P07 / Information Sources, Processing and Use in Policy Formulation

Topic : POLICY FORMULATION, ADMINISTRATION AND POLICYMAKERS

Chair : David Aubin (Université Catholique de Louvain)

Second Chair : Eric Montpetit (Université de Montréal)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

How do policymakers gather, process and use information in policy formulation?

Information is a critical resource in policy formulation, notably in highly technical, educated and democratically accountable societies. Information, defined as knowledge about a problem and possible solutions, is a prerequisite to governmental action. Information in policy-making contexts can be contested, making governmental action all the more complex (Montpetit, 2016). Information can also reveal new dimensions of problems, further complexifying policy-making, but also opening possibilities for innovative governmental action. As argued by Baumgartner and Jones (2015) “Information is at the core of politics” and a prime driver of policy stability and change. Digging in an issue is deemed to reveal its multiple dimensions and call for more state intervention (e.g. poverty alleviation). Technological developments and innovations, and their commercial applications, also challenge existing laws and regulations, sometimes making them outdated. Public policy needs adaptations when problems are shifting and technology evolves.

Within a policy subsystem, information comes from various sources in the policy advisory system, that is the “interlocking set of actors and organizations, with a unique configuration in each sector and jurisdiction, that provides recommendations for action to policymakers” (Craft & Wilder, 2015). Both public officials and external actors (e.g. consultants, scientists, NGOs, media or think tanks) produce and provide information and advice to the politicians and independent regulatory authorities. Information available within governments remains the main source that public officials use (Aubin & Brans, 2018). It takes the form of implementation reports, legal documents, monitoring database, proceedings from consultation procedures, etc. The shift from government to governance must not hide the importance of in-house information in policy formulation.

Collected from various public and private sources, information is processed and used in various ways by policymakers. Information use has two dimensions: (1) to enlighten and guide the decisionmaking process towards ‘fit’ regulations; and (2) legitimize the decision. To be turned into usable knowledge, information is sorted, classified, and analyzed. Process information becomes policy advice, that is advice about “clarifying the problem, identifying alternative course of action and systematically determining the optimal response” (Colebatch et al., 2010: 13; see also Halligan, 1995: 139). Advises either remain internal documents, but they can also be formalized (e.g. impact assessments). Impact assessments constitute both a statement about the process, but also a legitimation effort.

For this panel, we invite papers on the sources of information, on its processing by policy-makers and on its use and translation into public policy. Although the analysis of information use is still in its infancy, it gave rise to several theorization attempts, for instance those evolving around policy learning (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2017), policy networks (Leifeld & Schneider, 2012), and knowledge utilization (Weiss, 1980; Landry et al., 2001). Even if they are still in a description phase, research on policy advice (Craft & Wilder, 2017), policy work (Colebatch et al., 2010), as well as policy expertise (Weible, 2008) can be used as well. The papers will address the issue of information use in policy formulation in any policy system and level of authority. They can deal with the formulation of both primary and secondary law and concern policy-making as well as regulatory governance.

We hope to attract papers that theorize the relationship between information and policy-making, as well as present empirically grounded research on the topic. It is expected from the contributors that they apply a relative degree of formalization. The methods can be both qualitative and quantitative, but the papers must explicitly refer to the methods followed and the tools used for data analysis. Scholarly work that applies innovative methods is welcomed.

Reference list

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Colebatch, Hal K., Hoppe, Robert, Noordegraaf, Mirko (Eds.) 2010. Working for Policy. Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam.

Craft, Jonathan, Wilder, Matt, 2017. Catching a second wave: Context and compatibility in advisory system dynamics. Policy Studies Journal 45, 215-239.

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Leifeld, Philip, Schneider, Volker, 2012. Information exchange in policy networks. American Journal of Political Science 56, 731-744.

Montpetit, Eric, 2016. In defense of pluralism: Policy disagreement and its media coverage. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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CALL FOR PAPERS

Information is a critical resource in policy formulation, notably in highly technical, educated and democratically accountable societies. Information, defined as knowledge about a problem and possible solutions, is a prerequisite to governmental action. Information in policy-making contexts can be contested, making governmental action all the more complex. Information can also reveal new dimensions of problems, further complexifying policy-making. It might also enable innovative governmental action; courses of action that had not been imagined before. As argued by Baumgartner and Jones (2015) “Information is at the core of politics” and a prime driver of policy stability, change and innovation.

Information comes from various sources: interest groups, scientists, consultants, the general public, NGOs, the media, the civil service, think tanks, etc. The processing of this information by policymakers is influenced by political and psychological factors that sometimes induce biases. The use of information and its translation into public policy is further influenced by institutional and administrative settings. This panel seeks to shed light on the various aspects of these processes.

Specifically, we invite papers on the sources of information, on its processing by policymakers and on its use and translation into public policy. Topics such as policy learning, policy advice, policy networks, policy-science interface, policy work and policy expertise appear particularly relevant. We hope to attract papers that theorize the relationship between information and policy-making, as well as papers that present empirically grounded research on the topic. Scholarly work that applies innovative methods is welcomed.

P07 / Information Sources, Processing and Use in Policy Formulation

Chair : David Aubin (Université Catholique de Louvain)

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Session 1Information use in policy formulation: Formal and interpretive approaches

Thursday, June 27th 08:00 to 10:00 (MB 9 EFG)

Discussants

David Aubin (Université Catholique de Louvain)

Louis-Robert Beaulieu-Guay (University of Saskatchewan)

Problem Definition, Information Supply, and the Governance of Food Security

Samuel Workman (West Virginia University)

Clare Brock (Texas Woman's University)

Food security represents a significant public risk that engages multiple substantive dimensions of policymaking, including from social welfare and public health to agricultural production, climate change, and national security. We engage three strands of literature to understand how the issue of food security is defined and understood at the federal level, and to assess how information informs the development of these problem definitions and the various programs that govern policymaking on the issue. The first of these strands lies in the study of framing in political science (Rahn, Gollust, & Tang 2016; Brock 2016; Pinstrup-Andersen 2009). The second strand is in the study of how information is supplied in the policy process (Baumgartner & Jones 2015), and how bureaucracies use this information to develop problem definitions (Workman 2015). Third, our study addresses how scientific information (Lentsch & Weingart 2011) is used in the construction of these frames and resultant problem definitions. While this body of literature addresses how dimensionality and argumentation (legal and political) combine to frame how we understand policy issues, neither the framing nor the policy literatures addresses which indicators and measures are used in developing policy frames that shift dimensionality, and ultimately, problem definitions. Meanwhile, the literature on the politics of scientific information seem to assume dimensionality and reduce the question to one of understanding. Our study addresses how governing institutions process information head-on and is well positioned to assess how information contributes to our understanding of the use of information in framing complex, risk-laden policy issues.

This research seeks to understand how information influences the development of policy frames and resultant problem definitions. Food security is a complex policy problem that lies at the confluence of several substantive dimensions, including food, climate change, public health, social welfare, and even bio-security. We examine the important issue of food security to assess how scientific information, including indicators and measures, influence the framing of food security and how governing institutions come to define the problem. The empirical foundation for the proposal is 15,518 reports issued by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), congressional bureaucracy charged with oversight of federal agencies and programs. The reporting of the GAO is unique in that its explicit purpose is to evaluate how the governing system understands complex, boundary-spanning, issues such as food security. We develop a novel, tiered coding scheme that allows us to catalog the specific indicators and measures used in framing the issue of food security, while simultaneously connecting these to the regulatory structures that govern the issue, and the substantive components comprising the problem definition. We use this coding scheme to answer basic questions about how information shapes issue framing and problem definition in food security, how agencies use information to institutionalize problem definitions, and how information shapes the substantive agenda for policy reform. These findings have broad-ranging implications for the mobilization and inclusion of public interest groups, academics, and experts in the development of working problem definitions that shape policy.

The Mood of Business toward Government Regulations : Insights from Canadian Regulatory Impact Assessment Statements

Louis-Robert Beaulieu-Guay (University of Saskatchewan)

Marc Tremblay-Faulkner (Université de Montréal)

Eric Montpetit (Université de Montréal)

In this paper, we introduce an original textual database on Canadian federal regulations, which assembles all the regulatory impact assessments (RIAs) published in the Canada Gazette from 1997-2018. To our knowledge, this is the first comprehensive database on regulations that focuses on impact assessment instead of the text of the regulation itself. We created this database to show the potential of RIAs, a policy instrument promoted globally since the 1980s, as an analytical tool to measure the processing of information by policymakers. We do this by revisiting the “strength in unity hypothesis” in terms of the ability of the industry to get what it wants on regulations. Recent studies measure unity based on aligned regulatory preferences of business actors (Bunea 2015; Selling 2016; Young & Pagliari 2017; Chalmers 2018). Using text analysis and machine learning techniques, we build a Stakeholder Mood Index, which measures sentiment and unity of several distinct actors (industry, advocacy, experts, bureaucracy) to check if the level of regulatory constraint is influenced by stakeholder engagement in consultations held by federal regulators. We validate our measures of regulation by examining known episodes of regulatory activity in Canada.

From Information Sources to Policy Formulation in Health: The Case of France and Turkey

Ozge Uluskaradag (Concordia University)

The purpose of this paper is to shed light onto the processes through which policy makers including civil servants, political advisers and experts collect information and utilize it for policy formulation purposes in health policy making in France and Turkey. Drawing on 82 in depth semi-structured interviews with civil servants, political advisers, experts, policy makers and civil society representatives, this paper aims to show different types of information that policy makers rely on for policy advice, the sources of that information and their interactions as well as how such information is utilized for policy formulation purposes. The paper also raises some concerns about the validity and reliability of information used and comments on how such considerations affect policy making in both cases. Finally, the paper attempts to theorize information used in health policy making by categorizing the types of information as well as its sources in both cases.

Explaining the substantiating function of expertise: The cases of harm reduction and food supply.

Vincent Caby (Sciences Po Grenoble)

Early empirical investigations of knowledge utilization in the policy process showed that information had different “meanings” (Weiss, 1979) for decision-makers: cognitive, instrumental, symbolic (Caplan et al., 1975; Knorr, 1977; Weiss, 1977). For instance, decision-makers may use knowledge in order to substantiate their policy choice (substantiating function), or to maintain their legitimacy when they choose not to act (legitimizing function) (Weiss, 1979; Boswell, 2008). More recently, scholars from the ACF research community suggested that the type of policy subsystem (unitary, collaborative, advocacy) determines the type of knowledge utilization (Boswell, 2008; Weible, 2008; Radaelli, 2009; Schrefler, 2010; Daviter, 2015; Rimkuté, 2015). However, scholars still disagree on which contextual factors are essential. Previous studies have highlighted factors such as: the type of policy subsystem; the distribution of power within the subsystem; the nature of the organization ordering the production of new knowledge; the capacity of the producing organization; the level of tractability of the problem at stake, etc. But few scholars have tested these hypotheses empirically (often at the EU level only, see: Boswell, 2008; Radaelli, 2009; Rimkuté, 2015).

Therefore, the question of the influence of the policy subsystem on knowledge utilization remains open.

The aim of this paper is to test which contextual factors are essential to explain the substantiating function of knowledge. In order to do so, we focus on two meta-analyses of existing academic research: one on harm reduction among drug injectors, the other on eating behaviors. Both were produced by French research institutes (INSERM, INRA) on behalf of French administrations (Ministry of Health, Ministry of Agriculture). Semi-structured interviews with the decision-makers who ordered the meta-analyses indicate that they were produced and used to substantiate policy preferences: the opening of drug consumption rooms, the launch of a national plan dedicated to food supply.

In order to discriminate essential factors, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 22 policy actors (decision-makers, researchers, stakeholders). In addition, we gathered and cross-analyzed a wide range of public and private documents produced by policy actors and informing their policy preferences, resources, relationships towards other actors, strategies, and knowledge of the problem at stake (i.e.: meetings minutes, confidential notes, press releases, etc.).

In line with existing studies (see Boswell, 2008; Weible, 2008; Schrefler, 2010; Daviter, 2015; Rimkuté, 2015), this study indicates that the substantiating function of knowledge is associated with an adversarial policy subsystem (a conflict of values and objectives opposing two coalitions regarding a problem and its solution); a horizontally fragmented and contested distribution of power; a high scientific capacity of the organization producing new knowledge. Contrary to previous suggestions (see Schrefler, 2010; Rimkuté, 2015), we indicate that media attention on the problem at stake is not an essential factor to explain the substantiating function of knowledge. This study could not conclude whether epistemic uncertainty and problem tractability were associated with this type of knowledge utilization. We conclude with several implications of these findings for the study of other types of knowledge utilization as well as an agenda for future research.

THE USE OF INFORMATION DURING THE FORMULATION OF PUBLIC MANAGEMENT POLICY: THE CASE OF THE LITHUANIAN SUNSET COMMISSIONS DURING THE PERIOD 1999-2016

Vitalis Nakrosis (Vilnius University)

Despite increasing attention to the analysis of information use, academic research in this field remains under-theorised and lacks empirical explanations of comparative and longitudinal nature. Further theorisation of information use can combine different theoretical insights, including the “second wave” of advisory studies that offers hypotheses on the operation of advisory systems within wider political and economic contexts (Craft and Wilder, 2017), policy process literature that focuses on the processes of information processing during decision-making (Baumgartner and Jones, 2015; Weible et al., 2011), and public management work that analyses the autonomy and control of advisory bodies (Bressers et al., 2018).

The purpose of our research is to determine the impact of advice provided by Sunset Commissions to the Lithuanian core executive on improving the efficiency and quality of public management. These Commissions advised five different Lithuanian governments from 1999 to 2016. Such a long period of operation made it possible to undertake a comparative analysis of information use during 17 years across different economic cycles, different types of coalition governments (led by the conservatives or social-democrats) and various styles of (transformational or transactional) leadership.

By mixing the advisory systems and policy process literature, our research hypothesised causal links among the main factors affecting information use. The main variables of our research include the following: (i) initial financial and economic conditions; (ii) political support of the parliamentary majority and government attention to recommendations; (iii) the Commissions’ mandates formulated by the governments; (iv) the compatibility of recommendations with prevailing policy beliefs; (v) the composition of advisory bodies; and (vi) the role of change leaders during policy change.

Our empirical research was based on desk research, an analysis of available administrative information, a series of interviews and a survey of the Commissions’ members (with a total of 40 interviewees/respondents). We determined causal configurations underpinning the use of the Commissions’ advice based on the results of causal process tracing over time (Kay and Baker, 2015).

The results of our analysis reveal a good deal of variation in the use of the Commissions’ recommendations. For instance, the 1999–2000 and 2009 Commissions that advised the governments led by the Conservative Party during economic downturns were the most successful. In contrast, advice of the advisory bodies that worked during 2006–2008 and 2013–2016 (when the social-democrats were in power) was less impactful due to weaker political attention in the context of economic growth. This suggests that such internal factors as an efficient performance of the advisory body or a high match of its activities with the political mandate are not sufficient to explain the extent of information use due to the importance of political and economic conditions shaping decision-making in the policy subsystem.

Also, the paper finds that the compatibility of recommendations with dominant policy beliefs and the Prime Ministers’ transformational leadership were the two key conditions behind the successful use of advice. This conclusion indicates that advisory bodies with a high level of control exercise more influence on government policy compared to more autonomous bodies.

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Session 2Roundtable about The Politics of Information with Frank R. Baumgartner

Thursday, June 27th 10:30 to 12:30 (MB 9 EFG)

Discussants

Eric Montpetit (Université de Montréal)

Vincent Caby (Sciences Po Grenoble)

ROUNDTABLE WITH FRANK R. BAUMGARTNER

Frank Baumgartner (UNC-Chapel Hill)

ROUNDTABLE WITH FRANK R. BAUMGARTNER 1

Eric Montpetit (Université de Montréal)

ROUNDTABLE WITH FRANK R. BAUMGARTNER 2

Vincent Caby (Sciences Po Grenoble)