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Proposition for a Workshop at the ECPR Joint Sessions 2010 in Münster

## **Ideas, policy design and policy instruments: casting light on the missing link**

### ***1. Outline of the topic***

The ideational dimension has drawn considerable attention of policy scholars in the 90s above all inspired by studies on “epistemic communities” (Haas 1992), “advocacy coalitions” (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993), “historical institutionalism” (Hall 1992) and “rational choice institutionalism” (Weingast 1995) (see for an overview Braun and Busch 1999; Surel 2002). Both conceptual development and methodological questions (see for this above all Yee 1996 and Campbell 2002) have been put forward in this context. In the new century, the number of ideas-inspired policy studies has diminished though “discursive institutionalism” appeared on the scene with a number of interesting insights (Schmidt 2000, 2002; Schmidt and Radaelli 2004). Our knowledge on the ideational dimension has undoubtedly been advanced in comparison to the 1980s. Still we believe that knowledge gaps, ambiguities and methodological questions remain on the agenda and still need to be addressed.

Against this context, the workshop tackles the “empirical gap” between policy ideas and policy design, i.e. policy strategies and policy instruments. We wish to discover the ways and the degree to which policy ideas – next to or in interaction with interests and institutions - determine strategies and instruments adopted and implemented in order to achieve desired policy outcomes. This is a “sensitive” and “ambitious” subject for three different reasons:

Firstly, because in dealing with this topic we are strongly committed to overcoming the pitfalls and shortcomings by focusing on the *operational* level of policy-making, that is on the *concrete impact* of policy ideas. Secondly, because we wish to closely connect “*policy tools analysis*” (Hood 2007) with the mainstream of public policy. For too long now, policy instruments have been separated from the analysis of policy dynamics or development, and handled as if they were “neutral”, “objective”, “functional” components of the policy process (Howlett 1991; Lascoumes and Le Gales 2007). We believe that they lie at the very core of policy-making, and constitute an essential matter at stake; they are “bearers of values”, that is, they are ideologically or ideationally driven. Thirdly, because we want to call for a comparison and possible integration of the “specialized” frameworks

which characterize the study of policy ideas and policy instruments in the public policy field. Too often, scholars in each policy sector have developed specific theories regarding the role of ideas in influencing the choice of policy strategies and instruments and/or have designed idiosyncratic types of policy instrument. A comparison of such findings would help to improve our understanding both of the role of ideas in policy-making, and of the ways in which policy strategies are assembled, and policy instruments are chosen.

So, the proposed subject focuses on an important “crossroad” in public policy. The attempt to bring together ideational literature, policy instrument analysis, and specialized sectoral policy knowledge, is of fundamental importance if we want to gain a better understanding of and solve some of the long-standing questions about the impact of ideas in policy-making (discourses, paradigms, *référentiel*) on the design of policy strategies and instruments.

This workshop is designed to fill in the above-mentioned gap by bringing together different theoretical perspectives and research strategies. We still need improved concepts of ideas and their relationship with the behaviour and choices of policy-makers and we need to investigate possible ways of connecting ideas and policy choice.

It should be pointed out that over the last ten years no workshop has been specifically devoted to analysing policy instruments or the “ideational turn”. The latter was the subject of an ECPR workshop in 1998 (held in Warwick, under the joint supervision of Dietmar Braun and Andreas Busch; see Braun and Busch 1999).

Thus the core of our proposal fills this gap, and seems to meet the need to assess the state of research on the relationship between *policy ideas and policy design (policy strategies and policy instruments)* and, possibly, to move forward from there.

## **2. The relationship with existing research**

A state of the art analysis of the chosen subject needs to focus on at least two different streams of scholarship: on the one hand, there is the research into the role of ideas in policy-making; on the other hand, there are studies of policy instruments.

(1) The majority of studies on the role of *ideas* assume a “Kuhnian” epistemological perspective. Ideas are conceived as interrelated sets of values, beliefs and frameworks regarding what a policy goal ought to be, and what kind of strategies and instruments should be employed when pursuing a chosen goal. Policy ideas are structured in a hierarchical, consistent, and coherent way. Various names have been given to the interconnections between different levels of ideas: policy paradigms (Hall 1993), systems

of belief (Sabatier 1988, Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993), or “référentiel” (Muller 1995). Such theoretical approaches perceive the adoption of policy instruments as a direct function of the paradigm or system of beliefs to which they belong. From this perspective, each policy domain is built on a hegemonic paradigm or a dominant system of beliefs, which imposes its own policy strategies and thus a specific combination of policy instruments. This “top-down” approach to the relationship between ideas and policy instruments has been challenged in recent years, by an increasing number of scholars working in various different policy domains (administrative reform, social policy, economic strategy and pension policies). These scholars have emphasised the fact that:

- the impact of ideas on concrete policy-making is less linear than received opinion would have us believe (Capano 1999; Damamme and Jobert 2000; Musselin 2000, Gaudin 2004);

- new ideas are very often included in existing paradigms, even if they are supposed to replace the existing, old ideas (Lascoumes 1996; Lieberman 2002, Capano 2003, Oliver and Pemberton 2003, Beland 2007, Palier 2007);

- the structural fragmentation of the policy-making process cannot be boiled down to a coherent systems of beliefs and ideas, and is better grasped as an arena where the participating actors have partial, circumscribed, and very often incoherent, ideas about how to do things (Lieberman 2002);

- very often the adopted policy strategies are a mix of diverse policy instruments which sometimes appear incompatible and even contradictory, belonging as they do to different actors and to different policy paradigms (Sinclair 1997; De Bruijn and Hufen 1998; Gunningham and Sinclair 2002).

Thus, what emerges from these studies is that the unproblematic conceptualization of the choice of policy instruments (conceived as the mere consequence of prevailing ideas, paradigms, and systems of beliefs) represents both a theoretical puzzle and an empirical deficit.

(2) With regard to *policy instrument analysis*, it should be pointed out that studies have for a long time focused on the rationality of policy-makers (the rationale underlying their choices, which is usually defined in terms of political self-interest). The debate on this issue has been somewhat vague, tending to place the emphasis on all-encompassing dichotomies, such as “state vs. market”, “regulation vs. deregulation” and so on (Howlett 2004). In order to counter this rather simplistic way of reasoning, political scientists have attempted to classify the various types of policy tool employed by policy makers (Hood 1983; Schneider

and Ingram 1990; Lindner and Peters 1989, 1992; Salamon 2002). However, what emerges is a substantially prescriptive interest in this topic: scholars seem more interested in designing the most effective set of policy instruments, or “policy mixes” (Bressers and O’Toole 1998, 2005; Gunningham and Sinclair 2002), by focusing on “optimality” or on “coherence” (Campbell, Johnson, and Larson, 2007; May et al. 2005), without paying too much attention to an explanation of the underlying reasons for the choices made, or of the coherence of the latter with policy-makers’ ideas and beliefs (recent exceptions include Peters 2002; Lascoumes and Le Gales 2004; Eliadis et al. 2005). Nevertheless, it should be said that Linder and Peters (1998, p. 45) pointed out that the choice of policy instruments is not characterized exclusively by an instrumental rationale, but is “fundamentally an intellectual process of constituting a reality and then attempting to work in it”.

It clearly emerges from this short overview that little attention has been devoted to interlinking two cornerstones of the policy-making process - ideas and policy instruments. The time has come to bridge the gap between these two elements and to connect the two strands of public policy research in a more systematic way.

### **3. The Aims of the Workshop**

This workshop is going to address the problem of how the gap between policy ideas and concrete choices of policy instruments is to be filled, and in doing so shall attempt to bring together the two directions taken by existing research, both from a theoretical and an empirical point of view. The key questions we are going to examine include the following:

- a.** To what degree can a system of beliefs (or a paradigm or “référentiel”) be intrinsically incoherent with regard to the relationship between policy ideas and policy strategies and instruments?;
- b.** Do we need to assume that policy-makers consciously possess coherent policy paradigms or systems of beliefs?
- c.** How can the causal influence of policy ideas on the choice of policy-makers best be operationalised (by tracing policy sequences, by using surveys, through logical inference, discourse analysis, event structure analysis and so on)?;
- d.** How can the fact that policy strategies are usually a mix of diverse, apparently incompatible policy instruments be explained, and how can this phenomenon be accounted for from the ideational perspective?;

- e. How is the process of choosing policy instruments connected to the previous phases of the policy-making process and the prevailing ideas therein?
- f. What is the role of different “ideational” arena’s in explaining policy choice: the legislative arena (in particular the struggle between party ideologies), the administrative arena and the implementation arena?
- g. How do causal ideas about the effectiveness of instruments interact with the normative dimension of ideas of actors (parties, interest groups) in the political process?

#### **4. Participants and type of papers**

We believe that this debate is of considerable interest to a broad group of scholars working on Comparative Public Policy and on the EU, as well as to those interested in improving their theoretical and empirical grasp of the opaque connection between policy ideas and the concrete dynamics of policy-making. We expect substantial interest in the topic from scholars who regularly publish in journals such as: the Journal of Public Policy; the Journal of European Public Policy; the Policy Studies Journal; Governance, Public Administration, Public Administration Review, Policy Sciences, International Organization and in those journals specialized in individual areas of public policy. We foresee the participation of scholars from various different theoretical and methodological schools of thought (historical- institutionalist, rational-choice, post-positivist policy analysis, constructivism, etc.), each with research experience in a different policy field.

We would mainly like to receive innovative theoretical, methodological, and empirical papers focusing on the specific questions raised in Point 3 above. Theoretical and methodological papers are expected to be strongly committed to advancing the current state of literature: we expect to provide a number of more suitable solutions, ones that may be empirically tested, to the questions raised in Point 3. Theoretical papers attempting to connect ideational studies with policy instrument studies in an original manner are particularly welcome.

Empirical papers are also welcome, provided that they support theoretical, conceptual and methodological analyses with descriptive, highly significant cases. Those empirical papers capable of shining further light on some of the questions raised in Point 3, by comparing different policies or different countries, would be extremely welcome.

#### 4. Funding

The directors will apply to the University of Bologna and to the Italian Ministry of Higher Education for “partial” funding of the workshop.. Some additional funding may be available from research funds provided by the universities of those taking part in the workshop.

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