“Mechanisms of policy change: a proposal for a theoretical synthesis”

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1. Introduction

Explaining policy change has been a major interest for policy students during the last decades. Besides, it is also a difficult task. Policy change processes are dynamic and complex phenomena. This complexity is revealed by aspects like the multiple causal paths that can be identified, the multidimensionality of the *explanandum* – what actually changes – (Hogwood and Gunn 1984, 13-19), the usually high number of participants involved, the different sources of motivation they have (interests, norms), or the multiple institutional settings which frame and influence participants’ actions. In addition, complexity increases because of the interactions among these explanatory factors (Greenberg *et al.* 1977; John 2003). Considering all these circumstances, theoretical frameworks dealing with policy change should, at least, reduce this complexity to a number of manageable dimensions and elaborate comprehensive and useful accounts.

From the different frameworks proposed in the policy studies literature, three of them have obtained the largest acceptance among scholars. These reference approaches are the *Multiple Streams* framework (MS) (Kingdon 1984; 1995); the *Advocacy Coalition Framework* (ACF) (Sabatier 1987; 1988; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993, 1999); and the *Punctuated-Equilibrium Theory* (PET) (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). Of course, yet these are not the only theoretical frameworks aiming to explain policy change, they have inspired a higher number of research projects and publications compared with other rival frameworks. As John (1998) points out, these chosen frameworks are a clear example of the ‘state of the art’ of contemporary public policy studies.¹

Of course, these frameworks have not been exempt from criticisms. These criticisms (see below for references) have been mainly centred on the *scarce attention these theories pay to microlevel processes*, which reflects in the weak treatment of problems such as coordination, mobilization, and agents’ strategic behaviour; the *gross specification of the role of institutions*, specially the way different institutional settings

¹ In fact, members of the public policy section of the American Political Science Review voted in 2001 the works inspiring these frameworks within the “most important public policy pieces of the last ten years”. To be more precise, Baumgartner and Jones (1993) and Kingdon (1984[1995]) occupied, respectively, the first and the second position, while Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith was the sixth. Moreover, Kingdon’s was the most voted regarding “all time most important public policy works”. See Shoup (2001).
influence actors’ behaviour. Besides, there are other criticisms which literature has not paid enough attention to – and that this paper develops – such as the weak specification of the relationship between the traditional unit of analysis – policy subsystems – and its environment; the issue of the dependent variable – these frameworks explain change by focusing on different aspects without showing much concern on policy designs; or the insufficient causal accounts they give of complex processes behind policy change. In order to surmount these problems, as it has been suggested (Schlager 1999) that the tools from the Institutional Analysis and Development framework (IAD) (Kiser and Ostrom 1982; Ostrom 1990, 1999, 2005; Ostrom, Gardner, and Walker 1994) may offer a suitable solution to solve the detected problems, although such a correction has not been undertaken to date.

This paper proposes a theoretical synthesis which adapts the IAD in order to overcome the problems presented by the three reference frameworks. The proposed unit of analysis, the policy space, expands beyond the boundaries of the traditional policy subsystem to include interactions between the later and its environment. As the dependent variable, the proposed framework chooses policy designs and their components (Schneider and Ingram 1997). Finally, this synthetic approach changes the focus of the explanatory account from variables causing change to causal-mechanisms of change. Here, three main mechanisms – three different routes of change, implicit in the three reference frameworks – are identified: 1) exogenous impacts, where the process of change is triggered by events outside the policy subsystem; 2) conflict expansion, where the process of change catches fire inside the subsystem, but expands involving actors and institutions in the outside; and 3) learning, which refers to those processes of change started by participants in the subsystem which are managed inside it.

The paper is structured as follows. Next section reviews the three reference frameworks are reviewed, in order to show their main features and weaknesses, aiming to discern what is most important in order to identify the ‘building blocks’ to explain policy change. Then, these building blocks are taken as the basis for the formulation of the theoretical synthesis. Section three briefly describes the main concepts of the Institutional Analysis and Development framework (IAD). Section four set forth the basic conceptual elements of the proposed theoretical synthesis: the concept of policy space and policy designs are developed in the two first subsections. The third deals with the issue of explanation and causal mechanisms, then describing the main features of the three types of policy change mechanisms. The last subsection refers to interactions between mechanisms. Finally, this paper assumes the reader knows the basics of the three reference frameworks. Nevertheless, an appendix has been added with a brief summary of the three approaches.

2. Building blocks: Multiple Streams, Advocacy Coalition, and Punctuated Equilibrium frameworks

2.1. Common traits in the three reference frameworks

There are a series of elements that Multiple Streams, Advocacy Coalition, and Punctuated Equilibrium Theory have in common. First of all, they react against ‘classical’ explanations of the policy process, mainly incrementalism and the stage-
heuristics framework. The former was criticised for not being able to account for ‘big leaps’ in policy change. The three reference approaches intend to explain not only ‘why’, but also the different intensities of policy change. In its turn, stage-heuristics did not constitute a real causal explanation, since “it never identifies a set of causal drivers that govern the process within and across stages.” (Sabatier 1999, 7). Moreover, they try to escape from the traditionally static accounts of policy networks approaches and their emphasis on policy stability (John 1998).

Thus, the three reference approaches acknowledge the need for causal explanations of policy change. In this sense, the causal models they propose aim to deal with the inherent complexity of policy process. This complexity derives from the interaction among the variety of factors intervening. These can be grouped in three broad categories: individuals (with their beliefs and preferences); institutional arrangements (rules, norms); and exogenous factors, that is, elements outside the policy subsystem (see below) that influence policy dynamics. Although exhibiting differential nuances, the three approaches take into account these three categories of factors. For example, the MS (inspired by the ‘garbage can’ model of decision [Cohen, March, and Olsen 1972] emphasises the importance of randomness and unpredictability, and the need for incorporating fluidity in explanatory accounts of complex processes, such agenda setting is (Kingdon 1995, 225). Baumgartner and Jones also explicitly acknowledge complexity.4 The ACF also takes into account the multiplicity of factors affecting policy dynamics, but compared to the other two lenses, it maintains an epistemologically more ‘traditional’ approach (see below). In sum, dealing with complexity involves considering this diversity of intervening factors and, above all, the contingent character of explanatory accounts.

Along with the former, there are a number of specific elements in the three reference frameworks. Firstly, they take the policy subsystem as the basic unit of analysis. This concept basically refers the set of actors and institutions directly interested in a policy issue. Specifically, the ACF defines the term as “those actors from a variety of public and private organizations who are actively concerned with a policy problem or issue” (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1999, 119); and the PET as the “decisional systems organized around discrete programs and issues” (Thurber 1991, 319, quoted in Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 6). The MS framework uses the term ‘policy community’ in a more specific fashion (similar to Haas’ (1992) ‘epistemic communities’), meaning the set of policy specialists “which concentrates on generating proposals” on a certain policy issue (Kingdon 1995, 87). In any case, when explaining

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3 “There actually is a lot of complexity and fluidity in this real world, and a model of the world should capture the complexity. One reason that a probabilistic model, such as the model used in this book, is more satisfying than a deterministic one is its recognition of that residual randomness.” (Kingdon 1995, 225).
4 An example is the following quotation, referred to positive feedback processes that trigger substantive changes in public policies (see below): “During periods of positive feedback, the rapid diffusion of new ideas often appears due to the actions of one or a few actors or events, when in fact its causes are more diffuse (…) Indeed, by engaging in the timeless sport of searching for specific causation in social affairs, one runs the risk of attributing causation to one of many contributing factors (…) In a positive-feedback process, single actors are important when their actions combine with those of others (…) Dramatic events (…) often come to symbolize the entire process of change to which they merely contribute. The causes of change are much more complex than the behaviours of any single actor.” (Baumgartner y Jones 1993, 242).
policy change, the three approaches centre on the dynamics that affect the policy subsystem, both in their internal components and in the interaction with the subsystem’s environment.

Secondly, the three approaches emphasise the role played by ideas in the explanation of policy change. During the 90s, ideas started to occupy a relevant position in policy change explanations (John 1998, 145). This ‘ideational turn’ (Blyth 1997) redirected students’ attention to issues such as processes of ideas creation and diffusion, policy learning, and their interaction with individuals’ strategic behaviour. The MS, the ACF, and the PET approaches echo this interest on ideas as factors in policy change. Kingdon’s major concern in *Agendas… is to explain how certain ideas (policy issues and policy solutions) enter decision-makers’ agenda. In its turn, one of the basic assumptions of the ACF is that public policies can be conceived as beliefs systems containing in its design theories about how to achieve certain policy goals. In this respect, public policies involve “value priorities, perceptions of important causal relationships, perceptions of world states (including the magnitude of the problem), and perceptions/assumptions concerning the efficacy of various policy instruments.” (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1999, 119). This also entails the implicit assumption that underlying policy beliefs are correlated to the beliefs that those actors promoting them. Finally, the PET – in line with the agenda setting literature (Cobb and Elder 1983; Rochefort and Cobb 1994) – considers the ideational aspects surrounding a policy definitions (*policy images*, that is, “how a policy is understood and discussed”) as a crucial element in the power games that develops in the policy process (see below) (Baumbartner and Jones 1993, 11-12, 25).

The third common element is the importance the three approaches attribute to actors and their behaviour in explaining policy change. In the case of the MS and the PET approaches, both are explicitly build on the figure of the *policy entrepreneur*, that is, the actor responsible for promoting policy change within the subsystem. Putting the actors at the core of the explanation involves considering how they interact with their environment and how they process information and develop their preferences. In this respect, the three lenses adopt a realistic approach, based on the model of bounded-rationality (Simon 1947 [1997]; 1985; Jones 2001). In Kingdon’s MS actors appear cognitively limited acting in a complex and ambiguous environment, where it is difficult to differentiate between relevant and superfluous information. Also, time and actors’ resources act as limiting factors which move decisions away from the ideal of ‘exhaustive rationality’ (Zahariadis 1999, 75-76). Cognitive limitations and biases also affect actors’ behaviour in the ACF. They act in a rational-instrumental basis, that is, they aim to achieve certain goals, but these goals – defined by actors’ beliefs – are complex and not reducible to mere material-egoistic interests. Also, in order to attain those goals in complex situations, actors do not apply rational strategic calculations, but they usually recur to heuristics (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1999, 130-131). In its turn, the PET also emphasises cognitive and time limitations and how these features make difficult actors direct their attention to several issues at a time (the bottleneck of

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5 Ideas have attracted the attention of policy students from very different theoretical positions: rational choice theory (i.e. Goldstein and Keohane 1993), neoinstitutionalism (Hall 1993), or post-empiricism (Fischer and Forester 1993; Schön and Rein 1994; Fischer 2003; or Hajer and Waagenar 2003). Interest has been directed on several issues, such as the role of argumentation and persuasion in the policy process (Majone 1989; 1996), learning (Bennet and Howlett 1992; Hall 1993), or policy diffusion (Rose 1993; Dollowitz 2000; Elkins and Simmons 2005).
attention) and process efficiently all the information they receive from their environment. These aspects affect actors’ decisional processes and greatly influence interaction processes within the subsystem (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 250). In sum, what the three reference approaches want to emphasise by recurring to this ‘rational-bounded’ model of the actor is both the importance of agency in the explanation of policy change, and the need to offer a realistic view of agents.

2.2. Limitations of the three reference frameworks

Nevertheless, the three reference frameworks have not been exempt from criticisms. Policy literature has mainly emphasised: 1) the scarce attention these lenses they pay to microlevel processes and 2) the gross specification they offer of the role of institutions. Besides, more criticisms – which the literature has not paid enough attention to – may be added: 3) the unspecified relationship between the subsystem and its environment, 4) the diversity of conceptions they have of the explanandum – that is, the issue of the dependent variable, and 5) The insufficiency of causal accounts the three approaches offer, which lead them to privilege determined causal factors over others.

a) Neglected microlevel processes

This aspect has been pointed out as problematic in the three theories (Schlager 1999). The MS, for example, refers very generally to the strategic activity of policy entrepreneurs (Zahariadis 1996) and how they solve the problems of coordination and collective action (i.e. Kingdon limits himself to assert that policy entrepreneurs must be prepared for ‘surfing’ the policy opportunity ‘wave’, or that they must actively warm up policy issues while waiting policy window open). In contrast, the ACF closely pays attention to the problem of coalition coordination. However, it does so by privileging the role of shared policy core beliefs among participants, without paying attention to the problems identified by collective action theory, such as free-ridership, transaction costs associated to the search coordination mechanisms, costs and benefits distribution within the coalition, etc. (Schlager 1995, 246; Schlager y Blomquist 1996, 663-664). Sabatier and collaborators have tried to amend this flaw by suggesting that actors’ bounded-rationality, the existence of different types of coordination needs, and functional interdependencies among participants considerably reduce the importance of collective action problems, increasing the probability of coordination (Zafonte and Sabatier 1998; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1999, 140-141; Fenger and Klok 2001). However, these arguments only imply a ‘graduation’ of criticisms, as they only affect to the probability of coordination occurs, but do not preclude the presence of the above mentioned problems. Regarding the PET, despite the main role it grants to policy entrepreneurs and their strategic behaviour, it also neglects important processes like those of starting mobilization, attracting allies, and how they solve the side collective action problems that appear. As Schalger (1999, 245) points out, the PET limits itself to examine the “residue of collective action, such as change in policy images and change of venues”.

b) Gross specification of the role of institutions

This has been one of the main criticisms affecting the MS approach (Mucciaroni 1992). Although it cannot be said that Kingdon ignores the role of institutions (the MS is full of references to institutional factors affecting coupling or the working of the political stream [Kingdon 1995, 155-158]), institutions play a secondary role. They are not systematically identified, being confounded with other conjunctural structural factors affecting coupling (i.e. personnel turnover or focusing events). In its turn, institutional elements also play in the ACF a secondary role. They appear as the targets of coalition strategic behaviour (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1999, 142) or as contextual elements affecting policy change (i.e., constitutional changes as factors of substantive policy change). Their role is studied in more detail regarding which institutional characteristics of fora are more suitable to trigger policy learning. Most of these elements have been added in subsequent updates of the approach, and others (i.e., the role of venue shopping) mirror other frameworks. However, the ACF still neglects the role of institutional structure in the process of coalition formation, or how institutions mediate between policy beliefs and change in policy outputs (Schlager 1999, 249-250). Finally, the PET also calls for a more detailed treatment of institutions. For example, in explaining conflict expansion, it would be of use to precise how institutional structures affect the receptivity of the new policy image, how alliances form, how institutional structures facilitate or hinder the impact of exogenous factors within the policy monopoly, or how rules outside the subsystem (other subsystems and/or the macropolitical level) affect its internal working.

c) The relationship between policy subsystems and their environment

Previous issues are related to the problem of the relationship between policy subsystems and their environment. In general, the focus of the three approaches on the policy subsystem as the basic unit of analysis has left underdeveloped this important part of the explanation of policy change. Environmental factors are usually grossly specified, being mainly considered as ‘givens’ regarding subsystem’s activity. The distinction the MS makes among the policy stream and the politics stream is presented as a clear-cut one, where each stream responds to a specific type of logic (in brief, argumentation vs. bargaining). However, this misrepresents the very nature of the processes which take place within the subsystem, where ideas and interests go hand-in-hand, as Kingdon himself acknowledges in his 1995 update of the framework (Kingdon 1995, 227-229; see also Zahariadis and Allen 1995, 92-93). Besides, linked to the gross specification of institutions, the way environmental processes (institutional or not) transmit within the subsystem’s processes are not considered, remaining as more or less conjunctural opportunities policy entrepreneurs (policy advocators or political brokers) must seize. Regarding the ACF, the problem is the same. In the first versions, the relationship between exogenous factors and substantive policy change was mechanically presented (Mintron and Vergari 1996, 422). This led Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith to introduce new elements in order to explain such connection (policy entrepreneurs, the role of institutions, redefinition processes, or bias mobilization) (1999, 147-149). However, the process of transmission of exogenous impacts (being institutional or not) is still underspecified. This is the same for the PET, where the problem is even more evident, for its explanation of policy change is based on the boundary relationship between the policy subsystem and its environment (the
macropolitical level). In this sense, the PET leaves unanswered important questions such as how external actors in favourable policy venues are attracted as allies. Attention shift due to image redefinition is not a complete answer, for it has to account for how redefined policy images influences external actors’ interests and incentives in order to involve themselves in the policy conflict. In other words, it does not explain why some actors get involved while others reject to do so. It is necessary, thus, a more detailed account of the process of mobilization, which connects with the need of a higher specification of microlevel processes and institutional elements outside the policy subsystem.

d) The dependent variable problem

‘What changes when policy changes?’ is a major question that the three reference approaches answer unsatisfactorily. The MS centres on changes in decisional agenda, leaving aside decisional processes and policy outputs. Although Zahariadis (1995) has suggested the possibility of expanding the approach to the decisional stage, this is still insufficient. The same applies to the PET, which also concentrates on agenda change and programme production (i.e. the number of laws or regulations related to a given issue). This conception of policy change has been questioned (John 2003, 489; Hayes 2001, 96). For example, as Hayes point out, changes in macropolitical agenda may not entail changes in the products or in its implementation. Regarding the ACF, it identifies policy change with changes in coalitions’ belief systems. It considers that policy outputs (regulations, programmes) directly correlate with dominant coalition’s belief systems. However, this is questionable. Subsystem’s institutional structure and the strategic dynamics that take place within it mediate between participants’ beliefs and the content of the policy programmes, regulations, etc., that are finally implemented (Schlager 1999, 252). Thus, change in policy beliefs may not adequately reflect real policy change. Then, if the goal is to explain why policy change occurs, it is necessary to pay attention to policies themselves (that is, what in the following sections are called ‘policy designs’).

e) Insufficient causal accounts: privileged explanations

Previous paragraphs reveal the general drawbacks of the three reference approaches. The detected problems show the insufficiency of the causal accounts the frameworks offer. This insufficiency is also shown by their limited explanatory scope. ‘Limited explanatory scope’ means here that they do not offer a complete picture of policy change but, on the contrary, they tend to privilege particular images of the process. Therefore, the MS approach mainly focus on substantive policy changes, while it is less useful explaining incremental change. Besides, the emphasis on the importance of context and opportunity in policy change, makes this approach to privilege in the explanation contextual elements outside policy subsystem (policy community) over other causal vectors, such as policy entrepreneurs’ strategic behaviour (who usually limit themselves to keep warm the policy alternative or issue in hope the opportunity window opens) or policy learning (which takes place only within the policy community in the alternative selection stage, without influencing final policy change). In its turn, the ACF aims to explain both policy stability (incrementalism) and change, although in reality it explains better why policies remain stable (John 1998, 172). It also privileges
in the explanation of policy change the influence of learning (Sabatier and collaborators have developed an entire set of hypothesis on this subject) over subsystem participants’ strategic behaviour and exogenous impacts. Compared to the other two reference approaches, the PET offers the most satisfactory account of both policy stability and change. However, like the others, it privileges a particular causal vector, in this case, entrepreneurs’ strategic behaviour in mobilizing other participants, manipulating images, searching for policy venues, and expanding conflict outside the subsystem as the major causal factor. In contrast, learning is left aside, although it may be an important element in explaining why some subsystem’s participants become unsatisfied with policy monopoly and set out conflict expansion.

So what? On the negative side, these criticisms show the insufficiencies of the three reference approaches. All of them aim to explain policy change, but none achieve to offer a comprehensive and detailed explanation. Then, choosing a particular approach will necessarily lead to a partial account of the policy change process. This fact witnesses the complexity of policy process, and the difficulties to account for it. On the positive side, the three approaches shed light on the different aspects to be dealt with in order to cope with such a complexity. Also, they complement each other to a certain extent. In this sense, the three approaches may constitute the starting point for elaborating a more comprehensive theoretical synthesis, which take into account the criticisms.

3. The Institutional Analysis and Development framework

In such a synthesis, the Institutional Analysis and Development framework (IAD) developed by Ostrom and collaborators, plays a major role. The IAD is a theoretical framework where explanatory mechanisms are based on actors’ behaviour who interact within the limits established by the relevant institutional structure. In the field of public policy, it has been mainly used to study how actors solve the problems related to the management of common-pool resources (Ostrom 1990, 1999b; Ostrom et al. 1994). The IAD combines a series of qualities that allow to overcome the problems detected in the three reference approaches. Firstly, it presents policy outputs as the result of microlevel processes, that is, the interaction of rational-bounded individual participants. Secondly, these interactions are considered within the context of relevant institutional structures, which act at the same time as constraints and enablers of individual actions. Thirdly, institutions are treated in a detailed fashion which allows to specify the different forms they affect individual behaviour. Finally, the IAD also provides the tools needed for dealing with the question of the relationship between the subsystem and the environment. That is why it has been proposed as a complement to the former policy change frameworks (Schlager 1995; 1999). However, this task has not been undertaken yet.

The IAD constitutes the theoretic-conceptual baseline for developing the theoretical synthesis proposed in this paper. Thus, policy change process will be explained using the IAD vocabulary, and according its main theoretical premises. The rest of this section is devoted to briefly describe such basic elements.

The major concept in the IAD is the action arena. The term refers to the social space where individuals interact (Ostrom 1999, 42-43). Every action arena consist of
two elements: a) participants, and b) an action situation, defined as “(w)henever two or more individuals are faced with a set of potential actions that jointly produce outcomes” (Ostrom 2005, 32). The boundaries of action situations and action arenas are analytical, they depend on the interest of the researcher (Ostrom 2005, 57). An action situation consist of a series of elements: 1) participants, 2) the positions they occupy, 3) the set of actions available to actors, 4) results linked to actions, 5) information about the situation, 6) costs and benefits linked to actions and results, and 7) the resources controlled by participants and their preferences (Ostrom 2005, 32-33).

Participants (individual or collective) are conceived according to the patterns of bounded rationality, more specifically as fallible learners. The action situation influences participants’ interactions, but do not determine them. Their preferences are influenced by their shared culture (Ostrom 2005, 106) and their experiences. This entails that different participants perceive differently the same action situation and react differently to the same information. Finally, participants’ motivations range from material incentives to intrinsic factors, such normative orientations.

Action arenas are influenced by exogenous factors, including material conditions and attributes of the community. The latter refer, among others, to the generally accepted social norms, common understandings about the structure of action arenas, and the social distribution of preferences and resources.

However, the most important factor structuring action arenas are rules, defined as “shared understandings by participants about enforced prescriptions concerning what actions (or outcomes) are required, prohibited, or permitted” (Ostrom 2005, 18; emphasis original). Rules are the institutional dimension of the IAD. Rules structure action situations by affecting its different components (participants, actions, etc.). Rules may be formal or informal (not written but acknowledged by participants). The important thing in order to define an action situation is to identify effective working rules, that is, formal or informal rules that are actually in practice. Rules make action situation predictable. However, as rules are subject to interpretation (they are linguistic phenomena), they are modifiable. They are also vulnerable, depending on the existence of mechanisms of sanction and control (which are also controlled by rules). Then, rules influence participants’ behaviour but they do not determine it.

Rules organise in three hierarchical levels of analysis that accumulatively affect actions situations and outputs. The operational level encompasses those rules affecting participants’ day-to-day decisions. The immediately upper level is the collective choice level, occupied by rules regulating decision-making affecting the operational level (that is, the policy decision level). Finally, on the top of this hierarchical organization it is the constitutional level, which includes the rules regulating the making of collective choice rules. These three levels are nested, so changing the rules in one level requires climbing into the upper level.

Furthermore, action arenas may be connected to other action arenas, which is of great importance for the purposes of this paper. Most social reality consists of multiple action arenas sequential or simultaneously connected. These connections may be due, first, to hierarchical relationships among action arenas. In example, an organisation is composed by one or more action situations where rules specify how products in an action situation become inputs in other (Ostrom 2005, 57). Connections may also be
functional, as actions and outputs in an action situation may stimulate reactions in other actions situations, although they are not formally linked.

Finally, identifying the structure of action situations is an empirical matter. Researcher’s main task here is to uncover its components through a detailed analysis of available empirical evidence. In this respect, participants’ discourse becomes important, as it may reveal the institutional structure underlying shared expectations and observed behaviour regularities. Most useful techniques here are qualitative ones, such as document analysis and in-depth interviews (Ostrom 2005, 171-172).

4. Towards a theoretical synthesis for explaining policy change

In the previous sections it has been shown the need for theoretically complement the theoretic-conceptual tools offered by the reference approaches. What this section proposes (and the main goal of this paper) is a synthetic framework for policy change analysis that takes into account the valid components of reviewed reference approaches.

This synthesis deals with three fundamental issues:

a) Firstly, without excluding the centrality of policy subsystems, the framework deals with the need of redefining the basic unit of analysis in order to include those explanatory relevant interactions which occur between subsystems and their environment. In this sense, the concept of policy space is presented as a wider unit to be considered.

b) Secondly, in contrast with the reference frameworks, the synthetic framework defines explicitly the ‘dependent variable’. This is public policy as designs.

c) Finally, regarding the type of explanation, the synthetic framework opts to turn from variable centred explanations to causal mechanism-based explanatory accounts. Without entering in epistemological considerations, the dynamic, complex, and contingent character of policy change processes reduces the adequacy of variable centred explanations. When studying processes such as policy change, explanations become contingent with respect to the specific context where the processes take place. On the other hand, mechanism based explanatory accounts present some advantages for case study designs – which is the most common approach used by students to approach policy change (see George and Bennet 2005, chap. 7).

4.1. The concept of policy space: policy subsystems and their environment

The three reference approaches use the policy subsystem as the basic unit of analysis. However, an adequate understanding of policy change processes also requires taking into account interactions between policy subsystems and their environment. In this sense, the concept of policy space is used here to refer to the set of relevant policy interactions. In the IAD terms, policy space may be defined as the analytic whole

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7 On this topic, see for example: Goldthorpe (2001); Abell (2004); George and Bennet (2005); Gerring (2005).
formed by related action arenas which influence in a relevant way the final result of the considered process (in this case, the design of a public policy).  

Within the set of action arenas which constitute the policy space, the policy subsystem occupies a central position. Figure 1 represents a policy subsystem according to the IAD concepts. It is defined in the accustomed fashion, as an action arena where actively interested actors (participants) in a problem or policy interact in order to influence in day-to-day decisions (operational level) and/or in policy design (collective-action level). Patterns of interaction within the subsystem (action arena) vary depending on 1) the components of the action situation (participants, positions they occupy, actions, the range of possible results, information circulating within the action situation, benefits and costs they can obtain, their resources and preferences), 2) the type of actors and 3) external factors (formal and informal rules, community attributes and physical conditions).

In addition, the policy subsystem may include a set of nested action arenas (for example, organizational actors, actor coalitions, internal sub-processes within subsystem, etc.). For reasons of simplicity, these nested relationships are not represented in figure 1.

In explaining stability and change in public policy is fundamental to take into account the relationships taking place within the policy space, between the policy subsystem and its environment, which is formed by other action arenas. According with the PET, the stability of policies is associated to the existence of policy monopolies. In the terms used here, a policy monopoly would be equivalent to a subsystem with a high degree of autonomy regarding its environment. Thus, in policy monopolies, the limits of the policy space would coincide with subsystem’s boundaries.

Figure 1 represents an autonomous subsystem. This autonomy would be secured by the configuration of internal rules which guarantee to the dominant interest (identified with certain actors) to control outsiders’ access to the decision process. These rules may refer to the different components of the action situation. In this sense, rules affecting participation, positions and control over decisions are of major importance. The institutionalization of these rules within the subsystem and the fact that participants interiorize and share these rules contribute to make predictable process within subsystems and to policy stability.

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8 The concept of policy space is different from that of policy domain. This concept is defined on a substantive basis, i.e., as “a component of the political system that is organized around substantive issues” (Burstein 1991, 328) or “a relatively self-contained political arena consisting of a core set of organizations that pay close attention to important substantive policy issues and problems” (Knoke 2004), and it mostly depends on the shared understanding of the interested participants. In contrast, the policy space is independent of the existence of such shared understandings, being centred on analytical relevant interactions.

9 The concept of subsystem used here is more specific than the used by Baumgartner and Jones, who refer to ‘decision systems’ which organise around a series of policy programs or issues. In this sense, this sense, Baumgartner and Jones’ definition of policy subsystem is closer to the concept of ‘policy space’ presented here, which also could be equivalent to that of policy domain.
Nevertheless, policy subsystems – even policy monopolies – are not in complete isolation from their environment. On the one hand, change in material conditions and the attributes of the community may affect its internal configuration. That is why in figure 1 these exogenous factors are presented overlapping the subsystem’s boundaries. In situations of stability, these exogenous factors are included as givens in the functioning of the action arena, that is, as constant conditions that are considered while the interaction happens (this is represented in the figure by the overlapping of the boxes containing these variables over the action arena). However, material conditions and community attributes are not permanently under control. Firstly, the results of interactions (both at the operational and the collective action level) may affect both exogenous factors (this is represented in the figure through the dotted feedback lines). Secondly, there is always the possibility that exogenous factors change. These types of processes are called here exogenous impacts.\^10

Adapted from Kiser and Ostrom (1982, 207) and Ostrom (2005, 15).

\^10 Regarding biophysical environment, a country’s energetic environmental policy for example, apart from other institutional conditioning factors, it is influenced by the inner natural characteristics of its territory, something which has an impact on the country’s ability to develop a more or less autonomous policy. Also, natural disasters (earthquakes, draughts, etc.) may significantly alter the functioning of certain public policies, directly (i.e. infrastructure policy, agriculture policy, industrial policy, health policy, etc.), or indirectly (tasks of building reconstruction may divert resources from other policies considered non priority, i.e. arts policy).

Policies are also sensitive to variations in community attributes. Changes either in commonly accepted norms, or in the degree of homogeneity in preferences, or in the distribution of resources among their members may trigger a series of changes within the subsystem. For example, the progressive laicization of a society, or the extension of democratic values influence the stability of certain policies (i.e., abort policy, educational policy, security policy, etc.).
Another way of altering a subsystem’s stability comes from the possibility of transmission of external alterations through the existing connections between the subsystem and the other action arenas with which it maintains (inter)dependency relationships. This is called here subsystem’s institutional permeability (see figure 2). Precisely, changes in biophysical and cultural environment may transmit into the subsystem through these links. Firstly, the subsystem may be nested within another subsystem, that is, it constitutes a component unit within a wider unit (i.e., road policy is a component of general infrastructures policy). Apart from the nesting phenomenon, links to other subsystems may arise from the presence of common or overlapping actors (i.e., the same trade union may participate in industrial and professional training policies).

Relationships between the subsystem and other action arenas may be schematically grouped in to categories: vertical and horizontal relationships. Vertical relationships entail the existence of a hierarchical or authority component, from an external arena over the structuring conditions of the subsystem (that is, the capacity to modify the action structure within which participants interact). Decision bodies and a part of the participants in a policy subsystem are inserted to some extent in the State’s structure of authority. Therefore, decisions made in higher politic-administrative bodies may condition the structure of the action situation, affecting some or all of its components (from who is legitimate to participate to the distribution of benefits and costs derived from different alternatives of action).

Other relations of hierarchical dependency that affect the subsystem are actor’s organizational links which make their preferences and strategies dependent on the orders and instructions they receive from hierarchical superiors in the organizations they pertain (political parties, interest groups, etc.).

Besides, it should be emphasised the role played by actors during the process. Apart from the roles derived from their institutional attachments, they also incorporate to the process their own individual preferences and attitudes, and personal ways of looking at their context. These particular features and others such as personality traits, leadership issues, and actors’ previous experiences also affect policy change processes.

The other type of (inter)dependency that link the subsystem to its environment is defined as horizontal, as it does not entail the existence a hierarchical or authority relationships. This does not mean that they are always symmetrical. This kind of relationship implies that the results in other action arenas influence what happens within the subsystem, and vice versa. Horizontal relationships may be based on the existence of functional (inter)dependency. In this case, the development of actions and the results within a subsystem depend on the results in other action arenas. This kind of (inter)dependence may affect both the subsystem as a whole and/or specific participants. On the one hand, available alternatives, information controlled by the participants, or the possible results may be conditioned by decisions taken outside the subsystem. On the other hand, in case different arenas share some participants, or actors belonging to the same organisation or group, this dependency on other arena’s results is, in many cases, unavoidable. As these interdependency conditions exist, when choosing action strategies within a subsystem, participants must take into account the possible consequences of such an action on the other arenas where he is also participating.
This kind of relationships is especially important when actors pertaining to the same organisation (when they are not hierarchically related) act in different action arenas. The need for maintaining internal coherence in organisational strategies may impose restrictions to the action alternatives actors are considering. Turning back to hierarchical relationships, this is even more important. In such cases, it is likely that the chosen actions at the subsystem level depend on the strategies defined in organisation’s upper levels. Nevertheless, the degree of external determination of actors’ strategies within a subsystem will depend on the importance that subsystem’s results have for the organization’s general strategy and for the attainment of its goals. These aspects are especially important when considering explanatory mechanisms based on conflict expansion (see below).

Horizontal relationships between subsystems sometimes may not obey to functional (inter)dependency. They also may be produced by the existence of homomorphisms or structural similarities between action arenas. In example, in a federal political system (or similar), those policies which are exclusive competence of states – or regions – may configure relatively independent subsystems. Apart from the existence of formal mechanisms of coordination (that may not work de facto), each sub-national government is, in theory, ‘sovereign’ in order to determine policy design. However, the institutional permeability existing in practice implies that decisions taken in a sub-national subsystem may have some impact over other sub-national subsystems. This occurs, for example, when these decisions illustrate new policy designs, or when they raise inequality feelings among different territories. Besides, these links among subsystems may arise in different policy subjects sharing some kind of structural similarities. For example, concessions granted by public authorities as a response to the claims of some sector, may provoke other sectors to ask for a similar treatment arguing some kind of similarity in their respective situations.

In any case, both types of vertical and horizontal relationships may take place simultaneously, because of the coexistence in the policy process of formal and informal relationships. In example, a subsystem may be under the formal authority of a ministry or department and, at the same time, it may exist a functional dependency of these hierarchical superior bodies on what happens within the subsystem (i.e. because of the negotiation ability of the minister with other ministries is subject to the results obtained in that subsystem).

According to the postulates of the PET and the policy network approach, the degree of closeness and autonomy of a subsystem depend on that the relationships with external arenas be stable and predictable, to the extent that they are incorporated as given conditions within the subsystem’s action situation.

Another issue is the role of different action levels. A subsystem working in conditions of autonomy (that is, when exogenous factors are considered as a given) and with stable and predictable results (although they do not have to be invariant), according to the IAD’s terminology, would do so at the operational level. However, when processes of change start, and subsystem stability is broken, apart from the operational level (which may be still at work) the collective action level also becomes involved. Remember that policy change is produced within this action level.
The concept of subsystem’s institutional permeability implies that, in situations where the subsystem closure is questioned, decisional processes within the subsystem’s
action arena depend on what happens in other surrounding action arenas to which it is related. From an analytic point of view, this entails an expansion of the limits of the policy space outside the subsystem’s boundaries, which also implies a redefinition of the limits of the unit of analysis. For example, in terms of the PET, the de-stabilization of the policy monopoly and the process of conflict expansion (Schattschneider’s mobilization), with the attraction of previously uninterested actors, would imply that the policy space ceases to be circumscribed only to what happens within the subsystem (policy monopoly).

In sum, the image of the policy process proposed here is that of a dynamic process where products (policy designs) have to be considered as the result of the set of processes that take place within a series of action arenas which constitute the policy space. As part of this wider policy space, the subsystem’s action arena coexists with other social action arenas, which it may be linked to by vertical and/or horizontal relationships. These links may affect the whole subsystem or only some participants. The explanation of policy change would consist in disentangling the mechanisms that underlie the dynamics and process that take place within the policy space, and showing how these processes affect the stability and/or change of policy designs. The following section deals with the later concept.

4.2. Public policies as designs

One of the most important questions to answer in explaining policy change is precisely ‘what changes when policy changes’. However, the review of the reference frameworks has shown the problems they have in answering this question. These approaches forget the material and objective dimension that accompanies public policies, which constitute the substance of policy, and that manifests in the form of policy designs. The concept here is taken from Schneider and Ingram (1997), who define it as the “content or substance of public policy – the blueprints, architecture, discourses, and aesthetics of policy in both its instrumental and symbolic forms”, that is, “observable phenomena found in statutes, administrative guidelines, court decrees, programs, and even the practices and procedures of street level case workers as they interact with policy recipients” (1997, 2). In terms of the synthetic framework presented in this paper, policy designs are included within the category of outputs which result from participants’ interactions within policy space.

Public policies as designs consist in a number of observable elements: 1) policy goals and problems to be solved; 2) target populations; 2) agents and implementation structures; 4) policy instruments; 5) rules; and 6) rationales and assumptions (Schneider and Ingram 1997, 81-100). All these elements are “revealed” (1997, 2) in the texts, practices, symbols and discourses that form a public policy, and that are observable entities, susceptible of empirical analysis.

One argument in favour of studying policy change using policy designs as the explanandum is that the concept fits within the general schema of the IAD. As it has been mentioned above, policy designs may be considered as a product of policy interaction (other products are, for example, side payments for participants or externalities arising from the process). They enter in the feedback mechanisms, influencing the different elements of the action situation: specifying new rules,
activating new policy participants or eliminating others, providing resources for participants, introducing new information in the action situation, etc.

Contemplating public policies as designs also allows to empirically examine change along the dimensions covered by their different elements. It also provides the opportunity to study material and ideational-discursive components of public policies. Through policy relevant ‘texts’ (such as laws, regulation, documents produced by agents, public statements, personal interviews, and so on) it is possible to analytically disentangle design’s different dimensions and follow their variation along time.

Finally, regarding measurement issues, some comments should be made. First, there is the issue of the intensity of change. From the three reference theories, only the ACF offers an explicit (although unsatisfactory) definition of what is substantive change. The PET and the MS do not explicitly define substantive change, although they associate this type of change to quantitative significant variations along time in the indicators they use (i.e., the ‘punctuations’ in the time series that appear in the cases studied by Baumgartner and Jones [1993; 2002]). Observing diachronic variations (not only quantitative, but also qualitative) seems to be the better solution for identifying substantive change. The context dependency associated to the evaluation of what constitutes substantive change makes difficult to offer an explicit definition. This difficulty increases even more when taking into account the different dimensions of policy designs. In this sense, it may appear the temptation of identifying any of them as the ‘fundamental(s) dimension(s) (i.e. policy goals or rationales) while considering others as ‘secondary’ (i.e. instruments). Nevertheless, this would involve to incur in the same apriorism that has been criticised in the ACF regarding its definition of policy change related to the stability of belief system components.

In sum, the determination of the intensity of change is going to depend necessarily on the context surrounding these changes. Judgements about the type of change should take into account the evolutionary path a policy follows before and after the moment of change. In this sense, case study is a methodology which appears particularly suitable for studying policy change, as it allows for a greater ‘sensitivity’ of the measurement process and, in consequence, it offers a lower risk of falling into the problem of error of measurement (George and Bennet 2005).

4.3. Mechanisms of change in public policies

Two types of reasons are argued when claiming the use of causal mechanisms in social science explanations: 1) epistemological, and 2) reasons based on the characteristics of the object of study and research design. Epistemological reasons underline the inadequacy of statistics-based nomological deductive causal inference, based on correlation among variables, which its objective is to derive general covering laws that explain complete categories of phenomena. This conception of causality leaves aside the underlying causal mechanisms, which may be defined as the processes that link the explanandum with the explanatory variables, which allow to distinguish which correlations are effectively causal and which are not. George and Bennet synthesize the advantages that mechanisms-based explanation has over variable-centred

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11 Some examples of these criticisms are: Elster (1989); Ragin (2000); Goldthorpe (2001); Cox and Wermuth (2001); Abell (2001, 2004); George and Bennet (2005).
explanations: “(C)ausal mechanisms provide more detailed and in a sense more fundamental explanations than general laws do. The difference between a law and a mechanism is that between a static correlation (‘if X, then Y’) and a ‘process’ (‘X leads to Y through steps A, B, C’)” (George and Bennet 2005, 141). In defence of mechanism-based explanations is also Elster (1989, 3): “To explain an event is to give an account of why it happened. Usually, and always ultimately, this takes the form of citing an earlier event as the cause of the event we want to explain, together with some account of the causal mechanism connecting events.” (emphasis added). However, this does not mean that correlational analysis is inferior, but just the need of considering the processes that are in the base of causal links between correlated variables. Thus, variable-based and mechanism-based explanations are complementary.12

Having in mind this, the prevalence on one or another strategy of causal explanation is intimately associated to the particularities of the object of study and the research design. On the one hand, the use of causal mechanisms introduces an important contextual element in explanation. The same phenomenon may result from different processes, depending on the moment and the specific context it occurs (Goldthorpe 2001). Within that context, agents’ actions and their motivations play a fundamental role (Abell 2004). From the statistical point of view, however, this contextual character of mechanism-based explanation reduces the possibilities of generalization of causal arguments.13 However, the choice between generalization power and explanatory depth is intimately related to the question of the type of research design to be used. Precisely, small-n qualitative studies and, above all, case studies – those where intensitvity of analysis predominates – are the more suitable to emphasise causal mechanism explanation (Gerring 2004). Along with the type of research design, the nature of the object of study also justifies the use of causal mechanism-based explanation. This is particularly useful when the research interest is located on complex phenomena (George and Bennet 2005, 211-212), that is, where the number of intervening factors is statistically unmanageable, causal links between factors are not neither unambiguous nor lineal, event sequence matters, and/or agents’ decisions may influence decisively on the final result. Besides, it must be pointed out that causal-mechanisms based explanation is not equivalent to a mere description of the process that leads to a particular event. Causal mechanisms entail a certain degree of generality and must be based on a theoretical substratum and be confirmed by the available empirical evidence (Hedström and Swedberg 1996, 1998; Goldthorpe 2001, 13; George and Bennet 2005).

In this sense, policy change as an object of study adjusts to this characterization of a complex phenomenon. Processes of policy change entail the intervention of a great amount of factors (participants’ interests and motivations, available information, institutional structure of rules, etc.) located within the subsystem and in other action arenas, between which complex dynamics of interaction, almost always context dependent, take place. All these elements bring ambiguity into the research object, and produces uncertainty regarding the final result of interaction processes. Following this argument, many authors have underlined the difficulties about developing a general theory of policy change (Jones and Baumgartner 2005; John 2003). Due to this basic

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12 As Mahoney (2001, 582) points out, “(c)orrelational findings are incomplete and not fully intelligible without an understanding of the mechanisms that generate those findings; by contrast, theories of causal mechanisms are entirely speculative until their power is revealed through empirical correlations.”.

13 Some authors talk about the possibility of elaborate ‘contingent generalizations’ that identify the different conditions from which alternative results may emerge (George and Bennet 2005, 216).
contextual character of policy change process, mechanism-based causal inference happens to be the more suitable kind of explanatory account for these kinds of phenomena.

From the analysis of the three frameworks of reference three general mechanisms may be identified: exogenous impacts, conflict expansion, and learning. From an analytical point of view, these explanatory mechanisms are subsumed within the different types of observable interactions that take place within the policy subsystem and between this and its environment. Using a metaphor, each of these mechanisms represents a different ‘path’ that leads to change in policy design.

In the case of exogenous impacts, the process of change is triggered by alterations external to the subsystem. Changes in the environment (critical events, relevant events in related subsystems, changes in the macropolitical level) transmit within the subsystem, both directly (i.e., exogenous shocks that affect the inner nature of the components of the subsystem’s action arena) or through what above was denominated as institutional permeability, that is, the vertical and horizontal connections and dependencies that the subsystem maintains with its environment.

Regarding the mechanism of conflict expansion, the policy change process starts within the subsystem triggered by participants who are discontent with some aspect of its internal working or with the policy results obtained. This mechanism implies the expansion of this internal conflict outside the subsystem, beyond its boundaries. This entails the participation of actors previously not interested (or with a secondary interest) in the issue promoted from subsystem’s dissidents, and the questioning of the structure of the policy action arena.

Finally, the learning mechanism refers specifically to those processes of change initiated within the subsystem as a consequence of changes in participant’s beliefs. In this mechanism, a part or all of the members of the subsystem are unsatisfied with its internal working and/or with the policy products. However, in contrast to the conflict expansion mechanism, learning takes place entirely within the subsystem. Change by learning implies a voluntary change generated from the inside of the subsystem, as a product of the conscious utilization of information by subsystem participants, and effects on the redefinition of policy goals, processes, strategies and instruments.

These three mechanisms constitute an analytical typology. In practice, the three may appear simultaneously and interact among them (Thomas 1999). The influence of exogenous factors may generate the appropriate conditions (windows of opportunity) that trigger conflict mobilization and/or learning within the subsystem. Besides, the existence of institutional facilitators of learning allows the subsystem to foresee and to get adapted to the impact of exogenous factors. Also, the failure of learning mechanisms may contribute to conflict expansion outside the subsystem’s boundaries. Finally, the attempts of expanding conflict outside the subsystem may be aborted by countermobilization of dominant interests but, in exchange, they may also start internal processes of learning. Sometimes, researchers should fine-tune in order to differentiate among those situations when change takes place as a consequence of an exogenous impact, and those where learning mechanisms are at work. The following sections are intended to closer specify these three mechanisms.
**a) The exogenous impacts mechanism**

The three reference frameworks identify a variety of exogenous factors which influence policy change. However, none of these reference frameworks make explicit the mechanisms by which those exogenous factors end up in policy design changes. Exogenous impacts on the subsystem affect participants and/or the structure of the action situation, either at the operative level or at the collective action level (figure 3), directly conditioning the results of action and, in this sense, the inner dynamics of policy change.

Exogenous impacts reach the subsystem through the links it has with its environment: by changes in material conditions, attributes of the community, or in any of the other subsystems it is linked to. The impact of changes in *material conditions* varies across subsystems. They are more important, for example, in those subsystems dealing with material issues, such as energy, health, or ecology. In these policies, changes in material conditions (i.e. an epizooty affecting chickens or cows) transmit directly within the subsystem, affecting action alternatives available to participants and/or the results which results from them. Changes in *community attributes* (socially shared and accepted values, homogeneity degree in social preferences, size and composition of the community, etc.) may also trigger change. For example, trends of social evolution may modify participant’s understanding of subsystem rules, increasing the unpredictability of results, and then, contributing to a modification of policy. Moreover, alterations in material conditions or in community attributes may also transmit indirectly within the subsystem, through the impacts they produce in other subsystems or action arenas it is related to (that is, thanks to the subsystem’s institutional permeability). The existence of hierarchical dependencies (see above) entails the possibility that decisions made in other action arenas provoke changes in the subsystem’s elements and, as a consequence, in policies.14 On the other hand, exogenous changes in other policy subsystems may also transmit through horizontal links. Functional (inter)dependencies or homomorphism make a subsystem vulnerable to what happens outside.15

Sometimes, the boundary between the mechanism of exogenous impact and the others are quite difficult to distinguish. This question is important, for it is directly related to the possibility of direct empirical observation of exogenous impacts and to the effective causal nature of this mechanism. In this respect, the concept of exogenous impact used here implies that alterations in the subsystem’s environment are the immediate triggers of policy change, that is, policy change within the subsystem was not intended by the participants. This is shown in figure 3 by the fact that no causal arrow starts from the subsystem’s action situation boxes.

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14 For example, a governmental reshuffle – and the changes in ministerial seats that it involves – may entail changes in upper political-administrative levels responsible for policy decisions within subsystem. New decision-makers may bring with them new styles or priorities which could affect the continuity of the policy design.

15 For example, the adoption of certain policy instruments by homologous subsystems may lead to its diffusion due to the reputational benefits it may brings for decision makers. However, this situation does not implies policy learning for, according with the previous definitions, there is no conscious use of information on the policy results of the first decision.
Another question is to what extent a policy subsystem (and its components) can absorb and adapt to exogenous impacts. This will depend on 1) the intensity of the impact, 2) its predictability, 3) the temporal sequence, 4) the degree of institutional permeability of the subsystem (that is, its autonomy), and 5) resources controlled by participants. For example, external impacts which deploy its effects in a long time span are easier to absorb by subsystem participants than those which have an immediate effect; also, predictable changes allow subsystem participants to prepare in order to absorb them (this could trigger a learning process).

Finally, regarding the scope of change produced by exogenous impacts, the three reference approaches associated this kind of factors to substantive changes. However, having in mind the interaction between exogenous impacts and subsystem’s internal
processes, and the above mentioned possibility of absorption, determining the scope of change becomes an empirical question.

b) The conflict expansion mechanism

Actors discontent with the internal working and/or products resulting from the policy subsystem recur to conflict expansion when they find impossible to modify this situation through the available procedures within the subsystem. Given the costs that the activation of this mechanism has for change promoters, it is plausible to infer that subsystem participants will recur to conflict expansion in a subsidiary fashion, just in case internal procedures for policy change (learning, see below) are not available or they do not allow to attain their policy goals. In this sense, outsiders, newcomers, and those participants with a peripheral position within the subsystem are more likely to recur to conflict expansion in order to promote policy change than those with permanent access to decisional centres (insiders).

The strategies used by promoters of change to expand conflict outside the subsystem are those pointed out by Baumgartner and Jones in the PET: venue shopping and policy image redefinition. In terms of the IAD, venue shopping can be reinterpreted as the attempt to move decision into other action arenas which are more favourable to policy change promoters. Venue shopping is facilitated by the fact that action situations at the operative level (policies at work) are potentially affected by multiple collective action arenas (the locus of policy decision) (Kiser and Ostrom 1982, 215) (see figure 4). In case that the policy subsystem is a policy monopoly, dominant actors control the collective action level arena, which is incorporated within the subsystem. Venue shopping is, then, the attempt by unhappy participants to move decision into other collective action arenas that are not controlled by dominant actors.

In order to do so, change promoters must be able to attract the interest of all or some of the participants in those external collective action arenas which can influence on policy change. The goal is to turn mutually isolated arenas into connected ones, in the sense emphasised above. Through this connection, the policy space expands out of the boundaries of the subsystem (represented in figure 4 by the external discontinuous line containing the subsystem and the external action arena).

Venue shopping implies mobilizing the active support from other policy participants. Thus, the first task policy promoters have to deal with is solving the collective action problem. This is a question that the reference frameworks had left aside, but that must be incorporated in the mechanism of conflict expansion in order to have a complete account of how it works. The problem of collective action pervades the conflict expansion mechanism at different levels. Firstly, it appears when dissatisfied participants try to create organizational structures in order to support their claims. It is also present when they search for allies within the subsystem or in the outside.
Collective action literature has pointed out the factors that may contribute to solve the problem. Solutions range along the continuum formed by the logic of expected consequences and the logic of appropriateness (March and Olsen 1984, 1989, 1998). Rational choice collective action theory has tended to privilege the former. They range from what have been called internal solutions (Taylor 1987), based on the ability of actors in their strategic interactions to influence other participants’ behaviour without modifying the structure of the action situation, to those based on the strategic modification by participants of the inner structure of the action situation (external solutions). Most recent literature on collective action has emphasised the importance of
the structure of collective action over individual centred strategic solutions (see, for example, Marwell and Oliver [1993], or Heckathorn [1996]).

On the other hand, solutions based on the logic of appropriateness have emphasised that collective action problems may be solved because participants (at least, some of them) behave according to what they think is right. This kind of behaviour is explained by the presence of certain value or normative orientations in actors (such as altruism, reciprocity norms, etc.) (Taylor 2006). or the prevalence of group identity over individual identity (Tajfel 1982; Turner 1987; Ashmore et al. 2004).

This double logic affects other aspects of venue shopping beyond that of mobilization of support, such as the election of the venue itself. Then, according to the logic of expected consequences, promoters of change take into account the resources they control and the costs of the actions directed to attract the attention of the participants in the elected jurisdiction. Nevertheless, the logic of appropriateness may also guide promoters’ choice, i.e., normative or ideological elements may privilege certain venues over others (Pralle 2003).

According to the PET, image redefinition processes greatly contribute to venue shopping. Redefinition also plays an important role in solving collective action problems, such as literature on framing processes has demonstrated (Benford and Snow 2000). The PET considered image manipulation and the extension of a negative image of the existing policy monopoly as a key element for the expansion of the conflict outside the subsystem. But this depiction is incomplete. The question to answer is how redefinition affects action situations in order to link two previously autonomous action arenas.

Image redefinition is related to changes in actors’ perception of the action situations they are involved in. Conflict expansion as a result of image redefinition implies that former non interested actor perceive new implications of what happens within the subsystem, implications that they think could affect the action situations they are members of. Redefined images redirect their attention, showing previously not perceived links (or that they had underestimated) between the actions arenas they are regular participants and the subsystem. Image redefinition acts upon actors’ perception of their action situation through two ways. Taking once more the continuum ‘logic of expected consequences’/‘logic of appropriateness’, it may occur that changes in the perception of the action situation affect actors’ strategic calculation. In other words, actors now perceive that what is happening in a previously ignored subsystem may alter their current payoffs. On the other hand, redefinition may stimulate the logic of appropriateness, by activating pre-existing norms and rules.

Image redefinition underlines the importance of discursive processes in public policy, opening a door to introduce new elements taken from post-empiricist policy approaches (Fischer and Forester 1993; Fischer 2003; Hajer and Wagenaar 2003). Precisely, these approaches emphasise the importance of argumentation and discourse in explaining policy change. Image redefinition may be conceived as a discursive activity where policy change promoters struggle to subvert the previously established discursive basis of a public policy. According to Hajer (1995, 61) discourse and (policy) institutional structure are inextricably connected. Discourse structures the way participants perceive and behave in action situations, by defining the relationships...
among their different components. Besides, different institutional fields (in the IAD terms, action arenas) may develop different rules regarding discourse utilization (vocabulary, meanings, how concepts relate to each other, etc.). These rules may also become a limit for the participation in these institutional settings of foreign actors (what Hajer calls ‘conditions of discourse structuration’ [1995, 60-61].

Here, Hajer introduces an important element: inter-discursivity (1995, 61), that is, the possibility of establishing communication among arenas with different conditions of discourse structuration. The connection takes place through the elaboration of ‘story-lines’. These are “narratives on social reality through which elements from many different domains are combined and that provide actors with a set of symbolic references that suggest a common understanding” (Hajer 1995, 63). The symbolic component of the story-lines would contribute to the solidification of new shared perceptions (Ostrom 2005, 108). This explanation is connected with Baumgarther and Jones’ attention shift. Story-lines, the redefinition of policy images which incorporate new elements capable to attract the attention of actors outside the subsystem, would allow to change the focus of attention of those actors, offering a new interpretation of the situation they are involved in. Thus, discursive framing plays a fundamental role in mobilization of support and alliance formation.

However, the relationship between conflict expansion and policy change is not direct. The possibility and the type of change depend on a series of conditioning factors. These are, mainly, allies’ commitment to policy change and the concordance between promoters’ and allies' preferences. Regarding allies’ commitment to policy change, two situations should be distinguished. If allies act motivated by the ‘logic of expected consequences’, change will depend on how they incorporate the results of policy change in their ‘expected utility function’, that is, depending on the balance between the costs and benefits they foresee. If they act on the basis of the logic of appropriateness, allies’ commitment will depend on the direct relationship between the alternatives proposed by proponents of policy change and allies’ beliefs. Of course, these two situations are extremes of a continuum, so mixed situations may occur.

With respect to the concordance between promoters’ and allies' preferences, they may coincide in the general goals of policy change, but not in the details regarding the intensity of change or the dimensions of policy design that should be modified. The incorporation of the promoter’s preferences by allies will depend either on the extent these preferences are acceptable for the latter in terms of costs-benefits (once more the logic of the expected consequences), or (logic of appropriateness) on the extent these preferences are compatible in normative terms with allies’ beliefs, or coherent with activities they develop in other action arenas.

Along with the above mentioned collective action problems, conflict expansion has other obstacles. Firstly, there is the question of timing. Mobilization – in absence of an effective organisation and resources on which to sustain it – may become in the long term a very costly task (at least for a majority of the proponents) in terms of human, material, and even symbolic resources. In these conditions, it is very unlikely that policy change takes place. Also, the absence of a capable leadership, or inexperienced promoters, may also lead to the failure of conflict expansion. Sometimes, it is the nature of the claims made by promoters what becomes an obstacle. This occurs either because of the lack of public interest of the issue, or because the claims or the claimers have not
social legitimacy. In both cases, it is very difficult for promoters of change to attract the attention of public opinion and/or potential allies. At the same time, promoters of non legitimated issues are a perfect target for opponents in case of countermobilization. Moreover, institutional structure also poses problems for conflict expansion, as the presence of veto points controlled by opponents (Tsebelis 2002). In this sense, the control of the institutional agenda plays a fundamental role.

But the most evident obstacle for conflict expansion is the possibility of countermobilization by actors opposed to change. They have to face the same difficulties than proponents of change (collective action dilemmas, mobilization costs, etc.) but their position usually is more advantageous than that of policy change promoters (Cobb and Ross 1997, 26). The control exerted by some participants over the status quo confers them, first of all, legitimacy, linked to the positive policy image they disseminate outside the subsystem; time, a costly resource for change proponents, but inexpensive and very useful for those who want to avoid change happens; a higher control of relevant information, both substantive and procedural. Finally, there are other resources which it is likely dominant actors within the subsystem are more endowed with than promoters, such as authority (in case of actors pertaining to the State structure), social capital (the existence of relationship of functional interdependency with other actors in other action arenas it is a fundamental source of influence outside the subsystem), organizational resources (state actors’ advantages in this respect are obvious), or economic resources.

On the other hand, venue shopping is not only an option available to promoters of change. Opponents of policy change also look for allies in other action arenas to maintain the status quo. The existence of a multiplicity of venues and action arenas may be both a facilitator and an obstacle for policy change. As Pralle (2003, 237) has pointed out, the final result will be dependent on the resources participants control and the strategies they put into practice. In this sense, the scope of policy change as a result of conflict expansion is an empirical question.

c) The learning mechanism

The utilization of the concept of ‘learning’ in the study of policy change is not free from problems. The interest on learning as a causal mechanism derives from the introduction of ideational factors (ideas, knowledge, or information) as an explanatory variable of political processes (Hall 1993). The main problem is to isolate the mechanism of learning from the other mechanisms. As Bennet and Howlett (1992, 290) point out, it is difficult to observe learning independently of the change to be explained (see also Radaelli 1995; Yee 1996). Explanatory mechanisms based on exogenous impact and conflict expansion are necessarily associated with cognitive processes and knowledge utilization. In this sense, some conceptual distinctions must be drawn. Firstly, ‘political learning’ must be differentiated from ‘policy learning’ (May 1992). The former refers to learning through which political actors acquire a higher degree of sophistication in the prosecution and promotion of their interest. In contrast, policy learning refers to that learning oriented towards a better understanding – even a redefinition – of goals, instruments, rationales and the rest of the components of policy.
The concept of learning used here is the latter one. Another distinction is that between individual and organizational learning. Learning is, in principle, an activity that individuals do. Nevertheless, learning is also applied to collective entities (organizations, governments, even societies). Taking into account this distinction (Argyris and Schön 1996; Popper and Lipshitz 1998; 2000), collective learning appears when individual learning is incorporated and codified within collective routines and practices or, in other words, it is institutionalized within the collective entity (Levy 1994, 287).

In addition, in order to identify the role of learning as a trigger of policy change, it must be conceived separately from policy change itself (Levy 1994, 289-290). Learning may not even produce policy change necessarily. Participants may learn from experiences, but not to apply the lessons due to factors such as the lack of support or feasibility of proposed alternatives (Kingdon 1995). Of course, learning may be used to reinforce the existing status quo.

In general, policy learning implies a voluntary adoption of new policy beliefs by subsystem participants – these participants may be situated at the operational level (learning 1 in figure 5) or at the collective action level (learning 2) – as new available

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16 In this definition of policy learning are merged the two types distinguished by May (1992): instrumental policy learning – referred to implementation instruments – and social policy learning – where learning affects other components of policy design such as rationales, goals, and objectives.
information offers a better understanding of policy elements (Meseguer 2005, 72-73). In this sense, it is necessary to empirically account for changes in beliefs. Here appears the problem of differentiating when learning entails ‘real’ cognitive change (that is, when participants are truly persuaded) and when it is only a mere rationalization (ex post). Levy’s (1994, 308) recommendations may apply here.  

An indicator of ‘real’ learning is the existence of institutional arrangements within the subsystem oriented to promote such policy learning (Busenberg 2001). Information from the environment enters into the subsystem through a multiplicity of channels, from participants’ day-to-day experience, systematic scientific research, mass media, etc. (see figure 5). The transformation of such information into learning depends on the capacity of turning it into usable knowledge to guide evaluation and the modification of strategies, goals, or instruments (Adams 2004). The probability that this capacity is present increases if there are elements in the institutional structure designed to foster it (consultative bodies, professional fora, instruments integrated in policy implementation procedures, internal or external evaluations, etc.).

The structure of the action arena also influences learning. Some action arenas are learning facilitators, while others hinder it. Popper and Lipshitz (1998; 2000) have pointed out a number of conditions that make more likely effective learning within organizations: 1) environmental uncertainty, 2) costly potential errors, 3) a high level of professionalism, and 4) and strong commitment to learning of higher hierarchical levels. Thus, the probability of policy change by learning increases in those subsystems where these elements are present. Environmental uncertainty stimulates participants search and update of information in order to pursue their goals and strategies. On the other hand, learning is also stimulated when cost of errors (individual or collective) are too high to be assumed by the subsystem. According to Haas (1992) this is the reason for epistemic communities are created.

There are two major sources of uncertainty: a) lack of information or ambiguity; and b) the existence of competence and/or conflict within the subsystem. Both sources interact, influencing subsystem’s predisposition to learn. It has been stated that subsystem next to a monopoly situation, where participants share similar perceptions and where those participants with dissenting interests are isolated or excluded, would not constitute a fertile soil for the activation of learning processes (Thomas 1999, 211). However, if the nature of the issues that subsystem deals with entails great levels of uncertainty, and errors would be too costly to be assumed, it is likely that participants adopt a more cooperative orientation aiming to solve problems, where learning plays a fundamental role (Radaelli 1995). On the other hand, from the ACF it has been pointed out how situations of moderate conflict in an arena may stimulate learning processes among participants (Jenkins-Smith 1988, 177-178; Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier 1993, 49). At the same time, the conflict may rouse mobilization and conflict expansion processes that, although they fail to expand conflict outside the subsystem, they may

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He recommends that research designs should incorporate longitudinal studies about participants in order to determine 1) whether they maintained certain beliefs-discourses before events triggering policy learning occur; 2) whether changes in beliefs-discourses are correlated with and they follow changes in interest or institutional roles played by participants; and 3) whether private expressions of beliefs-discourses deviate with respect to public ones. The answer to these questions would allow to identify whether learning is present or not. An affirmative answer in 1) would confirm the spurious character of learning. An affirmative answer in 2) would indicate the (likely) existence of a ‘rationalization’. Finally, an affirmative answer in 3) would deny the existence of learning (Levy 1994, 308).
introduce new concepts and policy images that could trigger learning processes within the subsystem.

Another factor favouring learning is the **degree of professionalism** of subsystem participants. This entails the existence within the subsystem of rules that promote the participation of actors with a determinate **ethos**, whose self-esteem and external valuation depends on they use in their day-to-day work of peer-certified knowledge. This is accompanied with the positive valuation from other subsystem participants of the use of certified knowledge as a basic instrument for legitimating any policy change proposal. Finally, it is also important that actors with **authority positions** within the subsystem or outside, who are capable to influence on the rules, be committed with learning and its importance. Policy learning is also favoured when subsystem’s internal rules and culture positively sanction learning as a legitimate route for policy change. These two later elements (professionalised ethos and auspicious organizational culture) are present in the case of the most favourable institutional locus for effective policy learning according to the ACF: the **professionalised forum** (Jenkins-Smith 1988).

Including learning as an explicit mechanism allow to introduce rationality in policy change. However, this does not eliminate the possibility of ‘fallible learning’ due to participants’ cognitive limitations and institutional structures. On the other hand, although learning allows introducing rationality in policy change, it does not eliminate politics. Institutional structures aiming to facilitate learning are, in the end, the result of political decisions. Policy usable knowledge is socially constructed and, thus, it occupies a subordinate position regarding underlying social and political processes (Weiss 1983; Bennet and Howlett 1992; Schneider and Ingram 1997, chap. 6).

Usable knowledge is more than the knowledge produced by experts. The claim of technical rationality has invested this kind of knowledge of a higher legitimacy in the policy process. However, there are other types of knowledge at work, also legitimate and usable, as that produced by legislative bodies, mass media, opinion leaders, interest organisations, and individual citizens (Adams 2004)

Regarding the type of change learning generates, policy literature has pointed out its limited effect. Organizations and, by extension, stable subsystems, allow change from within only as it does not affect the fundamental aspects of their working (Argyris and Schón 1996; Argyris 1976). The ACF underlines how policy oriented learning only affects secondary aspects of belief systems. Nevertheless, the possibility that learning produces substantive policy change should not be discarded. Precisely, in those situations where participants are able to learn that the current policy design may seriously harm their interests, it is possible that they trigger a substantive review of elements of policy design. In this sense, as some critics of the ACF have pointed out, egoistic interests in participants may overcome support to certain goals or institutional arrangements. When the ineffective working of a policy endangers dominant participants’ status (even their survival chances) it is likely that they promote a substantive review of policy design (Weiss 1983, 233).

In sum, the ability to detect these dangers is higher if the subsystem’s institutional structure allows generating adequate information and its later use. As it has been mentioned above, it is more likely to find these structures in those subsystems characterized by a higher level of environmental uncertainty, costly potential errors,
professionalism, and learning committed leadership. On the other hand, in case these conditions are not present and/or where institutional arrangements do not favour learning, the probability that new information trigger policy change will depend on whether it questions fundamental policy values, goals, strategies, or instruments. When this occurs, policy change is usually marginal or incremental.

4.4. Interactions between mechanisms

Each of the three mechanisms presented above are conceived as alternative paths for policy change. However, the complexity inherent to the policy process implies that the different mechanisms frequently interact among them. Firstly, exogenous impacts may trigger learning processes within the subsystem. This may occur because the exogenous impact is absorbed by the subsystem – above all if its effect is extended along time. Also, it is possible to locate a delayed interaction between the mechanisms of learning and exogenous impact. Although it is not absorbed, the impact may contribute to learning if it generates information that can be used in the future by subsystem participants. The exogenous impact becomes, then, an opportunity for drawing lessons that may be applied within the subsystem later.

On the other hand, as the PET and the MS frameworks point out, although exogenous impacts finally do not trigger policy change, they may offer opportunities for conflict expansion. For example, a or a shock due to a sudden alteration in material conditions, may make change promoters’ claims more visible outside the subsystem, facilitating venue shopping and the attraction of allies from other action arenas. Moreover, a governmental reshuffle may situate in potential alternative policy venues individuals’ more sympathetic to promoters’ views. This would entail a greater likelihood of success, and it could change promoters’ calculations about the expected payoffs of expanding conflict into such venues.

Interactions also take place between learning and conflict expansion. On the one hand, when learning processes do not end up in policy change, discontent actors with this result may trigger conflict expansion outside the subsystem. On the other hand, failure in conflict expansion may favour learning. For example, after experiencing the costs of aborting the mobilization of the proponents of change, opponents may reconsider the possibility of dealing with the issue from within the subsystem, and put into action learning instruments. Another situation is that opponents learn that change is necessary, but they do not want proponents of change to get all the credit. Then, after aborting conflict expansion, they may put into action policy change.

This interaction among mechanisms must be taken into account when explaining policy change diffusion between subsystems (either horizontal or vertically linked). In this sense, a policy change in a subsystem due to conflict expansion must become usable information in other subsystem and trigger change by learning. At the same time, a change due to learning in a subsystem may constitute an exogenous impact in another subsystem.

Finally, the possibility of interaction between mechanisms may result in explanatory accounts where policy change occurs after a sequence of different mechanisms (that is, a chain of mechanisms), that may also cross subsystem boundaries.
This type of situations perfectly fit the mechanism-based explanatory approach adopted in this paper, according to which to explain an event is to account for the series of events that end up in the event to be explained. For example, conflict expansion within a subsystem may constitute an exogenous impact to a linked (vertically or horizontally) subsystem. If the subsystem has the ability to absorb this exogenous impact, it may then trigger policy learning and, then, policy change.

**APENDIX. The three reference frameworks**

**A) The Multiple Streams framework**

Kingdon’s goal is to explain the process of agenda setting, how certain policy problems and solutions attract decision-makers attention and are selected, how others move to a secondary position, and how others simply disappear or do not reach attention threshold and are ignored (Kingdon 1995, 3). His approach is inspired by the ‘garbage can’ model of decision making (Cohen, March and Olsen 1972). Kingdon identifies three types of processes – ‘streams’ – affecting agenda setting: problems, policies (or solutions), and politics (1995, 87). Every stream is independent from the rest and has its own dynamics.

Problems struggle for attracting the attention of people around government (Kingdon 1995, 87). Decision makers become aware of a problematic situation through, 1) the evidence obtained by systematic information produced on social situations; 2) the attention generated by focusing events or crisis; and 3) feedback from existing policies. This information is mediated by cognitive and interpretive processes. However, the recognition of a problem is not a sufficient condition for setting out a policy proposal.

The second stream, policies, consists in sets of solutions generated within policy communities. Solutions are finally selected after a process of combination and recombination of previous existing solutions. The range of alternatives selected is usually wider than the set of alternatives finally considered by decision makers (Kingdon 1995, 121-122). In this process, policy entrepreneurs – actors who invest their resources (time, expertise, reputation, energy, indeed money) in promoting their pet solutions in the expectation to obtain some kind of payoff in the future – play a major role. Selection of alternatives depends on a series of factors, where argumentative and persuasion processes play a major role. Other factors are entrepreneurs’ power and influence, absence of negative predispositions within the other participants, compatibility with community fundamental values, technical feasibility, or the ability to anticipate future obstacles and constrains. The few alternatives that survive experience a process of diffusion within the policy community becoming common knowledge among its members (1995, 137-141).

Politics stream consists of 1) the public mood, mainly associated to the opinion of specific attentive publics; 2) organized political forces (parties, interest organizations, and clienteles around policies); and 3) the functioning of the political-administrative system, mainly personnel turnover and the distribution of jurisdictions and competences.

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18 Payoffs are diverse in nature. They may be money, personal satisfaction when promoting certain values, economic incentives, career opportunities, or the mere pleasure derived from participating.
about issues (Kingdon 1995, 149-153). In contrast to the policy stream, persuasion and argumentation give way to negotiation in the political stream, where political coalitions are formed in order to promote a policy alternative. Participants in these coalitions may be guided by interest other than the policy alternatives in discussion (Kingdon 1995, 159-161).

The MS framework explains agenda setting (and, by extension, policy change) as the result of the coupling of the three streams. In brief, a problem or alternative increases its likelihood of being included in the decisional agenda if policy entrepreneurs get to couple it with the right elements in the other streams: a problem with an available solution and adequate political conditions; or an alternative or policy proposal with a problem to which it applies and the right political context as well (Kingdon 1995, 172-173). Coupling is a complex process conditioned by a series of structural and agency factors.

Structural factors condition entrepreneurs’ opportunities. Firstly, there is the type of window that opens, that is, the opportunity that arises for policy advocates to promote their pet solutions (policy window) or to attract public attention to the problems they are interested (problem window) (Kingdon 1995, 165). Other structural factors are: problems and alternatives queuing for a place in the agenda, strategic constraints – such as limitations in resources – the loading capacity of the system’s decisional structure or the existence of specialised bureaucratic venues for certain policy issues.

Regarding the agency dimension, the entry of problems and alternatives in the decisional agenda depends on the ability and skills of policy entrepreneurs (policy advocates or political brokers) in promoting their pet problems or alternatives in a structurally limited context. As the opening of windows is usually out of the reach of particular participants in a policy area, policy entrepreneurs must be permanently alert to get the opportunity (Kingdon 1995, 181). Besides, entrepreneurs’ ability depends on certain qualities, such as the ability to be heard (which also derives from entrepreneur’s expertise, representativeness, and political authority), her political connections and bargain capacity, and her ‘stubbornness’, the quality of political persistence (1995, 180-181).

B) The Advocacy Coalition Framework

Also conceived as a response to the insufficiencies detected in the stage heuristics model (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993, 3), the goal of the Advocacy Coalition Framework is to offer a “real theory” of the policy process, that is, a set of general and empirically testable causal hypotheses which explain the relationship among the main variables affecting the policy process. In this sense, the ACF has evolved since its first formulations (Sabatier 1987; 1988; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993), and today it is still put under test (i.e. Zafonte and Sabatier 2004).

The ACF starts from five basic assumptions (Sabatier 1993, 16-20; Sabatier y Jenkins-Smith 1999, 118-119) to which one more implicit one has been added here: 1) explanations of policy change have to take into account the role played by relevant

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19 In fact, only political decision makers can exert some degree of control on the opening of windows (Kingdon 1995, 177-178).
technical information; 2) an adequate understanding of policy change requires a time span of a decade or more; 3) the policy subsystem is the more adequate unit of analysis; 4) along with the participants traditionally considered by policy literature (politicians, bureaucracy, and interest groups) it is necessary to include other categories of actors, as journalists, researchers, and policy analysts; also intergovernmental relationships must be taken into account; 5) public policies can be conceptualized as belief systems, as they contain implicitly in their design theories about how the world works; and 6) (implicit assumption) a direct relationship exists between beliefs underlying public policies and the beliefs of actors promoting such policies.

The basic unit of analysis is the policy subsystem. The ACF assumes that within subsystems exist aggregates of actors called advocacy coalitions. Individuals and organisations forming these coalitions share a number of normative and causal beliefs, coordinating their action in order to accomplish policy objectives (Sabatier 1988[2000], 358; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1999, 120). Advocacy coalitions try to translate their beliefs into policies. The ability to do so depends on the strategic utilisation of resources controlled by their members (Sabatier 1993, 29). Coalition members’ shared beliefs are structured in three levels: a deep core of basic normative and ontological beliefs; a policy core of basic causal beliefs and normative principles regarding the policy subsystem and its working; and a third level of secondary aspects including instrumental or less important aspects of a policy. The characterization of this structure of beliefs has been refined along time. In this sense, Zafonte and Sabatier (2004) have recently specified the definition and the relationship between ‘policy core beliefs’ and ‘secondary aspects’, so that the hierarchy of beliefs is not based on levels of abstraction anymore, but in the instrumental relationship between core policy beliefs and secondary aspects.20

The ACF identifies two basic mechanisms of change: 1) policy-oriented learning and 2) changes by non-cognitive factors.

1) Policy oriented learning: Policy change may occur through “relatively enduring alterations of thought or behavioral intentions that result from experience and/or new information and that are concerned with the attainment or revision of policy objectives.” (Sabatier y Jenkins-Smith 1999, 123). This type of change affects basically to secondary aspects, mainly those with a scientific-technical component. In contrast, individuals’ cognitive filters hinder change in other levels when incoming information contradicts core beliefs (Sabatier 1988[2000], 373; 1993, 33-34; Sabatier y Jenkins-Smith 1999, 123). The resistance of policy core beliefs to policy-oriented learning entails that power distribution within the subsystem will not be modified despite changes in secondary aspects. Another consequence is that changes in the policy core result mainly from exogenous variables (Sabatier 1988[2000], 374-375; 1993, 34-35).

Two types of policy-oriented learning can be distinguished: within-coalition and between-coalitions. The former usually starts with individual learning and/or turnover of members within the coalition. After surmounting initial institutional resistance, final diffusion of new ideas depend on the rate of turnover within the coalition, the

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20 Policy core beliefs are “important normative and perceptual beliefs spanning an entire policy subsystem”; and secondary aspects are newly defined as “the instrumental decisions and information searches necessary to implement policy core beliefs in a portion of the entire subsystem” (Zafonte and Sabatier 2004, 79).
compatibility of incoming information with the system of beliefs, the capacity of persuasion of new evidence, and the presence or absence of external political pressures (Jenkins-Smith y Sabatier 1993, 42). Also, the ACF allows the possibility that within coalition learning affects the policy core when considerable evidence is accumulated during a decade or more (Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier 1993, 44).

On the other hand, between-coalitions learning assigns a fundamental role to the use of usable knowledge, particularly that produced by policy analysis (Jenkins-Smith 1988; Jenkins-Smith y Sabatier 1993, 45). The use of scientific-technical knowledge depends on the existence of a previous consensus among participants both on rules guiding the production of acceptable knowledge and on what kind of evidence can be taken as relevant. Value conflicts – over basic principles and beliefs – make between-coalitions learning very difficult. In this sense, Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier identify a number of conditions affecting knowledge utilization and between-coalition learning: a) moderate or low level of conflict – mainly regarding incompatibilities between coalitions’ core beliefs (Jenkins-Smith y Sabatier 1993, 49); b) analytical tractability of issues (Sabatier 1988[2000], 382; Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier 1993, 50-51); and c) professional fora or institutional sites where the debate takes place (Sabatier 1988[2000], 381-382; Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier 1993, 53-54). Despite empirical accounts of the difficulties of between-coalitions learning, it has been also documented the important role played by policy brokers in reducing conflict intensity and obtaining a reasonable solution (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1999, 122).

2) Changes induced by non-cognitive factors. Due to the resistance of policy core beliefs, substantive policy change results from non-cognitive factors. These include changes in socioeconomic conditions, in government coalitions at system level, and decisions taken in other policy subsystems (Sabatier 1988[2000], 362-363; 1993, 22-23; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1999, 120-121). These factors may affect coalitions’ resources, components, and the stability of the policy core.

Recently, in response to certain criticisms (Mintron and Vergari 1996, 422) Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith have introduced some elements taken from other theories (although they do not acknowledge the origin), as the role of policy entrepreneurs, institutions, and mobilization processes (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1999, 147-148). Finally, in their later updating of the ACF, Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith introduce the possibility of substantive changes in the policy core may occur without exogenous impacts, when rival coalitions conclude that a situation is unacceptable for both of them. In these circumstances, after a process of negotiation, a ‘supercoalition’ would arise (1999, 149).

C) Punctuated-Equilibrium theory and Policy Change

Like Kingdon, Baumgartner and Jones (1993) focus on agenda setting, but also deal with the impact of agenda changes in policy outputs. Their aim is to elaborate a framework which is able to explain policy dynamics, including both periods of stability and moments of sudden policy change.

A fundamental postulate of the PET is that participants behave strategically aiming to establishing a policy monopoly, that is, a highly cohesive subsystem
dominated by one interest (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 6; True, Jones, and Baumgartner 1999, 100). A policy monopoly has two basic components: an *institutional structure* that limits access to the policy process; and an *image* or powerful idea, connected with fundamental political values, which serves as an ideological support to the institutional structure (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 7).

The explanation of *policy stability* is intimately related to the concept of policy monopoly and its institutional features. In a policy monopoly, shared formal and informal rules regulate interaction among members, establish how and where decisions are made (*policy venue*) and limit access to outsiders (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 7). Policy venues are especially important here. Those interests aspiring to establish a policy monopoly should succeed in locating the authority over an issue in a venue which guarantees them control over access and decision outcomes (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 34).

Policy image also contributes to maintain policy monopolies. A policy image is the set of ideas and meanings associated to a policy, where empirical, emotive, and evaluative elements are mixed. Different actors may have different policy images. Actors dominating a policy monopoly disseminate policy images emphasising simultaneously positive social values and the technical or specialised character of subsystem’s issues. The aim is to legitimate and reinforce the monopolistic control over the policy subsystem by promoting public support or, at least, feelings of indifference or incompetence among outsiders (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 19). In addition, the closing of the subsystem is completed by the fact that only those actors with specific stakes in policy decisions are more interested in participating. Subsystems where a policy monopoly exists behave as very stable institutional structures, admitting only *incremental* policy change.

Along with stability the PET aims to explain subsystem dynamics, mainly subsystem creation and its destruction or transformation. The mechanisms explaining these dynamics are based in the *mobilization of indifferent publics and elites* by policy entrepreneurs. The mechanism at work when a subsystem arises is called ‘*mobilization of enthusiasm*’ or ‘*downsian mobilization*’ for it is inspired by Downs’ (1972) model of the issue attention cycle. According to this model, attention to policy issues follows a cyclic pattern: low attention at the pre-problem stage, sudden increase of attention and euphoria when the problem is discovered (usually as a consequence of a focusing event), reconsideration when decision-makers and public realize of the costs of solving the problem, and, finally, decline of interest and substitution by other issues. Baumgartner and Jones see this model as a valid description but they criticise Downs for not considering the institutional legacy (organisations, programmes) the process leaves behind. In fact, issues do not vanish but they remain active within these institutions after public interest has ceased, creating a new policy subsystem (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 85-87).²¹

However, the mechanism Baumgartner and Jones are more interested in is the one explaining policy discontinuity and monopoly alteration or destruction. They call it ‘*mobilization of criticism*’ or ‘*Schattschneider’s mobilization*’ (1993, 88; Schaatschneider 1960). Policy change will depend on to what extent policy change

²¹ However, this criticism is quite unfair, for Downs considers the persistence of policy issues when the cycle ends within the newly created institutional structures (Downs 1972).
promoters are able to attract the attention of other actors outside the subsystem, precisely those that the dominant interest in the policy monopoly try to maintain indifferent. Promoters opposing the subsystem’s status quo (internal critics or outsiders) struggle to erode the conditions of that subsystem stability, that is, positive policy image and jurisdictional attribution. Thus, substantive policy change is conceived as the product of the interaction between image redefinition and the search for new favourable policy venues (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 37).

A first step in subverting a policy monopoly consists in turning into negative the positive image cultivated by the subsystem’s dominant interest (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 26; Jones 1994, 136). This process usually is associated to a process of ‘non-contradictory’ argumentation between policy contenders. This is not to say that rational argumentation is not important during the process, but as the audience change promoters target increases (above all, if it is the general public opinion) the symbolic and emotional components also increase their importance when trying to get their attention (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 30, 182). In this respect, change promoters should also know the logic of mass media communication.

Image redefinition is important as it allow promoters of change to attract new allies, above all those situated in positions capable of altering the policy’s decisional locus. This is what Baumgartner and Jones call venue shopping (1993, 36). Among these new allies, those in the macropolitical level are especially important (parliamentary groups, judges, individuals with high level ministerial offices, members of government, etc.), both for their position in the decisional structure of the State and for they may become in policy entrepreneurs themselves (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 16, 36-37, 195). For this kind of allies, strategic calculation of the payoffs of promoting some policy change are even more important than the policy issue itself (1993, 79-80, 246-247).

Nevertheless, both mobilization of enthusiasm and mobilization of criticism do not automatically end up in substantial subsystem change. The final result will depend on the type of feedback triggered by the policy change process (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 16-17). There may be situations where the initial momentum of change progressively tends to disappear (negative feedback). In downsian mobilization, this is intrinsic to the process itself. In mobilization of the criticism, negative feedback is due to a series of factors, such as the failure of policy entrepreneurs to redefine the policy image, and, above all, the countermobilization of subsystem’s dominant interest. In any case, negative feedback implies, as much, incremental policy change (Baumgartner and Jones 2002, 22). In contrast, the momentum of mobilization may accelerate as times goes by (positive feedback), so first initial movements by policy entrepreneur ends up in substantial policy change, as more and more people get interested in the issue.

Nevertheless, Baumgartner and Jones (1993, 242; 2002, 14-15) – as Kingdon (1995) also does in the MS – point out the difficulty of identifying and explaining which factors contribute to trigger positive feedback, emphasising its random character. However, after the triggering event has taken place, it is possible to explain the expansive dynamics of positive feedback (i.e., through threshold type mechanisms [Schelling 1978, chap. 3; Granovetter 1978; Marwell y Oliver 1993]).
REFERENCES


