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Proposal to convene a workshop on:

LEARNING IN POLITICS AND PUBLIC POLICY

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Abstract

Although learning in politics and public policy is a prominent theme in political science, the state of the art has not much improved since the early foundational studies. The aims in this workshop are to make conceptual and empirical progress with the comparative analysis of learning in public policy, comparative politics, and diffusion theory, by bringing together a group of European and North-American scholars from political science as well as other social sciences, including cognitive psychology, political psychology, political economy, organizational theory, and international relations. The focus will be on a selection of papers with considerable potential for publication in leading journals in the profession, with three main research questions
that are often wrongly conflated, that is: (a) How do we theorize learning and use theory in empirical policy research? (b) What are the (structural, discursive, strategic) conditions under which different types of learning take place? and (c) What difference does learning make to change in politics and public policy?

We will seek empirically-rich papers grounded in explicit theories, and possibly multi-disciplinary approaches, covering the following aspects: micro-foundations, comparison of learning architectures for public policy, measurement and methodological issues, multi-dimensionality of learning, instrumental/strategic/symbolic types of learning, and analytical approaches to normative issues arising out of learning.

**Outline of the topic and relation with existing research**

Learning is a prominent theme in public policy, international relations, and comparative politics, as shown by two special issues dedicated to the role of knowledge in policy diffusion (Dolowitz, 2009), the EU as learning organization (Zito, 2009), a lead article on learning and knowledge utilization (Boswell, 2008), and the recent political economy literature on policy diffusion (for example, Simmons, Dobbin, and Garrett 2008, Meseguer 2009). Yet the state of the art has not much improved since the early foundational studies on policy learning by Heclo, Lindblom, and Simon, and some years later Peter Hall. The problems are conceptual as well as empirical. We found that recent reviews of the state of the art (Freeman, 2006; Grin and Loeber, 2007; Dobbin, Simmons, and Garrett 2007) contain only a handful of empirical studies on learning, thus making it difficult to assess what we have collectively and cumulatively learned about this topic. This perhaps explains the frustration expressed by authors such as James and Lodge (2003) and Volden, Carpenter, and Ting (2008). In the meantime, international relations scholars have connected with learning in the context of very different strands of research, including socialization, critical realism, and diffusion. But this has not led to greater conceptual clarification, rather it has opened up the Pandora’s box of endless discussions on ontology and epistemology.

The aims in this workshop are to make conceptual and empirical progress with the comparative analysis of learning in public policy, comparative politics, and international relations by bringing together a group of European and North-American scholars from political science as well as other social sciences, including cognitive psychology, political psychology, political economy, and of course international relations. Though based in Europe, the workshop conveners are well connected to networks of scholars working on different dimensions of learning in the USA and Canada (and Covadonga Meseguer in Mexico) as shown by their publication record and their presence at panels organized for APSA and EUSA in North-America over the last five years or so.
Type of paper

We seek papers based on explicit theories and rich in empirical analysis, thus excluding literature review papers and conceptual papers that precede the phase of fieldwork. Although priority is given to papers with new, original data (quantitative or qualitative), there are exceptions such as game-theoretical papers, formal models, and theoretical papers.

Specifically, we invite papers on the following seven aspects:

1. **The conceptual systematization of learning**: Granted that learning is not a monolith, what are its main types and dimensions? There is a difference between learning what is politically advantageous to an actor or coalition, and learning more instrumentally in public policy, but how do the two connect in real-world policy change? What are the trade-offs and connections between policy learning and political learning? Organizational theory has also shown how de-coupling may lead to symbolic, imitative learning. Yet symbols and signals are very useful to political actors, and we need to connect this dimension to learning to the study of power and change. Finally, learning is often seen as enlightenment and in some cases as output of force-free deliberation and reflexivity. However, coercion, hierarchy, and institutional rules act as important ‘teachers’ in politics and public policy. How can this asymmetric property of learning be modeled in comparative public policy and diffusion analysis?

2. **The multi-disciplinary dimension**: very rarely have political scientists have “imported” findings from other disciplines. Yet the body of knowledge on Bayesian probability theory, decision-making, models of mind, framing, behavior in experimental conditions and so on is impressive. To what extent is there mileage in an intelligent import of concepts and findings from other disciplines – an import that is ultimately useful to theoretical and empirical progress in political science?

3. **The micro-foundations of learning**: in political science, the assumption is often made that elected policymakers do not want to seek truth, and bureaucrats have preferences shaped by their organization, which include expanding their bureau, overcoming executive control, shaping the policy agenda and so on. The question arises under which conditions do we expect that elected policymakers and bureaucrats engage in learning? What are the modes of political vs. technocratic learning?

4. **Learning architectures**: International organizations and regulators have activated several types of learning architectures, such as benchmarking, intense transnational networking, league tables/indicators, and extrapolation. What is the causal effect of different learning architectures on what is learned across-nations? What is the influence of networking at the international and transnational level? How do domestic and international non-governmental organizations affect learning architectures?

5. **The dimensionality of learning**: how does the presence of multiple and potentially conflicting goals affect learning? That is, how do policy makers resolve the tension that arises when information on several relevant dimensions (such as the environmental and
economic consequences of climate policy) lead to different conclusions about the desirability of the policy?

6. Measurement and methodological issues: all too often political scientists have over-conceptualized and under-researched empirically this topic. What are the most appropriate measurement strategies? How do they perform on the ground of specific projects? What are the issues raised by case selection, techniques like elite interviewing, and more profoundly ontology in terms of, as it were, ‘getting out in the field to measure learning? Finally, how do our measurement designs cope with rival alternative hypothesis of lack of learning, and how do we sensibly control for that?

7. Normative issues arising out of research on learning: is this field of research beleaguered by a benevolent, a-political view of learning? How can one bring power and politics back into research on learning? What are the most important normative implications of the empirical findings of learning domestically and in international arenas?

Funding

We will seek funding for a number of participants via British Academy grants. Radaelli and Dunlop are also currently funded by the European Research Council (ERC) to carry out a project on Analysis of Learning in Regulatory Governance (ALREG). This project has funding for a final conference, if accepted we will immediately explore to what extent we can use the funding for the final conference to support workshop participants from outside Europe (some of the leading scholars in this field operate in Canada, Mexico and the USA). As editor of the EJPR, Radaelli is funded by the journal’s budget and will attend at no additional cost for the organization. We will also apply to the European Collaborative Research Projects of the European Science Foundation for a three-year project of international collaboration – essentially an international extension of ALREG – to fund the ECPR workshop among other things.

Workshop convenors

Claudio M. Radaelli is professor of Political Science at the University of Exeter, Department of Politics. With Richard Katz he edits the European Journal of Political Research. He has contributed to recent projects on learning, such as the special issue of Journal of European Public Policy led by Tony Zito (2009) and the recent issue of West European Politics on policy instruments led by Kassim and Le Gales (2010).

His research interests lie in the theory of the policy process, knowledge utilization and diffusion, regulatory reform, and Europeanization. He has published in European Journal of Political Research, Comparative Political Studies, Journal of Common Market Studies, Journal of European Public Policy, Scandinavian Political Studies, West European Politics, as well as in French and Italian leading political science journals. He is the co-author of Regulatory Quality in
Europe (Manchester University Press, 2007) and has authored and edited other 10 books and special issues of political science journals.

**Claire A. Dunlop** is senior lecturer of Political Science at the University of Exeter, Department of Politics. She has recently completed a research project concerning learning and epistemic communities in agricultural disease control policy in the UK sponsored by the British Academy and is particularly interested in the use of theories and findings from the education literature on learning into political science. Claire’s teaching and research interests lie in theories of public policy generally and specifically, the politics of expertise, science and public policy, cognitive theories of decision-making and risk regulation. She has recently published in Journal of European Public Policy, Policy Studies, Policy Sciences, Public Policy and Administration and Science and Public Policy.

**Fabrizio Gilardi** is associate professor of public policy at the Department of Political Science, University of Zurich, Switzerland. His teaching and research interests include regulation, comparative political economy, political delegation, policy diffusion, and methodology. His work has been published in journals such as Comparative Political Studies, the Journal of European Public Policy, and the Journal of Theoretical Politics, among others. He is also the author of a book on independent regulatory agencies in Europe (Edward Elgar, 2008), and the co-editor of a volume on delegation in contemporary democracies (Routledge, 2006).

**References**


