

Paul Cairney, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Aberdeen, UK paul.cairney@abdn.ac.uk

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How Does The Political Science Literature Conceptualise Change? A Multiple Lenses A

Abstract

This paper argues that it is not possible to identify the most appropriate unit of analysis or length of time to operationalise policy change. Rather, the measurement of trends, scales and speed of policy developments are subject to interpretation and debate. As a result, the development of a generalisable descriptive-analytical framework of policy change through time will at best require compromises and at worst encourage the model's author

to make the evidence fit the model. Instead, this paper argues that the analysis of policy approach, drawing attention to a wide range of models (for example, punctuated equilibrium, multiple streams analysis and multi-level governance) and their ability to explain particular case studies of policy change. Second, it should develop competing 'narratives' of policy change as a means of exploring the value of each model. There is an inextricable link between the author, the evidence chosen and the value of each model.

Although a multiple lenses approach does not solve the problem it creates (since there will always be a selection bias), it encourages a form of methodological pluralism as an antidote to the types of epistemological debates which result from the search for 'one

Introduction

A key concern of public policy analysis is to explain continuity and change. However, there is no common method to study it. This problem becomes particularly acute when we compare processes of policy change in a range of countries. For example, there is a degree of uncertainty about the extent to which models developed in the US are compatible with studies of EU countries or the EU itself. Yet, there is enough of a common thread throughout the literature to identify the main ways to study stability and change: theories of policy cycles, policy transfer, rational choice and socio-economic explanations can be found in most country-based literatures, while theories such as multi-

level governance developed within studies of the EU share many elements with US-based

discussions of policy networks (such as advocacy coalitions and punctuated equilibrium) and may have interesting parallels with the US literature on intergovernmental relations.

Policy analysts face the same problems as 'rational' decision-makers: an infinite wealth of potentially relevant information to choose from but finite resources with which to

choose. As a result they focus their attention to one particular aspect of explanation and this requires a choice. Yet, while theories of policy change are often presented as competing accounts, the alternative is to see them as a series of lenses through which to view public policy. There is a useful analogy from the study of agenda-setting. Often the process of agenda-setting is more subtle than competing interests pursuing mutually exclusive goals. Rather, they try to focus the most attention on particular aspects of the same policy problem. The aim within a policy context is for policy participants to achieve policy outcomes: focussed attention leads to decisions and the allocation of resources. In an academic context we may have a different aim: of illuminating as many relevant factors about policy change as possible. Therefore, with a multiple lenses approach the paper does not ask you to choose from conflicting accounts of the policy process (particularly since there are many overlaps between these theories). Rather, it allows the analyst to explore a range of aspects of the same policy area, asking for example: was there policy transfer; which levels of government were most active; and what is the significance of country-level differences? This allows the reader to develop a 'checklist' of questions or ways to view the same policy phenomena.

But how do we begin? In the past we may have begun with a discussion of comprehensive rationality as an ideal form of decision making. Most accounts would then use this as a point of departure, stressing its descriptive inaccuracy and developing alternative accounts. More contemporary discussions may begin at the other end of the spectrum, stressing the messy nature of real public policy making and exploring the extent to which we can make sense of this muddle (particularly in the literature on governance and multiple streams). This paper presents an overview of a variety of models which can be situated within this spectrum, outlining briefly the similarities and differences in each approach, as well as their respective values to research on policy change. To this end, it explores a series of questions, such as: does decision-making complexity constrain or facilitate change; how does our choice of starting point influence

our perceptions of change; and how does our selection of policy instruments and timeframe influence our findings on change? To illuminate the discussion, it presents the results from a case study – on tobacco control policy in the UK – using a multiple lenses

Models of Change – (1) Models Emphasising Stability and Continuity

A common criticism of approaches such as incrementalism or policy communities is that they only explain stability. Yet, their emphasis on stability does not preclude change. Rather, continuity becomes their main focus of attention because of the common assumptions that they take to task. In the case of incrementalism, this may come from two sources. The first refers to widespread and unrealistic expectations for policy change.

This is summed up well by Hayes (2001: 1). Quoting Knight (1947), he links public perceptions about the politicians they elect to their beliefs about how the political

Electorates educated in and by democracy tend to combine a lack of respect for 'politicians' with the belief that elected officials will satisfy any craving by fiat, if only the right pressure is brought to bear.

In other words, a key explanation for a lack of trust in politicians is that, once elected, they do not do what they say they will do quickly enough. Since politicians could do much more if they really tried or if the political system was geared up for change, then (according to this narrative) politicians have become inept and corrupted by the very political system they were elected to. Hayes (2001: 2) suggests that many academics and civic leaders stoke up this view by criticising the political systems in which politicians operate. For example, he outlines Burns' (1963) suggestion in *The Deadlock of Democracy* that the US should be more like the UK, with: a two-party system and clear competition based on distinct manifestos, a winning party with a clear majority and therefore a legitimate mandate to introduce its policies, and a system which has more top-down levers and fewer checks and balances. In other words, the main hindrance to legitimate and swift policy change is the structure of government. A similar rhetoric is often found in discussion of Japan's consensual style – if Japan emulated the Westminster model, then it could address widespread inertia within the political system and re-establish faith in its politicians. In Italy and Germany, while there may be fewer explicit references to the 'Westminster model', there are similar criticisms of political systems which were once 'stable' but are now 'stagnating'. In Italy, 'institutionalists' point to the value of a consensual system of government only when the country itself was deeply divided (in the aftermath of the second world war and in the wake of the cold war). However, when policy conditions changed, the institutions of government did not, and a lack of party competition and choice (as a source of a mandate for significant policy change) contributed to the 'degeneration of Italian democracy' (Fabrini and Gilbert, 2000: 28). Similarly, Germany's stable political system was once considered to be an antidote to uncertain economic conditions in the rest of the world and conducive to the 'Golden Age' of post-war economic recovery. However, it now contributes to a, 'painfully slow, incremental process of political and economic change' which is ill equipped to deal with new political problems and unable to command the respect of its citizens (Kitschelt and Streeck, 2003: 2).

An 'incrementalist view' suggests that the common theme in these countries is the attachment to unrealistic expectations about how quickly policy can change substantively within any political system. Hayes (2001: 3) draws on theories of incrementalism to suggest two constants in most mature political processes:

1. The necessity of bargaining and compromise between actors who have different information, different interests and conflicting views.
2. Building on past policies – when decision-makers consider a 'new' policy issue they do not begin with a clean slate.

The result of the need to compromise, combined with the inheritance of previous policies, is that policy change is incremental, or through a series of small steps rather than one large change. This universal finding suggests that instead of pursuing institutional reforms as a means to reinvigorate public confidence in politics, political elites should educate the public about the limits to (and problems with) radical change.

The second source refers to Lindblom's (1959) classic exposition and critique of the 'ideal' of comprehensive rationality, which sets out the conditions necessary for central decision-makers to control policy change and gauge the effects:

- Policy aims or ends are identified in terms of the values of the policy maker
- All means to achieve those ends are identified
- **The best means are selected**
- Analysis of the decision-making context is comprehensive – i.e. all relevant factors/possibilities have been considered.

As John (1998: 33) suggests, the rational model:

Conceives policy to be a logical, reasoned and neutral way organizations assess problems, propose solutions, then choose and carry out courses of action ... there are clear cut stages to decision-making. Organizations can make decisions when they are faced with choices. They rank the decisions and one emerges as a clear winner. When organizations make their choices, the preference rankings between them are consistent. Every participant in the policy process gets what they want, subject to the constraint of resources.

Of course, in this light, there are no accounts of the policy process which treat such a model as descriptively accurate. Lindblom's critique – based on the limited problem-solving ability of decision-makers, the lack of information on which to base decisions, an inability to distinguish between facts and values (and therefore take the politics out of decision-making), and the way in which issues arise (i.e. decision-makers react to events and the unintended consequences of existing policies much more than they devote time to policy planning) – is therefore one of many. The difference is in his solution, which stresses that: since there will never be complete agreement on policy solutions, policy success comes from a level of agreement based on negotiations between various policy analysts and decision-makers; and since policy research is costly (and few solutions will be politically feasible), policy analysis should not extend far beyond solving problems associated with policies already in place. This is based on a combination of the extent of existing commitments and the considerable effort previously invested by decision-

Although this normative conclusion may not receive unanimous support, the wider descriptive point is more widely accepted and articulated in a range of literatures:

- Inheritance before choice in public policy (Rose and Davies, 1994) – most policy decisions are based on legislation which already exists, while most day-to-day delivery of policy takes place without significant ministerial involvement. The significant investment of political resources into policy change in one area means ignoring or acceding to policy stability in 99 others.
- Policy succession (Hogwood and Peters, 1983) – the size and scope of the state is such that any 'new' policy is likely to be a revision of an old one. Indeed new policies are often pursued merely to address the problems caused by the old.

- The lack of policy termination Complete termination often has immediate costs (financial, political), may smack of failure without replacement, may be opposed by groups and interests associated with the policy, and may be undermined by organisations operating in relative anonymity or seeking new ways to justify their existence.
- Path dependence – when commitment to a policy has been established and resources devoted to it, over time it becomes increasingly costly to choose a different path.

Although incrementalism may also be an inspiration for the (UK) policy communities approach, the latter's main aim was to challenge the study of formal parliamentary procedures, in favour of a focus on 'real' politics and the relationships between groups and governments (Richardson and Jordan, 1979; Jordan and Richardson, 1982; Jordan 2005). In turn, this shift of focus explains why policy did not change as much as the 'adversary politics thesis' suggests. Regular changes of government did not cause wholesale shifts in policy. In part, this was because most policy decisions were effectively beyond the reach of ministers. The sheer size of government and its policy environment necessitates breaking policy down into more manageable issues involving a smaller number of interested and knowledgeable participants. Therefore, most public policy is conducted primarily through small and specialist policy communities which process 'technical' issues at a level of government not particularly visible to the public or

Parliament, and with minimal ministerial or senior civil service involvement. These arrangements exist because there is a logic to devolving decisions and consulting with certain affected interests. Ministers rely on their officials for information and advice. For specialist issues, those officials rely on specialist organisations. Those organisations trade that information/ advice (and other resources such as the ability to implement or

In later work, there is more of a critical focus on the assumption of policy stability, with Richardson (2000) most willing to reinterpret the level of policy change since 1979. For Jordan and Maloney (1997) there is less of a break from the past. Rather, they are more careful to identify the characteristics of networks or subsystems when they are stable: there is a well defined jurisdiction, small number of participants (with restricted access), low visibility of decisions and little scope for conflict. In some accounts, this stability hinges on socialisation and problem definition. Inclusion within the policy community depends on the gaining of personal trust, through the awareness of, following, and reproduction of 'rules of the game'. The learning process involves immersion within a 'common culture', or network in which there exists a great deal of agreement on the nature and solutions to policy problems (Wilks and Wright, 1987: 302-3;

McPherson and

Raab, 1988: 55). In part, this explains the 'insulation' of these communities from the wider political process. First, as a rule, policy is broken down to such a level that few actors are interested or have the time or resources (including knowledge) to become regularly involved. Second, a key rule of the game is for participants to resolve issues within the network, rather than seeking satisfaction elsewhere. Participants know that while they may not agree with all decisions taken, it may be counterproductive to highlight these grievances in other arenas where more involvement may dilute their

For example, issues may be defined as humdrum or technical/ requiring expertise – limiting attention and the perceived legitimacy of some groups to participate.

Given the specific conditions in which policy communities operate, the policy community concept became widely understood as one particular type of policy network. For example, Marsh and Rhodes (1992a) position policy communities at one extreme of a spectrum of policy network types, arguing that the assumptions involved (limited membership, good quality access, shared values and a relationship based on the exchange

of resources) contrast with issue networks (less control over membership, infrequent access, greater conflict and less negotiation) at the other (see Hecl, 1978). However, again, discussions were rarely focussed directly on the idea of stability and change. The identification of the pervasiveness of policy community-like arrangements (see Jordan, 2005: 317 - 'there is a lot of it about') could be taken to mean that most policy tends to be incremental. However, challenges to this idea tended to be couched more in terms of the power of the centre or sectoral level in relation to policy communities at the sub-sectoral level (see Cavanagh et al, 1995; Jordan and Maloney, 1995). Although this relates in some way to the idea of change (such as where it comes from and how much can be imposed from the top), there are other models – such as punctuated equilibrium and the

Models of Change – (2) Network-Based Models Emphasising Continuity and Change

There is now an increasing focus on explaining policy change within the policy networks literature. In the US, this may be a response to the identification since the 1980s of a more complex political system - containing a much larger number of groups, experts and other policy participants – which makes it much more difficult for policy issues to be insulated from the wider political process and for policy monopolies to restrict debate (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993). In the UK, it may follow the experience of the Thatcher government and the imposition of policy change in the face of widespread opposition, rather than through the types of negotiation and compromise that incrementalist and policy communities approaches suggest. In the EU, it may follow the identification of a policy process which is 'more fluid and unpredictable – and less controllable – than seems to be implied by enthusiasts of the network approach' (Richardson, 2000: 1008).

The model of punctuated equilibrium (based on the US political system) is well equipped to capture this shift from policy insulation to integration (or perhaps from policy community to issue network) because it explains both with a similar model of agenda setting: 'The forces that create stability during some periods are the same that combine during critical periods to force dramatic and long-lasting changes'. In particular, Baumgartner and Jones (1993) discuss the conditions necessary to both develop and challenge policy monopolies. The production of a policy monopoly follows the successful definition of a problem in a certain way, to limit the number of participants who can claim a legitimate role in the process. Policy issues are 'inherently multi-dimensional', but while there is an infinite number of ways of looking at a problem, there is only so much time and energy to devote to issues. So, highly complex issues are

time at the expense of all the rest. The practice of problem definition is crucial because the allocation of resources follows the image of the policy problem. Similarly, those excluded from monopolies have an interest in challenging or reshaping the dominant way

of defining policy problems, to allow new entrants into the policy network and/ or widen the debate to ensure a more sympathetic audience. This may come from within, for example by ensuring that new ideas or evidence force a shift in government attention to a

new policy image of the same problem. If these new ideas are accepted, the very structure of the decision-making process changes to accommodate new interests and experts (and perhaps exclude the actors previously favoured by governmental decision-makers). Or, if this new image is stifled by policy monopolies, then groups may pursue

In short, the successful redefinition of a problem accompanied by an influx of new actors leads to the realignment of those actors and institutions and the redirection of public policy resources. Examples include: the shifting image of pesticides (from a focus on scientific progress and ending world hunger to the toxic effects on the environment); nuclear power (from scientific advance and solving energy crises/ becoming less dependent on others for energy to the environmental effects and financial costs with disposal; and tobacco (from an image based on glamour, liberty and economics to public health and smoking related illness). In each case, while policy was initially sympathetic (with pesticide, nuclear power and tobacco production subsidized in the US),

The Advocacy Coalition Framework (also based on the US – see Sabatier, 1998; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993) focuses more on the interaction between coalitions of policy participants competing for public policy resources. In this sense, the focus is less on competition *within policy* communities towards competition *between* different communities within a sectoral level subsystem (reflecting a more complex political system containing a much larger number of groups, experts and other policy participants). Each advocacy coalition also includes more actors than we would expect to find in policy communities: ‘most coalitions will include not only interest group leaders, but also agency officials, legislators from multiple levels of government, applied researchers, and perhaps even a few journalists’ (Sabatier, 1998: 103). The ACF includes discussion of actors at all levels of government over ‘a decade or more’, to track policy through a full policy cycle. Therefore, while it was built on analysis of the US, it has increasing relevance to multi-level studies in the EU.

The glue that binds these actors together is ‘belief systems’. These range from ‘core’ beliefs (e.g. on the relative priorities of values such as freedom and security or health), ‘policy core’ (the proper scope of government, the economy versus the environment, coercion versus persuasion) and secondary aspects (such as the best way to deliver policy). Core values are the least susceptible to change. The coalitions themselves are based on policy beliefs which may only change following external ‘shocks’ to the system

(such as changes in socio-economic conditions or the effects of policies external to the

learning. For example, environmental coalitions may shift their beliefs about the best way to *deliver policy* (from command-and-control to economic incentives). These beliefs

are refined according to new information based on the evidence from the policy cycle and, for example, the ‘enlightenment function’ of actors such as journalists or policy analysts in the wider policy process. The idea is that within a policy subsystem these advocacy coalitions not only compete for position within subsystems (with a role for a relatively neutral ‘policy broker’) but that they are constantly learning from past policy and revising their strategic positions based on new evidence and the need to react to

We therefore have both stable and dynamic elements. Stability comes from the parameters/ context of policy – such as the constitutional structure, fundamental social structures and values – and perhaps the dominance of one advocacy coalition over a period of time. Change can come from two main sources: first, from within a coalition which adapts to its policy environment and engages in policy learning to protect its position, or second from a shift in power following a ‘shock’ to the political system or a more successful period of policy learning by a competing coalition. In either case, policy learning and the judgement of new evidence is not straightforward. Rather, it is shaped by the existing beliefs holding coalitions together. This relates not only to the slant put on new evidence but the importance of that new evidence compared to other issues. Thus, one basic premise of the ACF is that the visible jostling on policy positions and the

best way to deliver policy is underpinned by more deep beliefs which shape the interpretation of evidence. Change is apparent (but not as significant) even if one coalition dominates proceedings for long periods, since the coalition is always learning from policy evaluation and reacting to external events. In addition, dominance may be unlikely in the long run, given the importance attached to the role of external events in the ACF. This constant change in policy conditions results in changes to the types of

The third relevant model in this category (based primarily on studies within the EU) is multi-level governance. This is perhaps more difficult to pin down because the model has multiple authors, there is a related study of governance (i.e. without the multi) and the range of topics is broad. Further, at least in the UK, its main focus is often a critique of the ‘Westminster model’ rather than policy change per se (Bache and Flinders, 2004a; Bevir and Rhodes, 2006). However, the potential usefulness of the concept is vast, since it combines a focus on intergovernmental relations at various levels with a discussion of governance (which furthers a policy network-based study of the blurred boundaries between public and private action). For present purposes, perhaps the most useful exposition is by Hooghe and Marks (2003) who highlight two types of MLG: type 1 relates to the diffusion of power (or a ‘basket’ of specific issues) by territory (for example from the UK upwards to the EU and downwards to Scotland); type 2 refers to the diffusion of power according to policy issue, involving a wide range of organisations across various levels of government and in the public and private sectors.

As a result of the width of focus, it is possible to infer both stability and change from particular studies. For example, MLG appears to undermine the idea of a single, central

decision-maker or decision-making organisation (a key assumption of comprehensive rationality). Instead, there are multiple centres of authority and strong central government is replaced by bargaining government and the type of ‘mutual adjustments’ associated with incrementalism. Viewed from the top-down, the problem of governance is an inability of central government to directly control policy:

Twenty years ago political institutions and political leaders were much more self-reliant and it was assumed –for good reasons- that the state governed Britain. Today, the role of government in the process of governance is much more contingent. Local, regional and national political elites alike seek to forge coalitions with private businesses, voluntary associations and other societal actors to mobilize resources across the public-private border in order to enhance their chances of guiding society towards politically

In other words, the proliferation of governance organisations may exacerbate the collective action problems identified in rational choice analysis (and this has parallels in rational choice applications to ‘veto points’ in intergovernmental relations – Tsebelis). On the other hand, there are a number of possible sources of policy change. The first refers to the potential for innovation in devolved jurisdictions, followed in some cases by

policy learning across a wider territory (see below). The second refers to the ability of supra-national organisations such as the EU to make member states introduce policies that they would otherwise not entertain. The third refers to flexible governance and the ability to tailor policies to heterogeneous populations (Hooghe and Marks, 2003). In this sense, we may equate policy *divergence* (for example, between devolved territories and central government) as policy change. Further, if we analyse policy change from the ‘bottom up’ or street level, then we may witness a profound level of policy divergence (and therefore change) over time. As Greer (2004) discusses in his study of UK health policy, an initial level of divergence is caused by different actors dealing with similar problems but making different decisions. As time goes on, these differences multiply since diverging policies throw up different problems which have to be addressed in a different way. Eventually, the frames of reference change profoundly in each territory, with (for example) contact and policy learning between different territories diminishing because their political systems seem so different that there is little value in exchanging policy experiences. If we follow the ‘bottom-up’ focus on a wide range of decision-makers at a low level of government, then we see this diminishing point of reference multiplied dramatically. In other words, if there is a lack of central coordination and a proliferation of decision-making bodies, then policy delivery may be diverging/

Models of Change – (3) Change From Above and Below

In at least two cases, models based on networks can also be included in this next category, since there are three main examples of change originating from (or heavily influenced by) an organisation or venue outside of the central state:

1. The idea of ‘venue shift’ in which binding decisions made in venue B affect policy in the venue A (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993: 32).

2. Multi-level governance which describes the dispersal of power from central government to other levels of government and non-governmental actors (Bache and Flinders, 2004b).
3. Policy transfer and learning. In its broadest sense, policy convergence refers to the evidence for similarities in policy across regions. A more specific focus is to link convergence with a transfer of policy from one region to another. The literature then extends to a series of questions, including: is transfer voluntary; which actors are involved; how much policy is transferred; and how do we explain variations in levels of transfer (Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996; 2000; Bennett, 1991; James and Lodge, 2003;

While these models help us to understand the links between decisions made elsewhere and their effects on a particular country's policy, the extent of this influence varies. In the case of venue shift, it may vary by political system. For example, while Baumgartner and

Jones (1993) emphasise the influence of venue shift from the executive to congress or the courts, this was traditionally a less realistic strategy for policy participants in the UK faced with a centralised state. While the advent of power diffusion upwards to the EU and downwards to devolved governments changes this picture now, it may not aid

- direct coercive policy transfer which can involve a supra-national body (such as the EU) taking over responsibility for policy development and obliging individual countries to follow;
- indirect coercive transfer which describes a perception (fuelled by pressure participants) within region A that it should follow the policy of region B (or at least change policy in line with international experience);
- voluntary transfer which describes the relative freedom to interpret and learn from decisions made elsewhere (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000)

Further, as with MLG, the focus of policy transfer is broad, with the research agenda covering such issues as: the actors involved (elected officials, parties, civil service, 'policy entrepreneurs' and supra-national organisations), the type or level of policy transfer (from ideologies and complete duplication of programmes to administrative arrangements or just broad inspiration from ideas), the likelihood of, or willingness to, transfer (which depends on shared policy conditions, geography and ideology) and the conditions for successful transfer (for example, if the policy is simple, the values of borrower and lender coincide and the political structures/ administrative arrangements are

similar). However, perhaps unlike our discussion of MLG, the agenda is arguably so broad that most of the questions involved are covered in the existing literature on policy

- Incrementalism and path dependence - the search for outside experience is not automatic since a large preoccupation of decision-makers is solving problems caused by previous policies; the focus on learning may be restricted to countries which share basic characteristics with the importing country, since a radical

departure from the past is unlikely (indeed, region A may be most likely to borrow from B if it has already done so in the past).

- Agenda setting and punctuated equilibrium – the lessons from other countries are subject to demand (for example, based on dissatisfaction with current policy) and framing, particularly from those who seek to import new policies (Page, 2000: 4) or those who seek to use international experience to repackage or legitimise existing policy.
- Multi-level Governance - the successful adoption of policy from one level of government is dependent on the cooperation from another; policy transfer may be fostered outwith the arena of central government; successful voluntary transfer in one area may result in indirect coercive transfer in another (Bennett, 1991: 223-6; Holzinger and Knill, 2005: 776; Cairney, 2007a; 2007b).

Models of Change – (4) Garbage Cans, Policy Windows and the Role of Ideas

Policy transfer may also be influenced by the role of ideas. Ideas are often described as ‘viruses’ which ‘mutate’, take on a life of their own and permeate political systems (Campbell, 2002; John, 1998; 1999 Richardson, 2000). Or, they may be, ‘an irresistible movement that sweeps over our politics and our society, pushing aside everything that might stand in its path’ (Kingdon, 1995: 1). This powerful force emanating from outside political systems may explain why policy may change in a similar way in different political systems or may change even when the process was hitherto dominated by policy

monopolies. Similarly, if such ideas are associated with scientific knowledge, then they may be championed in a similar way in a range of countries by ‘epistemic communities’ (or networks of knowledge-based experts - Haas, 1992: 3). However, the type of response by individual countries to particular ideas tends to vary according to the ‘vested economic interests, cultural practices, and political factors’ of each country (Studlar, 2004). Further, significant time-lags between the proposal and acceptance of scientific knowledge and then the introduction of policy to address the problem suggest that the involvement of epistemic communities, ‘may be a necessary but not a sufficient

This level of contingency reinforces the point that few discussions of the role of ideas treat them as the sole explanatory factor. Instead we find varying combinations of ideas and *interests*. One of the most prominent discussions of this interaction uses the concept of ‘policy windows’ (formed in the US but applied elsewhere – see Zahariadis, 1999) to highlight the idiosyncratic and serendipitous reasons for the adoption of policies (or, in the case of transfer, apparently similar policy developments in different countries). According to Kingdon (1995), policy change requires the coming together of problems (policy issues which are deemed to require attention), policies (solutions proposed by policy participants) and politics, which refers to changes in the political system (such as a

crisis or the election of a new government) that make attention to this particular problem more likely. So, while policies or solutions already exist, their proponents must wait for the right opportunity to present them and have them adopted." This window of

Separate streams come together at critical times. A problem is recognized, a solution is developed and available in the policy community, a political change makes it the right time for policy change, and potential constraints are not severe ... these policy windows, the opportunities for action on given initiatives, present themselves and stay open for only short periods (Kingdon, 1995: 165-6)

The point is that the use of particular ideas to define and solve policy problems is far from a straightforward process. Rather, to explain their adoption we must explore the particular circumstances in which policy change takes place. This shifts our attention from the ideas themselves to the *receptivity* to ideas (Kingdon, 1995: 72). This treatment of ideas may at first seem contradictory, since Kingdon refers both to the notion of an 'idea whose time has come' (suggesting inevitability, with the idea as the main source of explanation) and the need for a range of conditions to be satisfied before a policy will change (suggesting uncertainty, with the acceptance of the idea more important than the idea itself). However, this can be viewed more usefully as an attempt to 'bring ideas in' to a traditional focus on the power of participants. In terms of policy networks analysis, the use of innovative ways to see an old policy problem, or the introduction of new and reliable evidence may be as useful a resource as the claim to represent a particular profession or constituency. Further, since it may be fruitless to explore the relative weight of ideas versus interests, a more useful approach is to draw attention to both:

An idea's time arrives not simply because the idea is compelling on its own terms, but because opportune political circumstances favour it. At those moments when a political idea finds persuasive expression among actors whose institutional position gives them both the motive and the opportunity to translate it into policy – then, and only then, can we say that an idea has found a time (Lieberman, 2002: 709).

Since a policy window does not stay open very long, an 'idea's time comes, but it also passes', particularly if the reasons for a particular level of attention to the policy problem fade before a coalition behind policy change can be mobilised (Kingdon, 1995: 169). Further, since there is an almost infinite number of ideas which could rise to the top of the political agenda, we can usefully see the process as one of competition to dedicate political time to one idea at the expense of the rest (particularly if subsequent policy competes for ministerial or legislative time). Therefore, a focus on the success of one idea exaggerates the role of ideas in general, since it ignores the failure of most others.

A Multiple Lenses Approach

A multiple lenses approach suggests that each model is complementary rather than contradictory, in the sense that the aim is to highlight as many explanations of the same problem as possible. There are also useful areas of overlap and common ground, in at least two ways. First, while some models emphasise stability, few models preclude change. For example, incremental change does not necessarily mean inertia. The cumulative effects of a series of small steps may be more radical change than could be achieved in one fell swoop by a government unwilling to negotiate (and therefore more subject to the problems of unintended consequences, opposition and implementation

explain policy stability, it is remarkably easy to adapt network based accounts to a focus on change. In this sense, policy networks may constrain, mediate and facilitate change. Finally, with governance, we find accounts that not only stress constraints on the ability of the centre to direct policy change, but also highlight multi-level governance as a source of innovation and policy learning

The second similarity regards a departure from 'comprehensive rationality' in favour of fairly similar accounts of bounded rationality. Some models come to different conclusions about the implications of this departure. For example, incrementalism suggests that the constraints to comprehensive rationality necessitate a process of bargaining and compromise between actors - who have different information, different interests and conflicting views - which is built on past policy. However, punctuated equilibrium uses a discussion of bounded rationality to explain rapid and profound policy

change: since decision makers have limited resources they cannot deal with the full range of ideas or policy problems available to them; they ignore most and promote relatively few to the top of their agenda; change occurs when this concentration of attention (and resources) shifts towards a different policy image or new way of understanding an existing problem. Further, the garbage can model of change uses bounded rationality as a starting point to explain 'organized anarchy' or the fluid and unpredictable nature of policy change. However, there is less of a contradiction than this suggests, since the latter models extend the analysis to uncommon periods of policy development. 'Garbage can' explains a 'portion' of policy activity, while punctuated equilibrium explores departures from the more common phases of policy stability. Therefore, while some models may be more focussed on, or better equipped to explain, instances of policy change, this does not mean that they present a more realistic picture of

the policy process. Indeed, models focussing on stability may be better placed because in each case they present a strong logic to arrangements based on small steps, stability, compromise and the exclusion of most policy participants. If we find that this is the dominant style within public policy (particularly when we extend analysis beyond

A combination of these points suggests that these models are flexible and able to adapt to a range of policy circumstances; to stability and change at various stages in the policy process. However, while flexibility is an advantage (particularly when a range of models highlights a range of explanations), this lack of precision may also be a problem. In other words, few models spell out their value in relation to a particular definition or measurement of policy change. While some (multiple streams, ACF, punctuated equilibrium) may seek to explain 'major' policy change, no model provides a convincing

definition (Schlager, 1999). Of course, this may be holding up each model to an impossible standard, since distinguishing between minor and major change may be an intractable problem. However, if we accept this argument, then we accept that it is not possible to identify the most appropriate unit of analysis or length of time to operationalise policy change. Rather, the measurement of trends, scales and speed of

operationalises the idea of change influences the subsequent value that we attach to each model. This process of defining change has a number of aspects:

- Our characterisation of policy change depends on the policy instruments that we select. For example, in tobacco, instruments include regulation, legislation, economic incentives and penalties, public education, health funding, funding public health organisations, funding scientific research, border control and voluntary agreements (Cairney, 2007b). In some cases, the instruments used appear to be contradictory (for example, there may be economic policies to increase tobacco production but limit consumption). In others, the policy may have uncertain aims (for example, the primary aim of cigarette taxes may be to raise revenue; a smoking ban in underground trains may be to stop fires). In other policy areas, increased levels of public expenditure or organisational resources devoted to a policy may be a more systematic indicator. However, this may involve a reclassification rather than a redistribution of resources. As Peters and Hogwood (1985: 242) suggest, this involves ‘moving boxes around, but what the boxes do is unchanged’.
- Our characterisation also depends on the timeframe that we use. For example, Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993) call for policy change over a decade or more, while Baumgartner and Jones (1993) suggest that significant policy change is common over the long run. Yet, we may identify different levels of change in the ‘short run’, while we may be more interested in vignettes or snapshot of the key moments involving particular individuals. This factor is crucial, since if we use, say, a fifty year time period, we do not necessarily know (or may not be able to agree) if policy change was incremental year-on-year or if one year in particular was pivotal. In other words, it is often assumed that models based on the US political system do not translate easily to other countries. In this case, we have similar limitations to their generalisability.
- Our choice of starting point influences our perception of change. For example, a top-down or state-centred perspective may suggest that it is now more difficult to change policy, since any decision now involves a convoluted process of negotiation and compromise. Conversely, a top-down approach may exaggerate change by focussing on formulation rather than implementation. A ‘bottom-up’ approach may look for change in the day-to-day activities of street level organisations. While this has the advantage of longer term analysis through the policy cycle, it may not provide a systematic assessment of policy change in organisations.
- Our normative framework influences the way we characterise change. In other words, evaluations may be expressed in terms of how much policy change we should expect (and therefore how fast or slow policy change was in relation to this standard).
- Our assumptions of power influence our identification of the causes (and therefore the nature) of policy change. For example, a more crowded policy environment may have two plausible responses (suggesting opposing forms of power) – either the network becomes more pluralistic and difficult to control, or

subsystems become smaller and more specialized but more able to control and exclude the participation of a wider issue network (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993: 45).

As a result, it is possible to produce competing (and equally plausible) narratives of the type, tempo and nature of change in the same policy issue (this may be particularly the case when the author draws on contradictory interview evidence). In turn, the selection of narrative determines the value of each model of policy change. Therefore, a multiple lenses approach is better suited to explain policy change when there are multiple narratives and there is no broad agreement on when and how much policy has changed. This approach is perhaps different from the arguments put forward by Sabatier (1999), since the emphasis in this paper - on ambiguity and multiple narratives - suggests that a search for the best model or even best fit with the evidence is illusory. Yet, the practical effect of this difference may not be as significant as this statement suggests if the main focus of policy analysis is to track and illuminate the policy issue under study (rather than

Case Study: Tobacco Control in the UK

In this case study, Cairney (2007b) seeks to explain why tobacco policy appeared to demonstrate a period of short but profound policy change (in less than five years) after an extended period of policy stability (over fifty years). It presents two narratives at opposite ends of a spectrum (suggesting that further narratives could be produced by

Table 1 – Contrasting Narratives of Tobacco Policy Change

	Dominance Narrative	Incremental Narrative
Post-war policy change (until the early 2000s)	Limited; minimal changes mediated and exaggerated steps up to the 1970s was: by the tobacco industry	Significant, with gradual accelerated from the 1980s
The tobacco policy network was relatively:	Closed and dominated by tobacco interests	Open to health and scientific interests
Voluntary agreements on tobacco represent:	The <i>appearance</i> of change without actual intent, with legislation to follow if unsuccessful <i>enforcement</i>	A profound signal of legislation to
The move from Conservative to Labour government in 1997:	a Demonstrates inertia and the difference between commitment to, and commitments made in opposition and actions when in government	Represents a greater acceleration of, tobacco control
Recent legislation represents:	A sea-change in policy and a challenge to vested interests and inertia in government	A logical progression, consistent with existing policies

The dominance narrative suggests that the post-war tobacco policy community was dominated by tobacco companies at the expense of public health. This was based on

favourable socio-economic factors (the number of people employed in the industry, the value of exports, tax revenue, high levels of smoking and minimal public support for restrictions) and a government-industry relationship which was cemented during WW2 (when a tobacco council was set up to ensure cigarettes reached soldiers and civilians). The policy community defined tobacco as an economic issue and, as such, the tobacco council (backed by the four main UK-based companies) enjoyed ministerial and civil servant links in the key departments – the Treasury and Department of Trade and Industry. It also fostered wider links through sponsorship of sport and the arts. This community was surrounded by, but largely insulated from, an issue network which included (relatively underfunded and disorganised) public health interests competing with groups associated with tobacco – retailers, the Tobacco Workers Union and FOREST (Freedom Organization for the Right to Enjoy Smoking). The level of tobacco funding to

newspapers via advertising also ensured that few anti-smoking articles were published and few advertising restrictions were enforced. Over time, although the link between health and illness became more established and a purely economic image of tobacco came under threat, this was bolstered by an image of individual liberties and personal choice. On this basis, the dominance narrative suggests that while policy appeared to change in the post-war period, it was rarely against the interests of the industry or rarely enforced. For example, measures such as health warnings on cigarette packets not only helped the industry claim its consumers were aware of the risks, but were also traded for the ability to use brand names in advertising. More importantly, the government generally eschewed legislation in favour of voluntary agreements (e.g. on advertising) which had no real ‘bite’. This continued until 2006 – i.e. for nine years into the term of a Labour government which professed to reject the previous laissez faire attitude of the Conservatives; and eight years after the government accepted the scientific link between passive smoking and illness. Until 2006, the government continued to favour a voluntary agreement on smoking in public places (which merely obliged pubs who allowed smoking to put a sticker in the window to say so). Recent legislation therefore represents

In contrast, the incremental narrative suggests that the policy network was never insulated. Scientific and medical advice was always present and ASH (Action on Smoking and Health) was a government-funded pressure group whose role was encouraged by civil servants. The medical evidence was used in negotiations with tobacco interests and the government took policy as far as it could (for example, given the unpopularity of a smoking ban in the 1960s). Tobacco control was incremental, beginning with age-related restrictions (1933) and then followed by smoking cessation clinics, health warnings, public transport and cinema smoking bans, punitive (and optimal, given the threat of smuggling) tax increases and strong health education messages. Indeed, even before the smoking ban was introduced, the UK was second (of thirty) in the European Network for Smoking Prevention’s league table, while voluntary measures had secured a 50% rate of smoke-free workplaces. Therefore, when viewed in the context of tobacco policy as a whole, legislation represents a logical progression from

The implication is that we may be trying to explain two different changes (radical versus incremental change), two different conceptions of change (in a few years or over fifty) and two different sources of change (from outside a previously closed policy community or from within government). This affects the value of models of policy change. For example, explanations from ‘above and below’ may be most appropriate if we are seeking to explain radical change in a short time period caused by decisions made outside

of a previously insulated network (particular examples include the role of the EU in obliging member states to ban tobacco advertising, international trends towards smoking bans, and the decisions in the devolved territories to ban smoking in public places which put pressure on England to follow). In turn, we may link this process to the strength of the role of ideas which contributed to very similar policies across the UK and within the EU. Or, we may focus on the mediation of changing socio-economic factors by policy networks. The number of jobs in the UK directly related to tobacco, the value of tobacco-related tax and the levels of smoking prevalence have all fallen significantly, trends reduce the obstacles to policy change, while changing social attitudes may provide a “‘permissive consensus’ not demanding government action but willing to support it” (Studlar, 2007b). In turn, these factors accelerate the trends within networks – including the greater acceptance of (now relatively well organised, active and funded) public health

interests and a reduced acknowledgement of the financial contribution that tobacco companies make to the economy. In the ACF, this may involve a post-war period of tobacco coalition dominance which was lengthened by policy learning and adaptation to its new environment (this includes voluntary measures introducing filters for cigarettes, funding medical research, voluntarily restricting advertising, and providing ventilation in

public places) but then undermined by advances in the public health coalition which also engaged in learning (by developing the scientific evidence on passive smoking) and successfully persuaded the ‘policy broker’ to introduce more radical policies than seen in

the past. With punctuated equilibrium, increasing acceptance within government of the link between passive smoking and illness shifted the policy image, from individual

Yet, there are two main problems with these conclusions. The first is that each explanation is incomplete or relies on unusual political behaviour. For example, the UK went far beyond EU requirements for tobacco advertising and there was no EU push on smoking bans, while indirect voluntary transfer from the devolved territories to England is highly unusual (and usually in the opposite direction). Indeed, the UK government resisted the urge to follow other countries. Radical policy change therefore required further venue shift to Parliament. Yet, since this process is rarely significant (particularly compared to venue shift from executive to legislature in the US), we also need to explain why Parliament was important in this case. Following multiple streams analysis, we can argue that a series of the right things came together at the right time. This began with a strong Secretary of State in the Department of Health (John Reid) who ensured that major

policy decisions on tobacco would be made in his department (the Treasury was also

agenda). This raised the status and profile of public health groups and ensured that some form of legislation would reach Parliament. Further, the Labour government had suffered a series of 'rebellions' and the prospect for further revolt (furthered by Labour's chair of the Health Select Committee and the prospect of a Cabinet split), on an issue not high on the government's agenda, was key to the decision to allow a free vote in Parliament (which was crucial given Conservative opposition to legislation). Following the unusually intense lobbying of Labour MPs by public health groups, the free vote resulted in legislation to introduce a complete ban.

Although we can give too much credit to multiple streams analysis in this case (since the focus on ambiguity and unpredictability does not really guide detailed analysis), it reinforces the idea that models explaining long term change are often incomplete without

a discussion of individuals and their role in making highly significant decisions in a short

time period. This vignette - or snapshot of the key moment - may be even more apparent in the Scottish process (Cairney, 2007a). This began when Stewart Maxwell (Member of the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish National Party which, at the time, was in opposition) secured the agreement of a range of influential public health groups to support his Member's Bill banning smoking in certain public places at a press conference. The inference was clear: the groups were influential, could secure the publicity and this would be directed in favour of Maxwell and against the Scottish Executive which had hitherto refused to legislate. As a result, Scottish ministers traded the withdrawal of this public support for the promise of a Scottish Executive bill which would introduce a more comprehensive ban. Ministers also agreed with Maxwell that if the former did not criticise the Scottish Executive's lack of progress in the past, they

The second problem is that these models are only useful if we accept one particular narrative. If we accept the competing incremental narrative then, for example, explanations from above and below seem less convincing. In other words, why place explanatory weight on decisions made in the EU and devolved territories when they did not appear to alter the course of UK government policy? This brings us full circle to our original discussion of incrementalism: if policy stability is the most common occurrence in public policy, then the adaptation of old models to suit new circumstances may entail more work than justified by the benefits.

Conclusion

Since we already have so many models of policy change to choose from, and we have different models for different purposes, this paper argues for a multiple lenses approach to policy change rather than the search for one best way. The paper outlines the main aspects of a range of models and suggests that their objectives and approaches are generally complementary. In turn, the tobacco policy example shows that an explanation of change may be most complete when we draw on a range of models. The paper suggests that the selection of one model may be inappropriate when there is so much disagreement and ambiguity surrounding the form of policy change that the models seek to explain. Our conclusions on policy change vary according to the policy instruments,

length of time, starting point (for example, from the top or bottom), normative assumption, and the assumptions we make about the exercise of power in political systems. These assumptions may also vary by political system and/ or policy issue. Since it is possible to produce equally plausible but competing narratives of the type, tempo and nature of policy change, then we should be careful about ascribing theoretical superiority to one model based on one characterisation of change.

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ⁱThis gained currency in the late 1970s as a justification for electoral reform. The adversarial style of politics in the UK combined with an electoral system which exaggerates voting majorities causes regular changes of government and therefore wholesale shifts in public policy (see Finer, 1975).

ⁱⁱ This emphasis on 'solutions chasing problems' is inspired by the 'garbage can' model of policy change (Cohen et al, 1972) which seeks to explain 'organized anarchy', or instances in which organisations have unclear preferences, unclear decision-making processes and fluid memberships. In such cases, solutions may be aired to solve problems which are not particularly well articulated.

ⁱⁱⁱ Although there is scope to explore contradictions in the details. For example, Hooghe and Mark's (2000) idea of 'optimal' type 2 MLG assumes a degree of certainty in the definition of policy-specific jurisdictions, while most other models assume ambiguity in relation to the framing of policy. Or, a key tenet of the ACF is that constitutional structures provide stability for subsystems, yet MLG stresses the changing or *dynamic* elements of those structures, while venue shift suggests that the value of each constitutional body to explanation varies over time.