Policy Theories Relying on Socioeconomic Characteristics

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ABSTRACT

Theories of the policy process that rely on socioeconomic characteristics as explanatory variables emphasize the importance of the social context in which policy making occurs. That context shapes the problems that policy makers try to address, the resources with which they can do so, and to some extent the options available for policy instruments and implementation. Socioeconomic variables thus shape both the possibilities and the constraints of policy making. The socioeconomic approach has been used most commonly in comparative policy studies, and less commonly in the theories that focus on the political and governmental processes of policy construction. This distinction helps account for periodic rises and declines in the popularity of the socioeconomic approach.

1. Introduction

In policy studies, theoretical work relying on socioeconomic characteristics grew out of influences that the behavioral revolution had on the field of comparative politics. Behavioralists hoped to supplement or replace the traditional area-studies approach that featured thick descriptions of governments with multiple-unit studies of political systems and their operations and effects (Mayer 1989: 28). From this effort came the subfield of comparative policy studies. Through the study of political systems and their policy products, colleagues in comparative policy studies hoped to advance understanding by examining the similarities and differences in the operation and effects of political systems, and our understanding of the public policy process by finding the commonalities and

differences among systems that might offer clues about how policies are generated and changed (Mayer 1989: 43-49). Hopes were highest that such progress would come from studies involving a large number of cases and employing sophisticated data analysis techniques.

Half a century has passed since the beginning of publications in comparative policy studies. This paper assesses the contribution of some of that work to our understanding of the policy process—particularly, what we have learned about the policy process from comparative policy studies relying on socioeconomic characteristics to explain similarities and differences in policy adoptions and policy outputs.

The substantial amount of published work in comparative policy studies (see the references at the end of this paper) includes comparisons of policy outputs at the national, subnational, and local levels. This paper will consider all of those types of studies, while focusing primarily upon large-N comparative studies that have involved the American states. Comparative studies of state policy making in the U.S. certainly does not constitute the whole of the subfield, but they do constitute a large body of published work and concentrating on them gives the paper a clearer focus. Furthermore, to the extent that the subfield of comparative policy studies has enhanced our understanding of the policy process, that contribution should be evident in the comparative state studies.

For pragmatic rather than theoretical or epistemological reasons, comparative state studies have been prominent in the comparative policy literature. Aggregate data of respectable quality are available for the American states concerning policy outputs, political activity and institutions, and economic, social, and cultural conditions. Cross-

national studies face greater challenges in this regard (Leichter 1979: 71).1 Even inter-local studies within the United States have data availability and comparability problems. In addition, the governmental structures and policy responsibilities of the American states are more similar to one another than are those of countries, or of local governments within the United States. In the words of two pioneers of comparative state policy research, "the fifty states share a common institutional framework and general cultural background, but they differ in certain aspects of economic and social structure, political activity, and public policy. Therefore, they provide a large number of political and social units in which some important variables can be held constant while others are varied" (Dawson and Robinson 1963: 265). Finally, it is possible to include all of the states in a study, and the size and membership of the set has remained fixed since 1959. Comparative state studies therefore allow one to avoid methodological arguments about which countries or local governments were selected for a study and on what basis.2

2. Emergence of the Subfield

Even if it were useful to do so, it probably would be impossible to identify a moment in which political scientists first became interested in the determinants of public policies. Broad inquiry into whether and how certain types of political systems and social structures

1 See, for example, the excellent comparative policy studies collected in Castles (1993). These studies, rich in context and detail, are nevertheless for the most part confined to 3, 4, or 5 countries at a time. A number of large-N cross-national studies, such as Burkhart and Lewis-Beck (1994), have political variables (e.g., the extent of democracy) as their dependent variables rather than public policy outcomes.

2 That still leaves plenty of room, of course, for discussions about one's choices of time period and variables.

are associated with efficient or egalitarian or just public policies has forebears at least as ancient as Plato and Aristotle and would include deTocqueville, Marx, and several others (Dawson and Robinson 1963).

It is possible, however, to identify 1963 as a watershed year in comparative state policy studies. In 1963, Richard Dawson and James Robinson's article, "Inter-Party Competition, Economic Variables, and Welfare Policies in the American States," appeared in The Journal of Politics. Another cross-state study appeared that year in book form, Jerry Miner's Social and Economic Factors in Spending for Public Education, and an influential inter-local study by Maurice Pinard was published in the American Journal of Sociology on the relative influence of political behavior and community characteristics on the passage of fluoridation referenda in 262 communities.

Dawson and Robinson were careful to note their intellectual debt to small-N studies by V.O. Key and Duane Lockard of the relationship between state welfare policies and political variables such as the degree of inter-party competition.[3] Dawson and Robinson's study encompassed 46 states[4] as cases, 3 measures of state welfare policies as dependent variables, and used as independent variables some political indicators such as measures of party competition and some indicators of economic development in the states. Their

3 Key's work appeared in Southern Politics in State and Nation (1951), Lockard's in New England State Politics (1959). Dawson and Robinson (1963: 270) wrote, "Our study is an attempt to expand further on the hypotheses of Key and Lockard concerning party competition and welfare policies, testing them in a larger 'laboratory' and applying slightly more rigorous statistical techniques."

4 They excluded Alaska and Hawaii, which were so new to the Union at the time of the 1960 Census from which Dawson and Robinson drew much of their data, and Minnesota and Nebraska, which had nonpartisan legislative elections that made it difficult to determine certain measures of state party competition.

results are now well known to most policy scholars: while measures of party competition correlated weakly with measures of the welfare orientation of state policies, measures of economic development (per capita income, industrialization, and urbanization) correlated much more strongly. Dawson and Robinson concluded by raising the question whether policy differences among the states might be more strongly influenced by "environmental" variables (i.e., socioeconomic characteristics) than by various aspects of politics.

Thomas Dye followed up in a 1965 article in The Journal of Politics examining the relationships (or lack thereof) between legislative malapportionment and the degree of intra-state party competition, and between party competition and state welfare expenditures. Citing Dawson and Robinson's work, Dye added socioeconomic variables—specifically, measures of per capita income and industrialization—as controls. Dye measured the effect of malapportionment and party competition on state policies in education, welfare, and taxation. He employed 30 policy indicators, each with data for all 50 states from 1960 and 1961: 12 measures of education policies, 10 measures of welfare policies, and 8 measures of tax structure and burden (Dye 1965: 590-591).

The measures of malapportionment failed to show statistically significant correlations with most of the state policy indicators, once the socioeconomic variables of income and industrialization were controlled (Dye 1965: 595-599). Dye concluded, "On the whole, the policy choices of malapportioned legislatures are not noticeably different from the policy choices of well-apportioned legislatures. Most of the policy differences which do occur turn out to be a product of socio-economic differences among the states rather than a direct product of apportionment practices" (1965: 599).

Dye's book, Politics, Economics, and the Public appeared the next year, as did two articles by Richard Hofferbert on the relationship between socioeconomic variables and public expenditures in the states. Dye (1966) reported that in welfare and in other policy areas, socioeconomic variables seemed to account for more of the variation among states than political characteristics such as apportionment, party competition, and turnout. Hofferbert (1966b) used the Dawson-Robinson measures of state welfare expenditures plus some data on state financial aid to cities and also found that environmental variables such as the extent of industrialization affected these indicators of state policies to a greater extent than the political variables of apportionment, party competitiveness, and divided government. Other studies during the late 1960s confirmed that measures of socioeconomic differences among states or localities or countries showed stronger statistical relationships to policy measures than did differences in their political institutions or behaviors.

The subfield flourished. The early activity in comparative policy studies was so prolific and its emergence so rapid that retrospective assessments of its progress and problems began to appear within just a few years (Wilson 1966; Froman 1967). As early as 1970, Ira Sharkansky was able to produce his edited volume, Policy Analysis in Political Science, consisting largely of papers presented and articles published from 1966 through 1968, offering and applying models and presenting and testing hypotheses about the determinants of public policies, especially at the state level.

The Dawson-Robinson question—whether environmental or political variables matter more—continued to frame entries in the subfield for several years. A series of articles

concerning redistributive policies of the American states is illustrative: Fry and Winters (1970) found a larger role for political variables, then Booms and Halldorson (1973) weighed in on the side of the socioeconomic environment, then Uslaner and Weber (1975) and Tompkins (1975) published rejoinders emphasizing interactive effects.

The environment-versus-politics tone of the literature diminished during the 1970s. Researchers such as Cnudde and McCrone (1969), Uslaner and Weber (1975), Tompkins (1975), Lewis-Beck (1977), and Cameron (1978) began to employ path analysis to comparative studies, showing interactive as well as partial effects of independent variables. Those studies appeared to rescue the importance of political variables, and suggested that policy outputs were complex products of several factors (Hofferbert 1990: 147). At the end of the decade, Mazmanian and Sabatier (1980) emphasized that throughout the comparative state policy literature, the proportion of explained variance in policies had been fairly small (see Allen 2005 for a later example), leaving open the possibility or likelihood that state policies were heavily influenced by other factors.

Hofferbert (1974) made a substantial effort to include some of those other factors, and to portray their relationships to one another and to the political and socioeconomic variables that had been used in previous comparative studies. His reformulation of the basic policy output model presented a sequence of related sets of variables, from the broadest background variables capturing historical and geographical circumstances of the polity, on through socioeconomic attributes of the population, mass political attitudes and behavior, governmental institutions, and elite behavior, respectively. Reading it backwards, policy outputs were decisions produced by elites operating within

governmental institutions, but affected by the mass public, the socioeconomic environment, and ultimately by the historic-geographic setting.

These mid-1970s reconsiderations within the subfield of comparative policy studies had important impacts upon subsequent studies. Prior to this shift, virtually all of the variables employed were aggregate, system-level characteristics and all of the data gathered and analyzed were secondary data. After the 1970s, a greater proportion (though by no means all) of published comparative policy studies included some variables reflecting elite and/or mass preferences with data from surveys, referenda, and/or interviews of decision makers in multiple organizations.[5] Many also employed data analysis techniques designed to show interactive or configurative effects among the variables rather than simple correlation analysis in which the variable(s) with the largest partial coefficient(s) were interpreted as having the greatest explanatory effect.

Predictably enough, increased complexity of models and greater sophistication of methods sometimes yielded mixed and subtler findings. Socioeconomic variables made a difference, but only up to or after some threshold. Political variables made a difference under some socioeconomic conditions but not others, and so on.

A prime example of this manner of sophisticated study producing complex results is the large-N cross-national project of Przeworski et al. (2000), comparing political regimes

5 Especially noteworthy in this regard, albeit in a small-N context, was the effort produced by Mazmanian and Sabatier (1980). Some examples of large-N studies that have incorporated data on elite and/or mass preferences include: comparative local studies by Ostrom, Parks, and Whitaker (1977), Schneider and Teske (1992), and Feiock and West (1993); comparative state studies by Erikson, Wright, and McIver (1989, 1993); and the cross-national work reported by Godwin (1992).

under different conditions of development, and indicators of development under different political regimes. Aggregate economic growth rates of democracies and dictatorships were not significantly different, but per capita incomes and their rates of growth were—an effect of faster population growth in dictatorships than democracies. Poverty persists under both regime types, but in countries above a threshold income level, growth is faster among democracies than dictatorships. Wealthier democracies withstood occasional economic downturns and incidents of political instability as well as dictatorships did, but poor democracies withstood them less well than dictatorships. The Przeworski et al. study was designed deliberately to let independent variables and dependent variables trade places, and to examine the conditional effects of independent variables upon one another—the conclusions (2000: 269-278) are fascinating, useful, and really complicated.

4. A Synopsis of the Dye-Sharkansky-Hofferbert (DSH) Approach

After Dawson and Robinson originated the large-N comparative state policy study, Dye, Sharkansky, and Hofferbert may be said to have contributed the most to the development and maturation of the subfield. Their work has influenced an extensive and still-growing body of studies, which explore cross-system differences in a host of independent variables to see which are and are not associated with differences in policy indicators. The models used by Dye and Sharkansky are quite similar, and are variants on systems theory: an external environment influences a political system that produces policies that feed back into the environment. Differences among the models have to do with such subtleties as whether to represent political behavior or activity in addition to the political "system,"

whether to represent policy outputs separately from outcomes or impacts, and how many potential stops there are along the feedback loop.

Hofferbert's (1974) attempt to produce a more comprehensive model represents the process as a "funneling" of influences toward a formal decision-making event. Although visually different from Dye's and Sharkansky's models in this regard, Hofferbert's model is quite similar conceptually. Fundamentally it portrays an external environment (historic-geographic circumstances plus socio-economic conditions) processed through a political system (the public, governmental institutions, and elite policy makers) that yields policy outputs.

These models have been applied in a variety of settings, to examine policy outputs in cross-national, inter-state, and inter-local studies. From the time of the first rush (1966-1970) of comparative policy studies based on the Dye, Sharkansky, or Hofferbert (DSH) models to the present, the basic approach has been the same and the variations have mainly involved differences in variable operationalization, data collection, and statistical techniques.

Typically, the scholar embarking on a DSH-style comparative study will specify a set of independent variables that are hypothesized to differentiate cases from one another with respect to some policy. The set of variables will include some elements of the socioeconomic environment. Economic measures (income, industrialization, etc.) are universal, and demographic indicators are common. The construction of indices combining economic measures or demographic ones, or both, has been an area of considerable creativity among scholars producing DSH-style studies.

Other independent variables will represent aspects of political behavior and institutions that are hypothesized to be important. In comparative state policy studies, for example, data on voter turnout registration or turnout, measures of party competition or instances of divided government, and measures of interest-group influence have been used frequently. In addition, after Elazar and Sharkansky in the early 1970s emphasized the importance of political culture and regionalism to an understanding of the American states and their political systems, many DSH-style studies also included constructed variables indicating region and/or the Elazar culture types (e.g., Boeckelman 1991). Scholars have been inventive in constructing indicators of these political variables.

The dependent variables in these studies are what the models depict as policy "outputs." Early studies leaned heavily upon public expenditures, in order to have interval-level data. Thus, for instance, a state's welfare policy would be measured in terms of total state expenditures for welfare programs, or monthly benefit per recipient household (e.g., Brown 1995). Since the late 1970s, many DHS-style studies have employed a categorical dependent variable indicating the presence or absence of a policy or policy change during a specified time interval, the adoption or non-adoption of a state law, etc.[6]

Employment of categorical dependent variables followed the introduction of different statistical techniques to DSH-style studies. In the 1960s and early 1970s, multiple regression analysis was the standard statistical method employed in DSH-style studies, and

6 The literature on innovation and diffusion of policies among the American states, which also grew rapidly during the 1970s and 1980s, relied heavily on these sorts of indicators of state policy adoptions, and there was considerable overlap and cross-fertilization of methods and findings between innovation-diffusion studies and the DSH-style studies covered in this paper.

ordinary least-squares regression required interval-level data on the dependent variable. Logistic regression and discriminant analysis techniques became more common in the 1980s and 1990s, allowing scholars to extract and analyze univariate and multivariate statistics indicating the relationships among variables and the explanatory power of models when the dependent variable is simply a (0,1) category.

5. (Perhaps Underappreciated) Merits of the DSH Approach

The DSH approach constituted a large portion of public policy scholarship beginning in the 1960s. Its weaknesses in forming a political theory of the policy process does not mean that the approach lacks merit, or that it has not made significant contributions to political science generally and policy studies in particular. In this section, we devote some attention to the research activity that has occurred and the insights that have been gained under the guidance of the DSH approach. Furthermore, we need to acknowledge again the efforts in more recent comparative policy studies to address and correct some of the deficiencies identified above.

The DSH models, and the early studies that revealed stronger correlations between socioeconomic variables and policy differences than between political variables and policy differences, shifted the field of policy studies even as it was emerging. The DSH-style studies demonstrated that the emerging field of policy studies would have to involve more than an examination of political actors operating within governmental institutions (Salisbury 1968: 163-164). The studies showed that policy makers are constrained by a host of conditions over which they have limited control, at least in the short run (Hofferbert

1990: 145). Both of these findings have been important contributions to the field of policy studies.

Albeit inductive and data-driven, the DSH approach has also provided an accumulation of empirical studies that have identified patterns in policy activity. The many comparative state studies, for example, have established that economic development, region, and culture all aid in distinguishing states from one another with respect to their likelihood of adopting certain forms of policies. Cross-national studies have yielded similar findings for economic development, demography, and culture. Comparative local studies have found that economic development, region, population, and (occasionally) governmental structure matter.

Those patterns, seen again and again in DSH-style studies, have become part of the empirical foundation on which more recently developed theoretical frameworks were constructed, even if this influence is not always evident to the builders of those frameworks. For example, the Institutional Rational Choice framework (IRC) includes "attributes of the community" among the influences upon a decision situation, which include such elements as cultural and economic characteristics. The Advocacy Coalitions (AC) framework's elaboration of coalition members' core and secondary beliefs opens the door to cultural framing of perceptions, and the inclusion of exogenous factors allows changes in social and economic conditions to affect the inter-coalition competition. Baumgartner and Jones' framework acknowledges that an important aspect of manipulating "policy image" entails sensitivity to culture, and that changed economic conditions can lead to changed perceptions of a policy. These emerging approaches to a

theory of the policy process were developed primarily during the 1980s, and built upon a base of empirical studies showing that culture and economic conditions affect the possibilities and constraints upon policy making.

Once empirical patterns are well established within the intellectual framework of a model, then the impetus for additional theory building can arise from the discovery of anomalies (Leichter 1979: 100). When the "iron triangles" model could not explain the flurry of deregulation in the late 1970s, for example, policy scholars began to construct new approaches—issue networks, advocacy coalitions, punctuated equilibria. Similarly, no matter how skillfully scholars performing DSH-style comparative studies constructed their models, operationalized their variables, and gathered and analyzed their data, they were rarely able to explain as much as half of the policy variation among states. The debate over political versus socioeconomic influences, and the persistence of a large unexplained variance even when both types of variables were included, became grist for a new round of examination of the role of policy elites, the importance of beliefs and information (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993), reconsideration of the relationship between public opinion, political parties, and public policy (Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1989, 1993), and in the comparative state context, reconsideration of the role of governors and legislatures (Ferguson 1996).

Finally, despite criticisms (elaborated below) that cross-sectional studies are poorly-suited to the task of explaining and understanding a longitudinal process, longitudinal policy studies have limitations of their own that would have weighed down the theory-building enterprise without the insights of the cross-sectional approach. By the late 1960s,

policy scholars had both discovered and despaired of incrementalism. Study after study focusing on a policy topic within a government over time tended to find "that nearly all the time policy will vary only marginally from what it has been" (Salisbury 1968: 164). Especially with respect to public expenditures, but also with other implementation-stage measures of governmental activity (arrests made, citations issued, grants awarded, inspections conducted, etc.), the next year's actions could be predicted with great reliability and accuracy by using this year's actions, this year's actions from last year's, and so on.

Such observations were hardly fertile soil in which to develop a political theory of the policy process, especially if one hoped to advance a theory that could explain change. And so, as Hofferbert (1990: 109) recalls, policy researchers searched for some variance. They found it in comparative studies. Welfare expenditures in Pennsylvania may not change much from year to year, but they sure were different from West Virginia's, which were different from North Dakota's, and so on. The pursuit of some accounting for these differences yielded an empirical base, some reliable patterns, and some unexplained puzzles upon which the field of policy studies has been built and upon which it continues to be built today.

6. The DSH Approach and the Pursuit of Theories of the Policy Process

Comparative policy studies using the DHS approach (and comparative state studies in particular) represent a considerable proportion of the body of literature in the field of public policy studies, and have made important contributions as noted above. Whether and to what extent the DSH approach has advanced the ability of policy scholars to understand

and explain the policy process, however, is a different question. DSH-style models and the accumulated body of empirical studies based on them still leave us well short of a theory of the policy process, for at least four principal theoretical and methodological reasons.

6.a. Policy Events Versus a Process of Policy Change. The DSH models depict policies as outputs of the political system, and DSH-style empirical studies have tended to operationalize those outputs as discrete policy-adoption events or as levels of public expenditure. Comparisons of policy outcomes are not the same, however, as explanations of the policy process. However carefully done, cross-sectional comparisons of expenditure levels or adoption events do not shed much light on the policy *process* conceived either in terms of stages or in terms of policy change over time. Hofferbert (1990: 146) himself acknowledged that DSH models focus primarily if not exclusively on policy formation and adoption. Little or no attention is given to implementation, evaluation, or feedback in the empirical studies despite their appearance in the models.[7]

There are several reasons, some considered later in this paper, for the inability of the DSH approach to provide an account of policy change over time. One reason is the data-selection bias in favor of initial policy adoptions over occurrences of policy modification or abandonment. Initial policy adoptions occur when no state law or regulation or agency (or state authorization or mandate for the creation of local versions of the same) existed at time *t-1*, a policy adoption event occurs at time *t*, and the state law, regulation, etc., exists

7 For a couple of noteworthy exceptions, see Thompson and Scicchitano (1985) and Ringquist (1993).

from time *t+1* forward. Policy modifications are changes to established state policies—a law or regulation is amended, an agency is reorganized or its resources are changed in ways that affect its operation, an authorization or mandate for local action is altered. Hogwood and Peters (1983) contend that most policy change falls into this category of policy modification, or what they call "policy replacement." Policy abandonments mark the withdrawal of government activity from an area—repeal, rescission, termination, devolution to local governments or preemption by central government.

DSH-style studies published during the previous 40 years ordinarily focus on initial policy adoptions. This is probably not coincidence. Operationalizing the DSH approach tends to lead one in the direction of discrete policy-adoption events—passage of a law, creation of an agency—that unambiguously (or at least less ambiguously) mark an occurrence of policy change. The researcher who thinks about developing and employing indicators of policy modifications may abandon hope upon recognizing that he or she could spend years fending off methodological quibbles (e.g., which amendments, changes in funding, reorganizations, etc. represented *real* policy changes and should have been coded as a 1 versus those that were insignificant and should have been coded as a 0).

Moreover, the availability and cost of data tend to direct one toward initial policy adoptions and away from policy modifications and abandonments (perhaps especially the latter). While the cost in time and effort of developing one's own database has dropped significantly since the arrival of computers with Internet access, it nevertheless remains much easier to identify, count, and date the passage of laws and the creation of agencies than it is to find significant amendments or determine that a state mandate has effectively

been abandoned via non-enforcement. Policy abandonments seem particularly likely to be overlooked unless signaled by a noticeable event such as the repeal of a law or the elimination of an agency.

If DSH-style empirical studies exhibit a methodological bias in favor of initial policy adoptions and against other forms of policy change, how does that affect our ability to develop a valid understanding of the public policy process? Among other things, it may distort our understanding of the role of information and analysis in the process of policy change. Granting that social and economic conditions, political activity, and ideas and information are all important factors in the policy process, consider that their relative importance may differ from one situation to another. A logical argument exists that while information and ideas always matter in initial policy adoptions (especially information about policy innovations as they diffuse among jurisdictions), those adoptions may be affected to a greater degree by socioeconomic and political variables. Policy modifications and abandonments will also be affected by changes in political and socioeconomic factors, but information and analysis may play a greater role in the decision to change or end a policy than in the decision to adopt it in the first place. If the logic of these assertions has merit, and if the DSH approach under-represents cases of policy change via modification or abandonment, that under-representation may diminish our attention to the role of information and analysis in the process of policy change, leaving us with an understanding that artificially inflates the importance of socioeconomic conditions and political structure.

6.b. The Description of the Political System. Both the DSH models and DSH-style empirical

studies leave the political system under-described in ways that have inhibited their usefulness for building political theories of the policy process. Among the most important deficiencies that impinge upon our ability to improve understanding and explanation of the policy process are: failure to incorporate the existence of multi-organizational governments and multi-governmental systems, failure to incorporate institutionally-defined roles, and failure to recognize the requirements or possibilities for joint or sequential action among multiple actors.

The American states—the jurisdictions to which the DSH models have been most frequently applied—are both multi-organizational governments and parts of a multi-governmental system. Ironically, the DSH models and DSH-style empirical studies rarely account for either characteristic despite their importance for policy making. The political "system" modeled in the DSH approach is unitary—a single, abstracted decision maker, an idealized executive, legislature, or court producing policies.

The point here is not merely that the DSH models fail to fully describe empirical reality—models never do. The important question is whether a particular abstraction or simplification in a model removes a theoretically significant element of the object or process one hopes to explain. If our purpose is to construct a valid explanation of the policy process, models that present governmental organization as unitary and governmental decision making as singular remove from view vital elements of the very process we are trying to represent.

In multi-governmental systems such as that of the United States, policy change occurs not only through innovation, termination, or replacement of policies, programs, or

organizations, but also as the result of shifts in intergovernmental responsibilities and relationships (Hogwood and Peters 1983: 20-21). Furthermore, the existence of multiple governments within a political system creates opportunities for strategic action by policy entrepreneurs, as noted below in connection with human agency. Political scientists who proclaim their interest in the policy *process* have often excluded intergovernmental interactions and processes from their field of vision (Van Dyke 1968: 26-27). This criticism is especially valid as it pertains to DSH models.

In a similar vein, the presence of multiple organizations within a government—i.e., separated powers—is a vital element of the policy process that is also under-described or omitted in DSH models.[8] Policy scholars outside the DSH tradition from Salisbury (1968) through Baumgartner and Jones (1991) to the present have acknowledged that the existence of multiple decision-making entities—not only formal branches of government but also informal arrangements such as policy subgovernments—profoundly affects the course of policy formulation and argumentation, as well as the likelihood of adoption or modification. If they are correct, then a needed dimension of comparative studies of the policy process is some representation of the range of institutional alternatives available to policy entrepreneurs.

Within the multiple organizations of a government and the multiple governments of a non-unitary political system, institutional rules define essential roles or positions that individuals may fill. Among the vital implications of the existence of institutionally-defined

8 Of course, some DSH-style state studies have included the presence or absence of divided government as an independent variable, which implicitly recognizes the existence of more than one decision-making body within state government.

roles is that all members of a political community are not equally positioned in the policy process (Gergen 1968: 181). At a given moment, certain individuals occupy positions that allow or require them to be agenda-setters, gatekeepers, and veto-holders. While a strong case can be made that the existence of these roles is vital to understanding the policy process within as well as across jurisdictions, the DSH approach does not recognize them.

Policy change, especially in governmental systems such as those of the American states, often occurs through the interaction of actors in multiple institutionally-defined roles. Those interactions may be joint or sequential. Recognizing the existence of multiple actors does not mean simply that political decision making is usually a joint enterprise—for instance, that legislators and the executive have to agree before policy change occurs. Policy change certainly is often a joint enterprise, but it does not have to be. Policy change can also involve a sequence of actions and reactions taken unilaterally by individual actors in institutionally-defined roles. Knott (1993: 6-7) employs the example of a court altering the substantive meaning or the practical applicability of a state law through the act of interpretation. The interpretation by that court—perhaps even an individual judge—is itself a policy change, but it is also an event in a sequence. If the legislature or the executive is dissatisfied with the court's modification of the policy, some sort of response will likely be attempted in order to restore the previous meaning and operation of the law. This sort of sequential interaction represents policy change occurring without changes in the values of socioeconomic or political-system variables, and is therefore outside the explanatory capacity of DSH models. Yet even casual observation reveals that this sort of process frequently drives policy change.

6.c. The Unit of Analysis and Explanations of the Policy Process. The units of analysis in DSH-style studies are the cases. It is the policy behavior of governments (e.g., the American states) that supposedly is described by a model that incorporates their socioeconomic conditions and political configurations. Yet the states are typically not the focus of *explanations* in DSH-style studies. As Andrew Abbott pointed out, the explanations supplied by researchers who perform DSH-style studies describe the variables rather than the cases as acting or being acted upon: "most narrative sentences here have variables as subjects; it is when a variable 'does something' narratively that the authors think themselves to be speaking most directly of causality" (1992: 57). Thus, malapportionment does (or does not) lead to higher welfare expenditures, or industrialization does (or does not) generate greater state aid to cities.

These variable-driven explanations have an automaticity that largely removes human agency from view, much less from a central place in explanation and understanding. As per capita income rises, so do educational expenditures—no one actually *does* anything to raise educational expenditures; it just happens. States with moralistic political cultures adopt environmental protection laws; states without do not. While these insights have some utility, they would not contribute much to the enterprise of constructing an explanation of the policy process that describes the policy process as a human-driven process, and can be used comparatively to account for developments over time.

Thus, it is not just the empirical results of DSH-style studies that appeared to suggest that "politics doesn't matter" relative to socioeconomic characteristics, it is the

construction and the interpretation of such studies that yields this conclusion. If the behavior of human beings is not the focus of analysis or explanation, then politics—with its interactions, arguments, quests for power or control, and all of its uncertainties as a form of human social behavior—has largely been removed from the scene. As scientists, we might not be worried over this if the remaining explanatory variables performed well in accounting for policy differences across jurisdictions or over time, but they do not. A huge unexplained residual remains, which some political scientists have recognized represents human agency (Mazmanian and Sabatier 1980), but which DSH-style studies regard simply as error (Abbott 1992).

The automaticity of the variable-driven explanations provided in DSH-style studies reflects two other problems—one for empirical theories of the policy process, the other for the normative utility of policy theory. The problem for empirical theory is that one cannot build from these types of explanations an account of the policy process that leaves room for contingencies, for failure or collapse. Since people are not at the heart of the explanation, their skill or learning or miscalculations do not produce the outcomes. An empirical theory of the policy process that does not center upon human agency is unlikely to be able to explain much of what transpires.

Furthermore, even if DSH-style studies could explain a higher proportion of the variance in policies across jurisdictions, the question remains whether anyone could use that information to alter the likelihood of success in changing policy. Hofferbert (1990: 147) recalls the early efforts to build models that would account for the highest possible amount of policy variance using socioeconomic and political-structure variables, and

describes it as "'basic research' at its most elegant level of irrelevance.... It says that the only way to change policy is to change social, economic, and political structures." In comparative state studies where characteristics such as region and political culture frequently outperform all other independent variables, this irrelevance has occasionally reached farcical heights. The late U.S. Senator Daniel P. Moynihan (D-NY) once composed a sarcastic op-ed commentary in The New York Times commenting on educational policy studies which showed that the independent variable most strongly correlated (negatively) with standardized test scores was distance of the state capital from the Canadian border. Want to raise your students' test scores, asked Moynihan? Move your state capital!

6.d. Failure to Include Multiple Levels of Action and the Scope of Conflict. On a more serious note, policy theories relying on socioeconomic characteristics leave little or no opportunity for policy scholars to explore or pursue the usefulness of the concept of "levels of action." In the DSH approach, the political system is not only static, it is a given. Individuals do not achieve or block policy change by shifting to another level of action and reconfiguring the organizational structure or institutional rules of governmental decision making. Yet, studies employing other frameworks (IRC's levels of action, Baumgartner and Jones' arena shifts) have concluded that the ability to change action arenas is an important aspect of the process of policy change, and a vital strategic tool for policy entrepreneurs and their opponents (e.g., Baumgartner and Jones 1991; Heintz and Jenkins-Smith 1988; Montgomery 1995). The ability to re-define the jurisdiction or authority of a governmental body (what IRC theorists call action at the constitutional or collective-choice level) in order

to make it accessible or off-limits to a policy proposal is a critical aspect of strategic political action. The same is true of policy implementation as well as adoption activity (Macey 1992).

In fairness, DSH-style studies are usually focused on a short term, and thus may be defended in the same way that economists defend static analyses of what will happen in an industry if demand or supply shift suddenly, viz., that in the short term the capacity and structure of the industry are fixed for all practical purposes. A similar observation applies to the governmental realm—i.e., states are unlikely to change their governmental structures overnight, and thus holding structure fixed is a reasonable way to approach the design of an empirical study of policy making in the states. Granting that, the absence of a means of accounting for shifts in the level of action remains a deficiency of the DSH approach for the enterprise of building a political theory of policy change.

Related to the concept of levels of action is the concept of the scope of conflict. The definition of relevant actors is also institutionally defined, though not solely through formal rules. From Key and Schattschneider to the present, policy scholars have proposed and shown that an important element of strategic political action in the policy process is the ability to expand or restrict the scope of conflict (see Bauer 1968, Baumgartner and Jones 1991, Stone 2000). DSH models and empirical studies treat the scope of conflict as fixed; the degree of elite or mass public involvement, the configuration of interest groups, and other such measures are taken at a moment in time and not allowed to vary, except across jurisdictions. Cross-jurisdictional variation in these indicators is, almost by definition, not a result or reflection of strategic behavior.

Recognizing the vital role of human agency in the policy process and the importance of strategic shifts in level of action and in decision-making venue, Smith (1982) follows the sociological methodology of Alfred Schutz and the economic methodology of Ludwig Lachmann, and advocates a phenomenological approach that focuses on rational individuals as policy entrepreneurs who formulate "plans," and attempt to transform their plans into policies through strategic action. Key elements of that strategic action are: 1) the actor's anticipation of conflict or opposition, which affects 2) his or her choice of political institutions through which to work, both of which affect 3) his or her expectations about likely outcomes of the process. During the actual political process of policy change, individuals may (and usually will) alter 2) and 3) depending upon the extent to which conflict or opposition are greater or lesser in intensity or in scope than anticipated.

7. Information, Ideas, Beliefs, and Interests

The idea of policy entrepreneurs reacting to new information by altering their strategies brings us to the model of the individual that is at work in these comparative policy studies, and to the role of information, perception, and interests in guiding individuals' actions. Here we encounter two questions: what view do DSH models and studies take of individuals' political interests, and how do those models and studies treat information and perception as sources of change?

Because of their systems-theory focus on "demands and supports," DSH models of the policy process tend to objectify the political interests of participants and correspondingly to neglect the importance of beliefs, ideas, and information in the policy process.

Accordingly, they have not been able to generate useful propositions about the impact of information, and of changes in the beliefs and ideas held by participants, upon the policy process.

DSH models do not contain or accommodate intermediate steps between the presence of certain socioeconomic conditions (e.g., wealth, industrialization, urbanization) and the demands made upon or supports provided to the political system and to which the system responds. More bluntly, in the DSH models, individuals derive their political interests directly and objectively from their socioeconomic conditions. Accordingly, beliefs and ideas are comparatively unimportant: if socioeconomic conditions change, so will the beliefs and ideas that constitute participants' perceptions of their interests, and such change in interests is unlikely to occur in the absence of changed conditions. Individuals (to the extent that they exist at all in DSH models) are epiphenomena—statistical ciphers whose interest indicators flick on and off in varying configurations as their incomes rise or fall, their residences become urban or rural, their occupations industrial or agrarian, etc.

At the time of the first rush of DSH models and studies, Raymond Bauer wrote: "Policy formation is a social process in which an intellectual process is embedded" (Bauer 1968: 5). He added:

> Of course, there are constraints of reality beyond which a sane man cannot be persuaded his interests lie. But within these limits there is sufficient latitude that self-interests cannot be taken for granted. We need to determine empirically not only how the persons in the policy process define their self-interest, but how the social process of communication brings about the definition and redefinition of self-interest over the course of time (16).

DSH-style studies have not done so, and the model underlying those studies may not be amenable to doing so.

Newer contributions to policy theory such as the advocacy-coalitions, policy-streams, and punctuated-equilibrium approaches took the intellectual or developmental aspect of the policy process more seriously. Instead of treating policy analysis as an objective element in the evaluation stage of the policy process, these newer treatments regard policy analysis as a consciously-cultivated tool of persuasion that may be employed throughout the process of policy change in order to try to alter, enhance, or undermine one's position or the positions of one's opponents (Heintz and Jenkins-Smith 1988). Several studies employing these emerging frameworks indicate that 1) the beliefs and ideas of participants are important elements of the ways in which they attempt to change public policies, 2) participants endeavor to cultivate information with which to counter or alter the beliefs and ideas of others, and 3) information sometimes has these effects upon participants' beliefs and ideas (Knott 1993).

The effort to change the image or perception of a policy is related to, but not the same as, the effort to expand or contract the scope of conflict. Altering images and perceptions is an important aspect of an attempt to change the scope of conflict. Still, one may engage in efforts to alter images and perceptions even if the scope of conflict remained unchanged and even of one were not trying to change it. Altering images and perceptions through the development and communication of information is part of influencing policy learning—reinforcing the perceptions held by one's allies and weakening those held by one's adversaries. Even when the scope of conflict remains stable, information and perception may play important roles in redefining the balance of power among the set of participants (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993).

Because they present a static analysis of policy making and their model of the individual does not incorporate an intellectual process, DSH models and their associated empirical studies have been unlikely to contribute to a policy theory that gives a central role to information and perception. One might even translate this observation into a choice facing scholars interested in the further development of policy theory—if a central role is to be accorded to information and perception, we will need a model of the policy process that describes or predicts the actions of individuals rather than the aggregate characteristics of systems.

Some scholars *have* attempted to add information about mass and elite preferences, or about elite beliefs and information, or both, within the confines of a DSH model. Among the most ambitious such efforts (although again in a small-N context) was the work of Mazmanian and Sabatier on the policy decisions of the California Coastal Commissions. In that work, they employed Hofferbert's (1974) model, and collected and added information about mass preferences, elite preferences, and elite beliefs and information to the usual data on socioeconomic conditions, in order to try to isolate and identify the relative contribution of these factors. Their efforts succeeded—the revised model explained nearly all of the variance among commissioners in their decisions whether to grant or deny coastal development permits. However, fleshing out the Hofferbert model with these kinds of information took approximately five years and as much as $200,000, and still only provided evidence across an N of four governments within the same state.9

Drawing toward a close, we return to Hofferbert's 1990 review and self-critique. In

9 This reflection was shared with me by the late Paul Sabatier in correspondence.

DSH-style comparative policy studies, he acknowledged, "Theory was and still is light. Induction... has driven the inquiry" (Hofferbert 1990: 147). Let us now consider what fruits this inductive approach has brought to the development of policy theory.

8. Conclusions and Questions

Theories of the policy process that rely on socioeconomic characteristics as explanatory variables emphasize the importance of the social context in which policy making occurs. That context shapes the problems that policy makers try to address, the resources with which they can do so, and to some extent the options available for policy instruments and implementation. Socioeconomic variables thus shape both the possibilities and the constraints of policy making.

Comparative policy studies have not achieved the grandest hopes wished for them in the heyday of the behavioral revolution. In the emerging field of policy studies, scholars hoped that the comparative approach would break the deadlock of incrementalism and vault the field forward toward a theoretical approach that could describe within-system stability and change as well as across-system similarities and differences. In the well-established field of comparative politics, scholars hoped that large-N policy studies would finally turn the field away from its tradition of country-by-country description and toward genuinely comparative research that might hold the promise of theory building (Mayer 1989; Smith 1975).

It was a lot to hope for, and while comparative studies relying on socioeconomic characteristics had important impacts upon the field of policy studies, they have not had

the originally desired impact on the development of theories of the policy process. More promising recent approaches to a political theory of the policy process have tried to place human agency and strategic action squarely at the center of their explanations, which studies replying on socioeconomic characteristics may be unable to do.

Given the direction in which theory development is currently headed, policy theory will involve multiple actors with complex cognitive processes and diverse motivations interacting in a multi-organizational arena shaped by institutional and environmental factors over which they have varying degrees of control, and their interactions will occur over (sometimes long) periods. The complexity of such policy-process theories will make the information-gathering and analytic tasks of even individual case studies daunting. The variable-operationalization, data-collection, and analytical tasks of comparative studies based on a multi-dimensional, multi-institutional, dynamic or diachronic policy theory but also incorporating socioeconomic characteristics are daunting.

The more recent theoretical approaches to the policy process are by design longitudinal. Their empirical manifestations will be narratives, not cross-sections. Comparative studies relying on socioeconomic characteristics may be methodologically inconsistent with narrative accounts of policy change over time. Explanations of the policy process and comparative studies of policy outputs share similar subject matter but they address different questions and employ fundamentally different approaches.

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