

PA 763 Final Exam
December 2008

Instructions:

Answer two of the following three questions. Clearly indicate which question you are answering. You have until 5 pm on Monday, December 15 to complete this exam. I recommend you write it in Times New Roman, 12 point, with one-inch margins all around. Number each page—however, you need not print the exam—you should submit this electronically like any other paper this semester. *Please submit via e-mail to me as a Word 2003 document (.doc) only—not as an .rtf or a .docx file unless absolutely unavoidable.* You may submit a paper copy as a back up; if you choose to do so—please leave papers in my mailbox in Caldwell, or in the drop box. Please do not stick papers under my door (they probably will not fit anyway). Please name your file in this format *lastname_final.doc*.

Just because you have three days to complete this exam does not mean that you must use all three days. I don't expect this exam to take more than eight hours, and probably less. *Use some of this time to carefully read, edit, and proofread your exams.* While I will take deadline pressure into account, writing quality will be a marking criterion.

1. This semester we have considered three main theories of the policy process—streams, the ACF, and punctuated equilibrium. We have also considered, although less intensively, Ostrom's Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) model.

Of these models, which of these do you believe are more realistic and more inclusive models of all the "stages" or "elements" of the policy process? In making your argument, please outline (1) what you mean by the stages; (2) how your model can encompass all these stages (whether or not the original authors of the model considered all these stages); (3) the critiques of the model you chose, particularly those advanced by proponents of the other models; (4) how the model addresses these critiques and (5) how, ultimately, the model you chose is superior to these other models.

You may *not* answer this question by arguing, more or less, that "all models have their strengths and weaknesses, and therefore no one model dominates." The point of this question is to take an intellectual position and defend it.

2. You have been hired in a public administration department at a small to medium sized university. One reason you were hired is that you have some advanced training in public policy (this class!) and your new PA department needs someone who could teach the public policy core course for MPA students. You realize that these students are in a professional degree program, not an academic degree program, and you conclude that you will need to teach this course rather differently than a PhD seminar on the policy process.

For this question, develop a sketch syllabus for this MPA or MPP level course. Assume the class meets 14 times. What topics and readings would you assign? What books would you require? In this answer, both provide the schedule and an explanation of the choices you made and why. You are free to consult the internet for examples of other syllabi used by instructors at similar universities, but remember that this work must ultimately be yours alone, and should not require an inordinate amount of outside research. Indeed, you might draw on a few of the readings in your seminar as a framework for this assignment.

3. The attached short article directly raises key issues that we have engaged this semester. Here, David Weimer argues that there are major differences between the types of theories and models that we develop to explain the *policy process* (knowledge *of* the policy process) and the models we use to understand *particular policy areas* (knowledge *in* the policy process). Weimer approaches this problem from within political science, which may be a relevant feature of his argument. In your answer, write a response or rejoinder of the sort that might be published in this journal (don't worry—I don't expect you to publish this for real!). In your answer, make clear whether you agree or disagree with Weimer's assessment of theory-building in the policy field, consider whether and to what extent the problems Weimer isolates are unique to political science, or apply to public administration and policy as well, and consider whether it ultimately matters, in any sense, that we might have two different kinds of models: knowledge *in* and knowledge *of* models.

You might also review and consider in your answer what are the characteristics of a “good” social science theory? Do any of the models we have considered this semester satisfy the requirements of good social science theory? Or do they fail in crucial ways to satisfy the requirements of good social science theory? Are these failures fundamental to Weimer's argument? Or are there actual successes that undermine his argument? Explain using examples from this course and others, as appropriate. Of course, you should bring in your own ideas and perspectives as well.

In considering your answer, bear in mind that there may be differences between good or “optimal” *scientific* theories and the sorts of theories that are *possible* in the social sciences.

Theories of and in the Policy Process

David L. Weimer

Like public administration before it, public policy has an uneasy place in the discipline of political science. The stress is most obvious in the distinction between theories that attempt to explain the policy process and theories that are useful to those who seek to operate within the policy process. Accommodating this stress within the disciplinary boundaries of political science poses a difficult challenge.

Introduction

Political scientists trained in the generations of my teachers, William Riker and Aaron Wildavsky, commonly studied public administration as a field.¹ As newer bodies of knowledge pushed public administration out of its previously prominent role within political science, and public administration largely split off into its own discipline, political scientists became less well connected to the nitty-gritty questions of governance.² Public policy, which emerged as a field to fill that role, has not had a comfortable place in political science.³ Research on policy processes often seems too ambitious, spanning more established fields without necessarily fertilizing them. Policy research, the practical and explicitly normative side of public policy, often seems too catholic in its disciplinary sources, yet overly narrow in its focus, as it addresses real problems of the world rather than intellectual puzzles of political science.⁴ These two orientations toward public policy roughly correspond to Harold Lasswell's (1971, p. 1) distinction between *knowledge of the policy process* and *knowledge in the policy process*. Consideration of the role of theory in public policy should recognize these different types of knowledge. In this brief essay, I argue that creating and testing theories of the policy process is a desirable project for political scientists, but that theories drawn from the narrower fields of political science and other disciplines are more likely to be useful in policy research.

My own bias is that theories with actors, whether hyper or boundedly rational, are most likely to be relevant to the majority of questions of interest to political scientists. For the purpose of this discussion, however, I require only that theory offer understanding of some general phenomenon. Thus, I avoid the entire rational choice debate within political science, which has been extensive and intense

(Friedman, 1996), largely because I have nothing new to add to it. Obviously, though, my view of theory certainly rejects the claim that generalization of any kind is futile.

Theories of the Policy Process

The public policy section of the American Political Science Association describes itself as “committed to producing rigorous empirical and theoretical knowledge of the processes and products of governing and the application of that knowledge to policy issues.” The first part of the commitment—knowledge of the processes and products of governing—concerns theory of the policy process. Assuming we do not just govern for its own sake, the “products of governing” phrase implies attention to how people are affected. Concern about the outcomes resulting from politics is one feature that distinguishes public policy as a field within political science.⁵ The other feature is considering processes broadly, rather than how they operate within specific institutions (international organizations, legislatures, the executive, the courts, subnational governments, etc.) or involve specific behaviors (voting, organizational behavior, socialization, etc.) that define mainstream positive political science. It is this broad view that makes public policy desirable; it also makes theorizing especially difficult.

In an academic world with increasing pressures on scholars to speak on questions of current interest to the discipline and to specialize in narrow fields within disciplines, public policy admirably aspires to be more comprehensive in its view of political process so as to explain not just parts of the process, but how their interactions produce policy outcomes. It potentially can play a role in “integrating the discipline’s accumulated knowledge concerning political behavior in various institutional settings” (Sabatier, 1991, p. 144). However, with comprehensiveness inevitably comes complexity. Theorizing and building useful models becomes inherently more difficult with complexity. So too does the problem of testing, or at least validating in some way, the hypotheses (or implications) that flow from the various models implied by any theory.

Models of complex phenomena can be useful in several ways. Perhaps the most useful models allow those employing them to make meaningful predictions about what is likely to occur. I think we have some narrow models that, over well-defined domains, are useful in this way. For example, in many legislative situations, Black’s Median Voter Theorem is likely to give us a pretty good prediction of what bill will be able to command a majority over the status quo. Of course, as soon as we allow for various sorts of complexity—preferences that are not single-peaked, policy alternatives that are multidimensional, etc.—we may no longer be able to make specific predictions. I do not think that the existing models of the policy process are very useful in prediction.⁶ Perhaps the advocacy coalition framework (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993) allows some predictions about what kinds of information in what sort of fora are likely to be effective in facilitating convergence between opposing coalitions in terms of policies and the ways they are implemented. Perhaps the

institutional rational choice framework allows us to predict when cooperation at the operational level is likely to be effective in producing public goods or preserving common property resources (Ostrom, 1990). In each of these cases, however, the frameworks are offering not predictions about the policy process itself, but rather about behavior in particular segments of it.

When confronted with complex phenomena, however, models (or as their creators often more modestly call them, frameworks) can be useful in giving us a resource for cognition, allowing us to identify some important features that can serve as the basis for seeing patterns among the complexity. For example, consider the policy/problem/political streams framework of Kingdon (1995). It does not offer much in the way of specific prediction, and it only offers limited and vague prescription—policy entrepreneurs should be ready to exploit policy windows that create an opportunity to push a policy alternative that they favor onto the public agenda. Nonetheless, I think that the policy streams framework is very useful in helping bring some order to the very complex policy process. It gives one someplace to start when thinking about the policy process writ large. One can also imagine embedding the advocacy coalition framework or the institutional rational choice model into the policy stream to understand better how the policy subsystems operate.

Testing or validating poses a problem for the policy process models. It is hard for me to imagine framing a refutable hypothesis based on the Kingdon (1995) framework, though in terms of retrospection (the actual domain of almost all social science prediction except that based on experiments!), it seems to provide a basis for plausible explanation. The advocacy coalition framework does lend itself to the specification of refutable hypotheses, some of which have been qualitatively tested (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999, pp. 125–27). Amenability to testing, however, does not necessarily imply usefulness. For example, consider the punctuated equilibrium model (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005; Jones, Sulkin, & Larsen, 2003). If one accepts the null hypothesis of policy changes being drawn randomly from a normal distribution, then rejecting the normal distribution in favor of a distribution with positive kurtosis provides evidence in favor of a U.S. policy process characterized generally by incrementalism, with the occasional major shift in policy. Although there is a coherent story behind the model, it is not, I think, one that brings much useful enlightenment to our understanding of the policy process beyond more narrowly focused models.

Of course, testing becomes even more difficult when one moves to theories that seek to explain the outcomes of policy processes across different sets of political institutions (and cultures). Few scholars have sufficient knowledge of the political institutions and cultures of more than a few countries to do detailed empirical comparisons as individual scholars. This is an area of research that almost certainly requires coordinated effort by teams of scholars (Riker & Weimer, 1995). Some examples of such projects include the study of changes in property rights in post-Communist countries (Weimer, 1997), the comparison of the governance of the health, steel, and financial sectors in six Western European countries (Bovens, 't Hart, & Peters, 2001), and the design of reproductive policies in 10 developed countries (Bleiklie, Goggin, & Rothmayr, 2004).

Theories in the Policy Process

Policy research seeks to give advice about how to achieve desired outcomes. As policy researchers seek to contribute to the realization of desired outcomes, they must necessarily be concerned with what can be attained politically—political feasibility is at least instrumental to achieving substantive goals. A powerful theory of the policy process would thus be extremely valuable to policy researchers (and especially policy analysts).⁷ As I argued above, however, models of the policy process offer only limited help in predicting. Consequently, they are not likely to be very useful to policy researchers in their efforts to predict the political fate of policy alternatives.

Instead, theories and frameworks of narrow scope are more likely to be useful. Policy researchers seek to predict the outcomes of specific processes, such as legislation, regulation, and implementation as they assess concrete policy alternatives. The more closely tailored the theories, models, and frameworks to the specific decision processes at hand, the more likely they are to provide relevant predictions. As social scientists, we should value generalization; as policy researchers, we must usually deal with the specific if we are to inform real decisions.⁸ A model of legislative process may be less valuable than a model of a particular legislature, which in turn may be less valuable than a model of how that particular legislature makes decisions in the policy area of concern.

Theories that are narrow in another sense are also likely to be helpful to policy analysts. I have in mind here the implications of models that seek to understand some generic behavior. For example, the notion that one may gain a stronger bargaining position by foreclosing some possible courses of action and making threats more credible seems to me something that a policy analyst would usefully have among his or her capital stock of ideas. It would join ideas drawn from a variety of intellectual sources, such as organizational behavior (Miles' Law—where you stand depends on where you sit), path dependence (programs create constituencies), heresthetics (making a latent policy dimension salient may disrupt an equilibrium), rhetoric (framing issues to resonate with cultural values may change public perceptions of the issues), rational choice theory of institutions (repeated interaction can support cooperation not obtainable in one-off interaction), cognitive psychology (people fear loss more powerfully than they anticipate comparable gain), and political economy (rectangles tend to be larger than triangles—rent transfers are more policy relevant than deadweight losses).

Notice that I did not include economics in the above list of sources. (If I were to select a single insight, then perhaps it would be "the scarce resource gets the rent.") If one were interested just in predicting political behavior, then one could draw on a variety of economically grounded theories, such as rent seeking. I did not include economic theory in the above list because it has such a broad influence on policy research that singling out a few insights would be grossly misleading. The influence of economic theory is both positive, in the sense of providing a starting point for prediction, and normative in the sense of providing systematic ways to assess the relative efficiency of alternatives through cost-benefit analysis. One can also point to many specific examples where economic theory and modeling played fundamental

roles in policy research and analysis. For example, the design of the very successful simultaneous ascending auctions of spectrum by the Federal Communications Commission in the mid-1990s drew heavily on theory (McAfee & McMillan, 1996).⁹ Political scientists who do policy research may face a disciplinary dilemma: To take full advantage of available theory, they may have to cross disciplinary lines; crossing disciplinary lines, however, may reduce the validity of their work among their political science peers.¹⁰ If one were restructuring the social science disciplines to better support policy research, then one might very well go back to Smith's political economy as the overarching framework for both political science and economics so that disciplinary lines would be less likely to constrain the theories used and the research approaches taken.

Conclusion

Theories of the policy process face conflicting demands. The discipline of political science seeks theories of a general nature; policy researchers seek theories that help them predict political outcomes in specific contexts. Reconciling these demands may not be possible. Rather, we may be left with grand theories that are not helpful and helpful theories that are not grand. Political scientists who seek to promote better public policy should encourage both types of theory.

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Notes

The author thanks Hank Jenkins-Smith and the other participants in the panel on Public Policy Theories at the 2004 Midwest Political Science Meetings for comments. The opinions expressed are solely those of the author.

1. Some might find it surprising that Riker contributed to the first Harvard case book on public administration (Stein, 1952).
2. Writing about the declining relationship between public administration and political science in the postwar years, Waldo (1968, p. 478) asserted that "the present relationship of Public Administration to Political Science is in significant part one of convention and inertia and the future relationship must be regarded as problematic." He went on to argue that social psychology, sociology, and economics all had come to have greater intellectual interchange with public administration than did political science have with public administration (p. 460).
3. See, for example, Hecklo (1972) and Bobrow, Eulau, Landau, Jones, and Axelrod (1977).
4. For the purpose of discussion, I consider policy research to be scholarly work directed at informing public decisions by framing undesirable social conditions as policy problems, by evaluating the consequences of adopted policies, or by predicting and valuing the consequences of policies that might be adopted. I reserve the term "policy analysis" for professional practice, specifically the provision of "client-oriented advice relevant to public decisions and informed by social values" (Weimer & Vining, 1999, p. 27). Policy research may be policy analysis in some circumstances, though it often neither has a clear client orientation nor speaks to imminent public decisions.
5. Normative theory speaks to the valuation of outcomes, but usually does not deal in any depth with the measurement or prediction of outcomes.

6. For overviews of policy process models, see Sabatier (1999) and Schlager and Blomquist (1996) .
7. An extremely powerful theory would pose what Jagdish Bhagwati calls the “determinacy paradox”: Political economy models that successfully endogenize politics would leave little room for the advice of policy analysts. See O’Flaherty and Bhagwati (1997).
8. Of course, some ideas of a general nature do influence public policy in important ways (Hall, 1989; Kelman, 1990; Walsh, 2000). The impact of ideas, however, may not be immediate but rather flow like water in limestone, reappearing unexpectedly (Thomas, 1987). They may also play a general “enlightenment role,” setting the context for policy discussion (Weiss, 1977). Based on the cases with which I am familiar, I would claim that such general policy ideas seem to come primarily from economists.
9. By the way, here is an example of the “limestone model” of policy ideas—auctioning spectrum was suggested by Ronald Coase in 1959.
10. The particular substance of policy problems may also necessitate drawing on theories of other disciplines, such as sociology and psychology.

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