

Review Essay Public Policy Guidebooks

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Giliberto Capano and Michael Howlett, editors
A Modern Guide to Public Policy
Cheltenham, UK, Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar, 2020

Christopher M. Weible and Paul A. Sabatier, editors
Theories of the Policy Process
Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999, 2007, 2014, 2017

Two edited books on public policy are reviewed here. The 2007 (2nd edition) of *Theories of the Policy Process*, edited by Paul A. Sabatier is available for free on the Internet. It has five sections: (1) Introduction, (2) Alternate Views on the Role of Rationality in the Policy Process, (3) Policy Networks and Subsystems: Change Over Time, (4) Frameworks Comparing Policies Across a Large Number of Political Systems; (5) Conclusion. Chapter 8 in Part IV is "Innovation and Diffusion Models in Policy Research". The Capano and Howlett book, *A Modern Guide to Public Policy*, 2020 has six sections: (1) Introduction, (2) Studying Public Policy, Actors and Dynamics; (3) Study the Policy Context and Processes, (4) Study Policy Mechanisms and Behaviour, (5) Studying Policy Tools and Capacities, (6) Study Policy Outputs and Outcomes.

Public policy has been defined in both grand and specific ways. In *Advanced Introduction to Public Policy* (2021), B. Guy Peters defined public policy as "the set of activities that governments engage in for the purpose of changing their economy and society." More specifically, in *Understanding Policy Decisions* (2014: 3), B. Dente explained public policy as "a set of actions that affect the solution of a policy problem, i.e., a dissatisfaction regarding a certain need, demand or opportunity for public intervention. Its quality is measured by the capacity to create public value". Even more specifically, other scholars defined public policy as a system of "courses of action, regulatory measures, laws, and funding priorities concerning a given topic promulgated by a governmental entity or its representatives" (Kirkpatrick, 2000). In some cases, the conception of public policy is a theory, when it is based on a logical explanation linking causes and consequences and able to be empirically tested. In this case, it is a theory of change or a program theory.

The field of public policy separated from political science beginning in the 1970s. University public policy programs have also been created in the USA, Canada, UK, Europe, Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America. In separating, public policy largely dropped consideration of ideology and politics as studied in political science and attempted to create a neutral, de-politicized study of the processes of public policy making. The books being reviewed take this approach.

One of reasons for this change from political science to public policy is political. A number of right-wing governments in the USA and Canada have been attempting, and have sometimes succeeded in de-funding political science. Political scientists talk about politics and have sometimes been critical of governments. Political science has been defunded in Canada; e.g., the University of Regina political science department was abolished and a public policy program expanded by a right-wing provincial government. This got rid of several scholars critical of the government. Replacing political science programs with public policy programs has thus sometimes been controversial. A right-wing Ontario government has just announced the abolition of the political science department at Laurentian University.¹

In the last forty years, as everyone who has worked on policy during that period knows, policy and the policy process have not been politically neutral. Right wing politics, in particular, have been very partisan. According to Rommetveit (1976), this is particularly true in two environments: when changes in normative structures are occurring (the basic value priorities of a polity are changing) and when no active participant dominates the policy process. The dominant ideology changed in western countries starting in the 1970s and right-wing ideology has been dominant since then; only rarely have centre and centre-left governments been in power. In Canada, norms changed from centre to right-wing; progressive conservative politics changed to neo-liberal and the neo-conservative party adopted USA Republican values. While Rommetveit's first characteristic has been true, the second has not. When centre parties have been in power, the locked-in cuts in taxes and programs (e.g., greatly reduced income security programs) and deficits and debts have limited government manoeuvrability. Federally taxes and programs were cut by the Liberals and Conservatives, in Saskatchewan by the Conservatives (Rushton, 2001; Marier, 2016).

Interestingly, how political governments have been has varied greatly and even unexpectedly; e.g., the former premier of the social democratic government of Saskatchewan, Canada, 1971-82, who might have been expected to be partisan, was not especially so. After he was in power, he published a political management book with a scholar second author (Blakeney and Borins, 1992). He had been a public servant, minister and the premier. The book was published by a major trade publisher. The book examined three perspectives: the political, the public service and the government's environment, with the environment being examined under the titles lobbying, managing change, crises and the media, and managing a change of government. It could be a public policy textbook. The authors referred to what they presented as a philosophy of statecraft. By comparison, the book about the right-wing government that followed 1982-91 (Baron and Jackson, 1991) was published by a right-wing publisher and was written from the government's perspective by ministerial assistants from the government. It reads in much the same partisan, populist way as communications of the government. The former government left the province with a balanced budget, the latter left it in near bankruptcy (the next government seriously considered declaring bankruptcy). It is hard to believe that an education in

¹ April 12, 2020 university administration cut 69 programs and terminated 110 faculty and 41 staff positions (151 of 850 employees, 17.8%).

public policy that ignores politics and ideology prepares students well for a career in government today. Nonetheless, the editors of these guidebooks have tried.

Scholars of public policy usually do not acknowledge the politics of policy. A few policy scholars have acknowledged the political system, but in very general terms. Of 11 chapters in Sabatier (1999), e.g., only one acknowledges politics or ideology as factors in public policy—that by Zahariadis. Zahariadis (1999: 78) acknowledged Kingdon's (1984) integration of narrow policy communities with ideas; broad political events with narrow sectoral developments. He recognized that “political events outside specific sectors influence the types of solutions that will be examined when windows open.” He also acknowledged that political parties “tend to dominate the political stream [he is referring to multiple streams theory] and exercise considerable control over the shape of policy choices”. This chapter was dropped from subsequent editions of the book. Most policy scholars do not refer to politics but generalize the policy process sufficiently to eliminate politics. Both of these handbooks are examples of that approach.

Public policy as a field of study should consider the politics of the government in power because their politics are of enormous importance to how partisan the policies are, which policies are implemented and how rational the policy process is. If this is not acknowledged, the guidance offered to students and the options and advice the students then offer to political decision-makers could not only be irrelevant, they could also be annoying. Moreover, in Canada right-wing ministers since the 1970s have appointed right-wing ministerial advisors in large numbers to control the policy content and process and right-wing public servants to policy positions within the bureaucracy, as a tactic for changing government policy and reducing and eliminating policies introduced by more left-wing governments (Marier, 2016). They have not valued the policies nor the existing staff but rather were suspicious of and sidelined or fired them. This tactic was successful. In the federal USA government, where the top four levels of the public service are political appointees, governments have also politicized the public (civil) service. Using a neutral, theoretical, non-political approach to preparing students to work in partisan environments has not worked very well, in my opinion. Public policy scholars should give some consideration to how to prepare students more appropriately rather than teaching them that policy development and decision-making is a rational process.

A Modern Guide to Public Policy acknowledges that politics exist but does not enlighten the reader about its role in public policy. Chapter 14 by Capano and Mukherjee, e.g., recognizes that policy design and the policy process may not be rational but rather political; however, “political” only gets eight mentions in the Index, that is, in the whole book. Politics and ideology get none, but power relations are mentioned. It is notable, as well, that the book does not include political elements such as external (contextual) elements or where the policy occurs. In the European Union and the USA; e.g., draft policies are sometimes tabled with elected officials by interest groups. Perhaps handbooks should also acknowledge these venues as places where policy is developed. While the policy process is presented generically as a technical process, that process may not only be technical in the private sector. In Sabatier (2007) the index lists two items for politics; one each for ideological principles and ideational factors in policymaking; two for interest groups; six for political conflict; one for political environments; one each for political

governance, political process, political activities and results, political and economic planning; political governance and implementation analysis; and political power, in a very large Index. While Sabatier does not totally ignore the political, this book does not systematically consider it either.

A number of public policy manuals are available on the market, such as CRC's Handbook of Public Policy Analysis (Fischer, Miller and Sidney, 2007), Routledge's *Handbook of Global Public Policy and Administration* (Klassen, Cepku and Lah (2017) and *Handbook of Public Policy* (Araral et al, 2013); Sage's *Handbook of Public Policy* (Peters and Pierre, 2006). the two handbooks reviewed here, Capano and Howlett's *A Modern Guide to Public Policy* and Weible and Sabatier's *Theories of the Policy Process* (4 editions), and Stuart Nagel's 984-page *Encyclopedia of Policy Studies*. There is clearly an interest in public policy as a field of study.

A Modern Guide to Public Policy covers the usual stages of the public policy process and uses some of the theories. It also adds some unique aspects. While, e.g., *Theories of the Policy Process* draws entirely on American scholars, *A Modern Guide to Public Policy* is edited by an Italian and a Canadian scholar, and none of the authors is American or British. While the nationalities of authors are more diverse than in many manuals, inclusion of women scholars is not accomplished. Of the 20 scholars published in the book, 5 are women, 25.0 per cent. Of the 13 authors published in *Theories of the Policy Process* (1999) 21 years earlier, 10 were men and 3 were women, 23.1 per cent.² Overall, they were more senior in the older book. In these two books, the inclusion and visibility of women scholars has not improved much in public policy but the inclusion of junior women is hopeful.

Scholars invited to write chapters in edited books are typically identified by editors two ways—through relationships formed with authors at professional meetings and through reading. Most public policy journals are American or British, are journals of professional associations and publish mostly their domestic scholars and their members. The USA and Britain have more journals than other countries, so their scholars are more likely to be published. Hence, Capano and Howlett's inclusion of none of these dominant American and British scholars can be considered an accomplishment.

All of the authors included in the first edition (1999) of *Theories of the Policy Process* were Americans and assumed an American political context. Sabatier made an effort to address this American chauvinism (his term) in the second edition (2007), by adding one chapter by Europeans and addressing two subjects of particular interest to Europeans, network analysis and social construction. Several chapters were revised not only to include "American pluralism" but also to include "non-American literature". As a Canadian, I still find this language still assumes the USA is the standard, but Sabatier did recognize and acknowledge his American-centric problem and made some effort to deal with it. In doing so, he also implicitly recognized that public policy has a political context.

² In my recent edited book, *Leading-Edge Research in Public Sector Innovation*, 13 women and 14 men were published (I must admit I did not pay attention to the gender issue).

While the public policy process is a practical field, none of the authors is a practitioner. Since the 1990s, many governments (e.g., Government of Canada) have reduced or eliminated their support to journals and to public servants to enable them to attend meetings of professional associations. With expenditure constraint and less respect for expertise, practitioners have largely lost conferences as a source of information and contacts on public policy and innovation. As a consequence, public servants and scholars do not meet as often as in the past and some public policy journals have not secured support from professional associations. This limits the capacity of public policy scholars to be published without fees paid either by their university or by themselves.

Theories of public policy are presented in these guidebooks as frameworks for exploring the process of policy making. Public policy making is also presented as a process. Facilitating the public policy process is a practical profession: some public policy university programs have relationships with the public services in their areas, e.g., the University of Regina. In the United States, the public policy concept refers not only to the results of policies, but more broadly to decision-making and analysis of governmental decisions. As an academic discipline, public policy is studied by professors and students at public policy schools of major universities throughout the country. The U.S. professional association of public policy practitioners, researchers, scholars, and students is the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management.

The study of theories and processes of public policy often do not recognize the practicality of the profession and avoid its political nature. Public policy theories are typically presented in a highly abstract way; e.g., Sabatier (1999) presented public policy theories from the perspectives of rational processes (process stages, institutional rational choice, multiple streams framework), policy networks and subsystems over time (network approach, punctuated equilibrium, advocacy coalition framework) and frameworks comparing policies across a large number of policy systems (innovation and diffusion models, the policy process and large N comparative studies).

While Sabatier (2007) rejected the idea of a policy process in stages by his second edition, and dropped the chapters taking that approach, many others see the policy process as occurring in stages. A typical set of stages includes agenda setting, formulation, legitimation, implementation and evaluation (Lasswell, 1956), to which I added approval and fate (Glor, 1998). Both of the latter two stages usually involve political actors. The Wikipedia entry on public policy³ also describes it as having stages (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_policy) and Howlett and Giest (2013) and Capano and Howlett (2020) do so as well.

Capano and Howlett (2020) include chapters studying policy actors (who makes policy: policy entrepreneurs, advocacy coalitions, epistemic communities, instrument constituencies) and dynamics (constituent elements of public policy: policy content, ends/aims, means/tools, how policy is made (policy cycle model). Public policy is regarded as a government decision. Their handbook is divided into the policy context (uncertainty and ambiguity) and processes (stages, a

³ This Wikipedia entry is well done.

range from unintentional errors to deliberate policy responses); policy mechanisms (a mechanistic perspective, first and second order mechanisms); behaviour (policy target behaviour), policy tools and capacities (instruments; resources, capacities and capabilities; complex policy mixes); and policy outputs and outcomes (design/non-design, learning, dismantling). They thus use some but not all of Sabatier's theories. According to Sabatier, for a period of time multiple streams framework was the dominant approach, but not in this book. In fact, this book pays substantial attention to stages of the process, which Sabatier (1999: 7) declared a heuristic that had outlived its usefulness. Others, however, have said that public policy focuses on the decisions that create the outputs of a political system, yet gave examples that are not political, such as transport and public health services, administration of a system of schooling and organization of a defence force (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_policy). More recent policy process literature has thus come back to a stages approach: *A Modern Guide* addresses stages in four chapters (3, 6, 8, 9).

Another criticism of policy analysis has suggested it undermines basic democratic institutions and processes by replacing public participation with expert analysis (Walters, Aydelotte, Miller, 2000). Many decision makers shun broader participation because of the complexity of an issue or the cost, time and uncertainty involved. Unlike the innovation literature, which has actively explored citizen participation as collaboration/co-creation (e.g., Sorensen and Vabo, 2020; Ansell and Torfing, 2014; Voorberg, Bekkers and Tummers, 2015), especially in local government institutions such as health, neither of the handbooks reviewed did so. How to conduct consultations and collaborations would be a useful addition to future editions of these manuals.

To summarize, I would say that both of these books have similar weaknesses, that may be due to the separation of public policy from political science—they do not explore the role of politics or ideology in public policy. The focus on processes ignores the content and politics of public policy and may not prepare students well for work in government or other sectors, which are not explored. While both books remained with current power boundaries by publishing substantially fewer women than men, *A Modern Guide to Public Policy* brought a new perspective by publishing only authors outside the American-British nexus. Both books lack the perspective of practitioners of public policy. On the positive side, both books include good papers on their topics and are worth reading.

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