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**Theories of Policy  
Formulation**

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## ***Theories of Policy Formulation***

Policy research is concerned with the output of political processes. This distinguishes it as a field of study from other areas in political science. Matthew C. Nowlin (2011, p.41) divides policy scholarship between “knowledge *in* the policy process and knowledge *of* the policy process.” The former includes knowledge generated through “analysis and evaluation” (ibid.) and is aimed at the design of policies. The latter generates knowledge about the why and how of policies. This paper is concerned with the latter, namely the explanation and the modeling of policy-making and policy change, rather than with giving policy advice or judging policy measures. Generalizing about the how and why of policies, policy theories “formulate propositions on the conditions under which certain political phenomena [...] are observed and impact on policy outcomes” (Breton and De Leeuw, 2010, p.83).

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Let me first underline my understanding of *policy theories*. I side with Eleanor Ostrom (2011, p.8) and Fritz W. Scharpf (1997) in conceiving frameworks, theories and models as nested concepts. *Frameworks* clarify important assumptions and connote the abstract “elements and the relationship among these elements that one needs to consider” for the study of policies, policy-making and policy change. They include a general set of variables that can be used to study various types of policies and policy changes. In addition, they provide a “metatheoretical language that can be used to compare theories” (Ostrom, 2011, p.8). *Theories* are located at a lower level of abstraction. They specify those elements of an analytical framework that are relevant to answer particular questions and include working assumptions about the causal relations among these elements (ibid.) in specific contexts that are bound in time and space. Policy theories include propositions needed to diagnose problems, explain policy change, or predict policy outcomes. Finally, *models* make “precise assumptions about a limited set of variables and parameters” included in policy

theories (ibid.). They specify the relations among these factors “that are hypothesized to operate in some well-defined set of conditions” (McGinnis, 2011, p.170). Moreover, insofar as policy theories and models aim at explaining empirical phenomena, they need to develop testable propositions, conjectures or hypotheses. In Sabatier’s words: “Be clear enough to be proven wrong” (2007, p. 5). Thus, policy theories organize research, present testable explanations of policy processes and outcomes, and seek to stimulate new research questions (see Jones and Baumgartner, 2012, p.1).

Policy theories are theories about public policy-making and policy output. However, the term public policy is ill-defined (see Page, 2006, p.210). Frequently, its usage refers to a bundle of rather disparate, collectively binding measures taken by state actors to allocate values, rights and obligations, such as the term social policy. However, some authors refer to specific laws or regulations such as the Directive on the Management of Spent Fuel and Radioactive Waste of the European Union, as policies. Hence, it is difficult to delimit the scope of policy studies. More generally, Page (2006) suggests that policies are marked by two elements: intentions in the form of principles and policy lines and actions in the form of measures and practices. Principles are general ideas “about how public affairs should be arranged or conducted” (p.210). Policy lines are the strategies related to particular topics. Measures are the specific instruments by which policy lines are put into place, and practices refer to the behavior of the officials who are expected to carry out these measures (p.211). Accordingly, policy theories seek to account for policy intentions and policy actions.

Designing policy theories is a complex endeavor. One of the pioneers in this field, Aaron Wildavsky (1979), has described policy studies as being more art and craft than ‘science’, one reason being that policy research is “interaction-oriented” (Scharpf, 1997, p.11). First, in modern democracies, policies result from the strategic interactions of several policy actors. These actors have their own understanding of the situation and the potential solutions, pursue their own interests and preferences, and have their own capabilities and resources (ibid.). While policies are usually decided by public actors, it is also now quite common that a large number of private actors are involved in their making (and sometimes also in their implementation), enhancing the complexity of the policy-making process. The fact that its scope transcends the operations of individual institutions (parliament, government, courts), actors (political parties, interest groups) and specific sets of behavior (voting, negotiations), adds to this

complexity. Secondly, policy actors usually lack some information about what resources are available for public action, how much and whose support they enjoy, what policy instruments might work, and what consequences policies might have (see Goodin, Rein and Moran, 2006, p.20). Several policy theories seek to incorporate these cognitive limitations, ambiguities and uncertainties in their theories. Thirdly, many policy issues cannot be dealt with in isolation or within a given jurisdiction; they result from previous policy decisions, are interconnected with other issues or need to be dealt with in international or federal settings. Policy theories need to take account of the interactive character of policy-making, of cognitive limitations, and of temporal, spatial, and substantial policy linkages in their explanations of policy outcomes.

Before discussing a number of important policy theories in more detail, a caveat is in order: Policy research has its origins in the United States which shows in *The Oxford Handbook of Public Policy* (Moran, et al., 2006), as it has an exclusive US focus in its contributions on the history of this field (e.g., De Leon, 2006). Several contemporary theories of the policy process reflect the U.S. origins of the field. Background conditions of the American political system (its democratic quality, the extent of checks and balances, its level of socio-economic modernization, its federal structure, etc.) have entered these theories either explicitly or implicitly such as in Kingdon’s (1995) seminal contribution to the study of agenda setting. Matching the fragmented and interlocked character of the US political system, his model of agenda dynamics is almost free of institutions and is “highly pluralistic” with a lot of ‘important people’ in the legislature (Congressmen and –women, congressional staffers) and outside (interest groups, consultants, and parties) playing important roles in “placing items on the political agenda” (Page, 2006, p.209). This does not necessarily make it or other policy theories that emanated in a specific national context unsustainable in different contexts, particularly if these have a lot in common with the original context. However, it calls for cautiousness and adaptations when letting them travel to very different settings (see Sartori, 1984). Edward Page (2006, p.209) emphasizes this point in his study of policy origins and finds that whereas “in European countries there is both government and sub-government, in the United States there is sub-government without government”.<sup>1</sup> More generally, Breton and Leeuw (2011, pp.88-89) find that the preeminent theories of the policy process “were modeled

1 On that respect, Page paraphrases Richard Rose.

on Western-style democratic governance systems and therefore may bear little relevance to significant sections of the world population.”

Given the complexity of the policy process and the need to align the analytical elements that are required to study it, researchers have chosen various strategies to develop policy theories. They have compartmentalized the study of the policy process into segments that do not connect easily. Thus, early theorizing focused on the importance of policy characteristics for policy-making (Lowi, 1964; Wilson 1980), on temporal segments of the policy-process, i.e. the stages of the policy-cycle (Anderson, 1975; Jones, 1970), and on modeling policy change as an incremental rather than a dynamic process (Lindblom, 1959). These efforts have been criticized for being empirically inaccurate and for developing neither causal models nor testable hypotheses (Sabatier, 1993).

In the following discussion, I analyze a number of contemporary policy theories. I do not focus on abstract research programs such as the rational choice approach or the constructivist approach. Neither do I highlight approaches such as multilevel governance that feature the general interaction and governance patterns in federal, quasi-federal, or con-federal institutional settings, nor the principal-agent model that is used to explore the benefits, practices and perils of delegation in different contexts. While all these approaches are important contributions to the study of political phenomena and have also been used in a variety of policy studies, their main concern is not with policy outcomes. I omit from the analysis specific causal mechanisms such as policy learning or policy diffusion and specific causal effects such as policy convergence. Instead, I highlight policy theories that claim substantial causal leverage over policy-making processes and point out and integrate several elements that need to be included into the study of policy processes, in order to explicitly address the issue of policy change. The resulting set of theories consists of Actor Centered Institutionalism, the Multiple Streams Approach, the Punctuated Equilibrium Approach, and the Advocacy Coalition Framework. It is interesting to note that these theories consist of fairly similar building blocks but conceptualize, emphasize, and arrange these elements in rather different ways: actors, interests, institutions, ideas, problems, arguments, and information. After discussing these approaches and theories individually, I provide a comparative assessment.

## ***Theories of the policy process***

### *Institutional Approaches: Actor-centered institutionalism*

Institutional approaches have become important in political science in the guise of neo-institutional analyses (see Hall and Taylor, 1996). These have addressed the question of international variations in policy-making caused by institutional differences. There is a large variety of institutional studies, but some variants of neo-institutional analyses have assumed a particularly important role in policy studies: Eleanor Ostrom’s (2011) Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) approach, George Tsebelis’ Veto player theory, and Fritz Scharpf’s (1997) Actor Centered Institutionalism (ACI) which he developed together with Renate Mayntz. All these analyses draw on the rational choice approach. Scharpf and Ostrom characterize their work as institutional approaches or frameworks rather than theories, whereas Tsebelis (2002, p.2) argues that he wants to provide a theory of institutional analysis. Here, I am going to focus on Fritz Scharpf’s work because Ostrom’s approach is focused on common pool resources and Tsebelis is more concerned with the extent of policy change than with its substance. In contrast, Scharpf’s ACI is meant to be widely applicable in problem-oriented policy research and concerned with both the substance and the scope of policy changes.

Scharpf claims that public policy tends “to result from strategic interaction among several or many policy actors [...]” (1997, p.11). ACI provides a toolbox to study these interactions. It encompasses purposeful actors, their interaction orientations, the actor constellations, and their interaction modes. Actors are crucial to the evolution of policies, and institutional settings shape the actors’ behavior and interactions. Institutions are defined as “systems of rules that structure the courses of actions a set of actors may choose” (p.38). These rules range from formal legal rules to informal social norms that actors respect and “whose violation will be sanctioned by loss of reputation,” etc. (p.38). The institutional setting is crucial to policy outcomes because it includes “the most important influences [...] on actors and interactions [...]” (p.39). Institutions “constitute composite actors, create and constrain options, and shape perceptions and preferences [...]” However, “they cannot influence choice and outcomes in a deterministic sense” (Scharpf, 1997, p.42), they only “define repertoires of more or less acceptable courses of action that leave considerable scope for strategic

and tactical choices [...]” (p.42). As institutions vary across countries and over time (p.2), policy change and international policy variations should be expected.

Scharpf distinguishes among three types of actor preferences: (institutionally defined) “self-interests, normative orientations, and identity-related preferences” (1997, p.16). *Actors* have different orientations and capabilities and can choose among different strategies. Drawing on game theory, Scharpf argues that the *actor constellations* include the actors’ strategies and their evaluation of outcomes, in the form of payoffs (p.72). These must be obtained through empirical research. Among the entire set of games that range from pure coordination to pure conflict games, Scharpf highlights four types as being most suitable for empirical policy studies. These are mixed motive games in which actors hold partly harmonious and partly conflicting preferences (p.73): assurance, battle of the sexes, prisoner’s dilemma, and chicken.<sup>2</sup> The analytical status of perceptions and evaluations is focused on the evaluation of outcomes and payoffs. Communication and trust amongst actors is important in shaping the payoff structure, thus affecting what outcome will result. In all games, the preferences of the actors are identical or are mirror images of each other, and actors have a joint interest in avoiding maximal conflict.

However, Scharpf also envisages constellations in which actors prefer defection or conflict over cooperation (1997, pp.78-79) – such as the break-up of a party political coalition – and develops a set of interaction orientations that include individualism (self-interest), solidarity, competition, altruism, and outright hostility determining the utility function of each actor or coalition (1997, pp.85-86). The subsequent *interaction modes* vary systematically among institution-free contexts and more *institutionalized settings*, the assumption being that the need for institutions and the impact of institutions on preferences and behavior increases from one mode to the next: Scharpf distinguishes unilateral action in anarchic fields, negotiated agreements in a variety of institutional contexts, collectively binding decisions by majority vote requiring some legitimacy, and hierarchical decisions calling for political accountability. In sum, the approach provides a variety of instruments to help study the role of actors and institutions

2 The cells in the 2\*2 matrices of these games have the following payoff structures, moving from upper rows to lower rows and from left to right in each row: AS: 44, 13, 31, 22; BS: 11, 34, 43, 22; PD: 33, 14, 41 22; CH: 33, 24, 42, 11.

in policy-making within advanced democracies.

Institutional frameworks are helpful in that they highlight the importance of institutions in channeling political behavior. They draw attention to cross-national and inter-temporal variations in policy-making as well as to the convergence of policies in international rule systems, which is why variants of institutional approaches have been applied to a great variety of settings. Institutional approaches indicate if policy proposals need to pass tight institutional bottlenecks or find open doorways when entering the political system. They are particularly well suited to studying policy stability by highlighting policy inertia and institutional path dependency (Pierson, 2004). However, they find it more difficult to explain policy change without institutional dynamics which is why more recent institutional analyses intensified their efforts to account for gradual change in periods of institutional stability (van der Heijden, 2010, p.231). Given the multiplicity of rules governing interactions in modern democracies they also “fail to provide any guideposts to direct the analyst to particular rules and not others” (Schlager, 2007, p.309). Finally, institutional approaches do not tell us which proposals arrive at the political scene. They need to be complemented with information about the policy input and tend to underplay other non-institutional sources of policy resistance, such as issue competition at the agenda-setting stage (Baumgartner, Jones and Wilkerson, 2011, p.961). The following policy theories focus more explicitly on the policy input and on policy dynamics.

### *Agenda-setting and multiple streams*

From a functional view of policy-making, policies are developed to prevent the emergence of problems or to remedy existing problems. Thus, functional theories of the welfare state see social policies as responses to major social problems. Nonetheless, a functional theory that presents policies simply as answers to problems, seems insufficient to account for the emergence of policies: On the one hand, “[...] what is perceived as puzzling or problematic is not pre-determined or fixed for all time” (Goodin, Rein and Moran, 2006, p.26). What is perceived as a problem requiring policy responses always has a “perceptual, interpretative element” (Kingdon, 1995, p.110). However, the causal link between problems and policies may not tell the whole story. Solutions may also be in search of problems they can be attached to. The multiple streams approach (MSA) seeks to account for how issues reach the political agenda and how policy change comes about.

Kingdon (1984) has developed an analytical framework that studies how issues “acquire agenda status and how policy alternatives come to be developed” (Gormley, 2007, p.302). Building on the garbage-can model of organizational decision-making (see Cohen, et al., 1972), his so-called multiple streams approach displays an image of the policy process that is, at least in part, in contrast to rational choice accounts. In this approach, policy-makers operate under significant time constraints so that they cannot tend to all problems and must use heuristics to get things done. They are satisficers rather than optimizers (Ackrill, Kay and Zahariadis, 2013). Furthermore, “there are three separate and independent streams related to policy-making: the problem stream, the politics stream, and the policy stream” (Nowlin, 2011, p.44). The *problem stream* includes items “that policy makers and citizens want addressed” (Zahariadis, 2007, p.70). Here, indicators of social or economic conditions, focusing events, or feedback to previous policies may draw the attention of policy-makers. The *policy stream* includes the ideas and options that are discussed as responses to the problem. Important elements in this stream are technical feasibility, normative resonance, resistance among citizens and interest groups, as well as the economic costs and benefits of these options. The *politics stream* is the political system writ large. Kingdon (1984) subsumes the national mood, the power structure in the interest group system, and the government – in particular the turnover of political personnel and the capacities of politicians and bureaucrats – under this stream.

The three streams have their own dynamics and flow independently from each other. Changes in the policy agenda occur only if the three streams converge. This can happen when “*windows of opportunity*” open up. In situations in which their preferred solutions are acceptable in the politics stream, skillful *policy entrepreneurs* or policy advocates are able to manipulate the political process by attaching these solutions to the problems floating by (Kingdon, 1984, p.173). “Problem surfing” (Boscarino, 2009) and merging the streams are intentional activities involving the framing of issues, symbolic politics, salami tactics and priming affect or emotions (see Rüb, 2009, pp.362-363). Hence, MSA highlights that problems need to pass filters inside the political system to acquire agenda status and evolve into public policies. Bounded rational actors (policy entrepreneurs) then generate irrational policies which are the outcome of the temporal interaction among the problem, politics, and policy streams. In Kingdon’s words: “Participants dump their conceptions of problems, their proposals, and political forces into the choice opportunity and the outcome depends on the

mix of elements present and how the various elements are coupled” (1984, p.174). Kingdon builds his theory upon empirical studies located at the US federal government level. The case studies deal with contentious public problems in the realms of transportation and health.

Recent discussions and revisions of the model include its adaptation to other contexts, the incorporation of additional variables, and its extension to the entire policy formulation process. First, Zahariadis (1999; 2008) refined Kingdon’s framework to make it work in parliamentary systems and in the European Union. Kingdon’s pluralistic and decentralized model of agenda setting does not fit easily into more hierarchical settings, such as European parliamentary systems that, by fusing the legislative and the executive branch, grant parties in government greater agenda control. To make MSA work in parliamentary systems, Zahariadis replaced the three original factors in the politics stream with the ruling parties’ political ideologies (1999, pp.79-81). The rationale is that political parties are able to shape national moods, that ruling parties dominate the executive such that administrative turnover is less relevant in these systems and that interest representation is targeted at the governing parties. To fit the theory to the EU context, he highlights the role of actors in the European Commission as policy entrepreneurs (2008, p.522; 525). Second, Ness has responded to the general lack of institutions in MSA by incorporating institutional variables (Ness and Mistretta, 2009, see Nowlin, 2011, p.45). The so-called policy milieu includes institutions such as state government structures or governance structures in education policy. Moreover the analytical focus has broadened from the setting of the policy agenda to the designing and formulation of policy. In his adaptation of the MSA to the EU, Zahariadis (2008, p. 525) has extended it from the agenda setting stage to the entire process of EU policy formulation (see also Ackrill, Kay and Zahariadis, 2013). Finally, empirical studies employing MSA have found evidence that some policy advocates indeed “surf the policy stream for salient issues to attach to or reframe their solutions” (Nowlin, 2011, p.46). However, the independence of the three streams is often doubted, suggesting rather, that there is interaction between problems, policy solutions and politics.

### *Patterns of policy change: Punctuated equilibrium theory*

The next approach also discusses how the political agenda evolves. It seeks to explain policy dynamics in the long term. How the attention of policy-makers shifts and how they “prioritize issues for action given the flow of information”

into the political system are central questions of the punctuated equilibrium theory (PET) (Jones and Baumgartner, 2012, p.7). Its authors take issue with Lindblom's (1959) models of policy change that emphasize continuity, stability, and incrementalism. According to Lindblom, policy-making is characterized by reactive rather than proactive processes. The risk aversion of policy-makers and the need for political compromises allows for only incremental changes of the status quo. PET also departs from what the authors call the standard model of the policy process, which identifies the main source of policy dynamics as the changes in the composition of political personnel brought about by elections. Rather, the authors argue that policy changes also take place in the absence of electoral changes and that the standard model conflates the choice of policy issues with the choice of a "policy solution given a policy problem" (2012, p.6, emphasis in original). Moreover, they claim that party platforms are only weak predictors of government agenda (Baumgartner, Jones and Wilkerson, 2011, p.954), because no government can know in advance what problems it has to face.

After several revisions, PET has evolved into "a theory of information processing, attention, and policy choice by governments" (Nowlin, 2011, p.49). Like actor centered institutionalism, it draws on the notion of bounded rationality to conceptualize how government processes incoming information and public policies evolve. Information or signals from the external environment are collected, assembled, interpreted and prioritized (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005, p.7). Assuming an oversupply of information to policy-makers, this process is not proportional to the relative weight of the incoming information; rather it involves attention scarcity, selective attention and attention-driven choice (see Nowlin, 2011, p.50). The attention paid to any (one) problem is dependent on the amount of attention spent on other problems. Actors do not just "update their preferences based on information" (Baumgartner/Jones/Wilkinson, 2011, p.949). Their responses to incoming information are "anything but smooth" (p.952) but shift from under reaction to overreaction. The resulting model of policy change presents policies as being marked through long periods of policy stability that are being punctuated through short bursts of major change. Hence, policy "stability and policy change are not two different processes, but two sides of the same coin" (Princen, 2013).

Does the distribution of small-scale and large-scale policy changes over time fit the PET expectations? Empirical studies have indeed provided support to the

notion that public policies are marked by long periods of stability that are interrupted by major punctuations. In a study of budget policies in the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom and Denmark, Breunig (2008, p.123) found that for "most of the years and most of the budget areas the change is incremental." But these small changes are "interspersed with occurrences of extreme change". These punctuations also account for greater policy change than the periods of incremental development. Hence, the theory generates important insights into our view of how policies evolve over time, challenging earlier theories that emphasized incremental policy changes. Much like the advocacy coalition approach discussed below, PET highlights the need for long time-frames in the study of policy-making processes.

However, it may be more important to know why these punctuations come about. Current PET work emphasizes that policy attention shifts can come about through media reports, real world developments as they are monitored, focus events, or activities within government. Policy change occurs if information signals are exceptionally strong or if they accumulate over time to overcome institutionally induced friction (Jones and Baumgartner, 2012, p.8). Earlier case study work in this tradition highlighted, on the one hand, that different venues, that is the different institutional loci where binding decisions on a given policy are taken, vary in their receptiveness to proposals for policy change. On the other hand, a policy image, that is the way in which a policy and the problems it is supposed to cope with are framed, affect the prospects of policy change. Hence, the change of policy venues and/or the change of policy images can bring about major policy changes (see Princen, 2013).

PET has been developed in the US context within the Policy Agendas Project. It was first applied to US politics at the level of the federal government in the early 1990s. It has now been extended to American states in the Pennsylvania Policy Agendas research (<http://www.temple.edu/papolicy/>) and to several European countries, Canada and the European Union in the Comparative Agendas Project<sup>3</sup>. Adaptation to these contexts entails changes in the original codebook of the Policy Agendas Project<sup>4</sup> because socio-economic conditions and political institutions in Europe deviate from those in the US. Applications in

3 See <http://www.comparativeagendas.org>.

4 See <http://www.policyagendas.org>.

the EU context focus on the notion of venue shopping in the complex horizontal and vertical EU political system and on the notion of policy image changes, both when new policies are introduced and when established policies undergo major change (Princen, 2013).

Critics argue that the PET leaves important questions unanswered: Under what circumstances do external signals impact on decision-making and surmount organizational thresholds? How is the nature of the policy input related to the policy output? And does the theory indicate what policies emerge or “is it just about the quantity of them?” (John, 2003, p.489). In short, it would be important to enrich this theory with causal processes about periods of major policy change. For instance, in his study on budget policies, Breunig (2008, p.123) traces international variations in budget punctuations to institutional differences among the four countries he studies. Most important among these differences are the inclinations of political parties to reform the budget (in the US) and the ideological differences between them (large ones in Germany and the UK and small ones in Denmark due to its minority governments). This however would put electoral politics back into the driver’s seat of policy change, as budgetary policies tend to rank highly on the agenda of national political parties. Weimer (2008, p.491; see also Meier, 2009, p.8) criticizes that the PE theory presents a coherent model of policy change but that this model is not “one that brings much useful enlightenment to our understanding of the policy process beyond more narrowly focused models.”

### *Coalitions and cognition: Advocacy coalition and coalition framework*

The advocacy coalition framework (ACF) (Sabatier, 1993) has been designed in reaction to theories of the policy cycle. It shares important similarities with ACI, MSA, and PET but deviates from them by emphasizing specific aspects of the cognitive dimension in its account of policy processes. Its analytical focus is on studying policy subsystems or policy areas which had also been the initial focus of PET. Much as the latter, it seeks to account for policy change over the long term, suggesting to study policies for at least the period of a decade. Moreover, it assumes that policy-making involves some degree of contention among policy rivals.

With ACI and MSA it shares the notion that actors are crucial to any explanation of policy change. However, rather than focusing on institutions as major expla-

natory variables or on individual policy entrepreneurs as drivers of change, ACF puts ideas and beliefs, on the one hand, and actor coalitions, on the other hand, center stage in its explanatory model. Actors behave instrumentally rationally but they filter information through belief systems. ACF groups the actors on the basis of their beliefs into different advocacy coalitions which promote different perspectives on the policy at hand. It sketches three levels of beliefs “with broader levels usually constraining the more specific levels” (Rozbicka, 2013). The core beliefs (*deep core*) of actors operate at a broad level and transcend policy subsystems, while the *policy core* beliefs in a policy subsystem keep advocacy coalitions together. *Secondary aspects* of the coalitions’ belief systems include understanding the seriousness of the problem, the appropriateness of specific policy instruments, etc. In sum, ACF claims that policies reflect the actors’ belief systems. According to this approach, the more one moves from core beliefs to secondary aspects of a belief system, the less stable coalitions should be and the more amenable a policy should be to changes.

Advocacy coalition consists of core members, players and tag-alongs. These vary in the extent to which they want to influence legislation, with core members seeking to influence key aspects of bills and other types of members exerting influence on a smaller scale (see Rozbicka, 2013). Policy brokers mediate among these coalitions to promote a compromised solution (Sabatier, 1993, p.121). Policy change comes about in two ways: first, policy learning as “relatively durable alteration of thought or behavioral intention that results from experience and/or new information” (Rozbicka, 2013) causes some policy changes. Second, and more importantly, exogenous changes in socio-economic conditions, public opinion, the governing coalition, and policy interdependencies are deemed necessary to trigger major punctuations in the evolution of policies (Sabatier, 1993, p.123).

ACF has been tried and tested on a number of occasions. As a result of these ACF studies, the initial framework has been modified (Sabatier and Weible, 2007, pp.199-207). First, it includes now a typology of coalition/political opportunity structures to enable the systematic application of the U.S. based theory in other institutional settings. Based on the openness of the political system and the degree of consensus required for policy change a two-dimensional typology is unfolded. Next, a typology of coalition resources is developed that enlists six types of resources (formal decision-making authority, public opinion support, information, troops that can be mobilized, financial resources, skillful leadership).

Finally, alternative paths to major policy changes are sketched. Here, internal shocks and negotiated agreements are added to the set of original causes.

A number of objections have been raised against the theory: Evidently, external stimuli need to be perceived and consequences must be drawn from them if they are to result in major policy changes. Generally, the overwhelming importance of external factors – and in the modified version of theory: of internal shocks – for policy punctuations puts into question the independent causal status of policy coalitions and belief systems for major policy changes, even though Sabatier and Weible (2007) underline that external perturbations also need a willing coalition to support the change. The modified version further reduces the importance of the cognitive dimension by alluding to a variety of resources and negotiated policy solutions. Still, the theory prioritizes ideas or beliefs as causes of coalition formation and policy change over interests and preferences. It might be more useful to treat the causal impact of ideas and interests on policy-making as an empirical question. To account for policy-making based on interests rather than beliefs, some students of the ACF have therefore incorporated elements of actor-centered institutionalism (see Becker, 2011, p.14). Additional criticism might be mounted against the specification of rather tightly integrated and stable coalitions based on joint beliefs, whereas other students of subsystem policy-making have identified substantial variations in the constellations of actors public policy-making. Ranging from loose issue networks, with easy entry and exit to tightly knit policy communities with common values and understandings (for a critical review, see Dowding, 1995). While some applications to the EU context have indeed identified rather stable coalition patterns in wind energy policy-making (Szarka, 2010), others criticize the lack of attention ACF pays to “fast changing and issue-specific alliances usually constructed on an *ad hoc* basis” (Rozbicka, 2013, emphasis in original).

### Discussion

Several theories have been established to account for the development of policy. These policy theories seek to aid our understanding and generalize explanations of public policy-making beyond the realm of specific policy subsystems. In this respect, ACI makes less specific propositions about policy change than the other three theories because it is located at a higher level of abstraction. As a result it can be connected to more specific institutional theories of policy

change such as the veto player theory developed by George Tsebelis (2002) which pinpoints the institutions that need to be studied more precisely.

All theories discussed here are ‘works in progress’ in that they have been refined over time. ACI, PET, MSA, and ACF provide useful analytical tools that can guide researchers in their analysis of policy processes. The four theories focus on different aspects of the policy process. ACI highlights the importance of strategic interaction in institutional settings when explaining policy outcomes. The multiple streams approach connects the strategic behavior of policy entrepreneurs to a temporal logic of policy-making. Punctuated equilibrium theory draws attention to a pattern of policy development that is marked by long-term stability and short-term punctuations. Finally, ACF highlights belief systems and policy coalitions as the causes of policy changes.

While the approaches draw on similar building blocks they conceptualize and organize them in different ways. For example, all approaches emphasize the bounded rationality of actors but highlight quite different cognitive limitations. Actor centered institutionalism infers the least restrictions from bounded rationality and is widely compatible with standard rational choice approaches to the policy process. This is less so for the remaining approaches. PET focuses on cognitive limitations in the organizational processing of information, resulting in under- and overreactions to incoming information. ACF points to core beliefs and policy beliefs as cognitive blinders and MSE envisages policy outcomes as resulting from the temporal convergence of independent policy streams.

Despite such variations, several authors have combined the elements of different approaches to account for policy changes. For example, Mintrom and Norman (2009) explore how the exercise of policy entrepreneurship fits with central assumptions of PET, ACF, MSA, and Neo-Institutionalism. Given the resemblance of their building blocks, Schlager finds that the policy theories constitute a “family of theories” (2007, p.299) and is optimistic that they can be subsumed under the roof of the Advocacy Coalition Framework (p.317). I am more skeptical about whether it is possible to unite these theories under a common roof. Doing so will always entail the difficulty of coping with inconsistent assumptions and conjectures. It is certainly possible to incorporate general concepts such as policy entrepreneurs, windows of opportunity, venue shopping or advocacy coalition into other theories. However, this transfer of concepts or labels happens quite often without the adoption of corresponding theoretical background.

It might be more useful to combine these policy theories in other ways as has been advocated by constructivist and rational choice accounts of European integration (see Jupille, Caporaso and Checkel, 2003). First, given that all the discussed policy theories seek to account for policy change, their causal validity can be tested against each other. Secondly, the theories may have specific domains of application. For instance, PE highlights long-term policy developments whereas actor centered institutionalism with its interaction orientation may be more appropriate to study the details of policy processes in the short term. Thirdly, a sequential or developmental combination of the ACF and the ACI in process tracing studies can highlight the importance of changes in policy beliefs, as a prerequisite of major policy change and point to the actors' interests as more specific causal factors in the policy processes impacting on the details of the resulting policy changes. Alternatively, the detailed study of decision-making processes leading to major policy changes, may be combined with studying the subsequent institutionalization of belief systems and advocacy coalitions in a new policy context. Finally, approaches such as ACI that are located at a higher level of abstraction might be considered to provide more general arguments than more specific policy theories such as ACF.

Finally, letting these approaches and theories travel to other contexts may require more than modest revisions. All approaches have been developed against the background of modern democracies, most of them against the background of the United States. Hence, they may not easily fit into other contexts. Breton and Leeuw (2010) criticize a study of Swedish health care reforms that employs the multiple streams approach because the reform processes were non-contentious and consensus-oriented. They found that this violated core assumptions of the MSA which was therefore an inappropriate tool to study Swedish health care policy-making. It seems even more difficult to let these theories travel to contexts that do not match the background conditions of a modern democracy (but see Ridde, 2009). However, given the increasing number of democracies since the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, their potential geographic scope remains considerable.

Approach Theory	Scope of inquiry	Actors	Relevance of Institutions	Rationality and individuals	Causes of policy change	Context
<i>Actor centered Institutionalism (ACI)</i>	System-level or policy subsystem	Individual actors and coalitions of actors	Institutions are rule systems. They constitute actors and their identities. They channel their behavior	Slightly bounded rationality, shaped by institutional rule systems: Individual as updater	Impact of external factors on actors mediated through institutional setting	Modern democracies
<i>Multiple Streams Approach (MSA)</i>	Policy decisions in a policy subsystem	Policy entrepreneurs	Little relevance of institutions	Bounded rationality: Individual as satisficer	Policy changes occur only when policy entrepreneurs couple problems, solutions, and politics.	U.S. political system, adaptation to other modern democracies and EU
<i>Punctuated Equilibrium (PET)</i>	Policy pattern in policy subsystems over the long term	Individual actors, Coalitions of actors	Institutional venues vary in policy receptiveness and pro-cess informati-on differently leading to frictions	Heavily bounded rationality and cognitive limitations to information processing: Individual as selective attender	Punctuations occur when institutional friction surpasses a threshold due to interest mobilization, shifting policy images and/or venues	U.S. political system, adaptation to other modern democracies and EU
<i>Advocacy Coalitions Framework (ACF)</i>	Policy change in a policy subsystem over the long term	Advocacy coalitions, Policy brokers	Institutions are context factors and part of the coalitions' opportunity structure	Belief based interaction and contestation: Individual as believer	Policies change due to external perturbations, changing belief systems through policy learning, changes in coalitions, or dynamics internal to the political system.	U.S. political system, adaptation to other modern democracies and EU

Table 1 Major analytical elements of policy theories and approaches (Own characterization, in part based on Schlegler, 2007).

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