1. An Outline of the Topic:

Public policies are the result of efforts made by governments to alter aspects of their own or social behaviour in order to carry out some end or purpose and are comprised of complex arrangements of policy goals and policy means. In this view policy design involves the effort to more or less systematically develop efficient and effective policies through the application of knowledge about policy means gained from experience, and reason, to the development and adoption of courses of action that are likely to succeed in attaining their desired goals or aims within specific policy contexts (Bobrow and Dryzek 1987; Bobrow 2006; Montpetit 2003).

As Linder and Peters (1991) argued, policy design can be thought of as a spatial activity. That is, as:

*a systematic activity composed of a series of choices . . . design solutions, then, will correspond to a set of possible locations in a design space . . . this construction emphasizes not only the potential for generating new mixtures of conventional solutions, but also the importance of giving careful attention to tradeoffs among design criteria when considering instrument choices.*

That is, designing successful policies requires thinking about policy-making in such a way as to fully take into account the dual purposes – substantive and procedural – which polices can serve and the nature of the multiple levels of policy elements or components which make up a typical policy: that is, to understand the “design space” (Hillier, Musgrove and O’Sullivan 1972; Hillier and Leaman 1974; Gero 1990) or context in which policy formulators and decision-makers work.
This is significant because the ends and purposes attempted to be attained through such designs are multifarious and wide-ranging and different policies can be more or less systematically designed. That is, not all policies are “designed” in the sense set out above and can rather evolve through less rational processes such as political bargaining or have their content informed by activities such as self-interested lobbying rather than disinterested analysis. And exactly what constitutes a design, what makes one successful and what makes one design better than other are important questions Attempts to understand the basic conditions for design (vs non-design) and to answer the questions posed above have animated design studies and research in the policy sciences over the past half century. This workshop addresses the significance of contextual and other factors involved in policy-making and instrument choices and their impact in terms of creating propitious or inauspicious circumstances for design efforts.

That is, the exact processes through which policy designs emerge and are articulated vary greatly by jurisdiction and sector, and appear to reflect factors such as the great differences, and nuances, that exist between different forms of government – from military regimes to liberal democracies and within each type – as well as the particular configuration of issues, actors and problems various governments, of whatever type, face in particular areas or sectors of activity – such as health or education policy, industrial policy, transportation or energy policy, social policy and many others (Ingraham 1987; Howlett, Ramesh and Perl 2009).

In some circumstances, it can be expected that policy decisions will be more highly contingent and “irrational” than others, that is, driven by situational logics and opportunism rather than careful deliberation and assessment. (Cohen et al. 1979; Dryzek 1983; Kingdon 1984; Eijlander 2005; Franchino and Hoyland 2009). This high level of contingency in some decision-making contexts has led some critics and observers of policy design efforts to suggest that policies cannot be “designed” in the sense that a house or a piece of furniture can be (Dryzek and Ripley 1988; deLeon 1988). However, many other scholars disagreed with this assessment. A design orientation focusing on rational instrument decisions engendered a large literature in the 1980s and 1990s under the guidance of such prominent figures in the US, Canadian, European and Australian policy studies community such as Lester Salamon, Patricia Ingraham, Malcolm Goggin, John Dryzek, Hans Bressers, Helen Ingram and Anne Schneider, G.B. Doern, Stephen Linder and B. Guy Peters, Renate Mayntz, Christopher Hood, Eugene Bardach, Evert Vedung, Peter May, Frans van Nispen and Michael Trebilock, among others.

Another strand in the literature did not ignore the irrational elements of policy-making but argued that formulation and decision-making activities could be analytically or
practically distinguished and divorced from each other. In their many works on the subject in the late 1980s and early 1990s for example, Stephen H. Linder and B. Guy Peters (1988) argued that the actual process of public policy decision-making could, in an analytical sense, be divorced from the abstract concept of policy design, in the same way that an abstract architectural concept can be divorced from its engineering manifestation in theory if not in practice. Such a distinction, they argued, allowed policy design (noun) to be separated conceptually from policy design (verb) and allowed for the development within policy studies of a design orientation even if the ultimate decision on policy content was less overtly rational (Schon 1988, 1992).

After the early 1990s the number of works adopting a design orientation declined (Howlett and Lejano 2013) Although some writings on policy design continued to flourish in specific fields such as economics, energy and environmental studies (see for example, Boonecamp 2006, del Rio 2010a and 2010b), in the fields of public administration and public policy the design orientation was largely replaced by a new emphasis on the study of institutional forms and decentralized governance arrangements. As a result of these processes, for example, many commentators suggested that implementation practices had become more participatory and consultative over the last several decades (Alshuwaikhat and Nkwenti 2002; Arellano-Gault and Vera-Cortes 2005) replacing previous top-down formulation processes dominated by government analysts with more “bottom-up” ones; that is, ones less amenable to design by state elites.

These studies embodied their own notions about what sorts of institutional arrangements and processes constituted desirable and attainable designs and usually treated these as inevitable quasi-automatic processes, therefore requiring only ex-post analysis (Considine 2012; Rhodes 1996; Kooiman 1993 and 2000). Ironically, these studies largely ignored the contextual and potentially irrational elements of policy-making and design. That is, in this literature, policy is typically seen as the outcome of decentralized, democratized processes involving the actions and interests of multiple public and private stakeholders and therefore is less “designed” than “emergent”, but is still “rational” in the sense that “form is expected to follow function” so that policies match their contexts.

These arguments had a serious negative impact on policy design research. If accurate, the idea that changes in governance modes entailed both alterations in the abilities of various state and non-state actors to prevail in policy formulation disputes and decisions, as well as shifts in the choices and types of policy instruments used to implement public policy which are at the core of policy designs and designing (March and Olson, 1984; Offe, 2006; Weaver and Rockman, 1993; Scharpf, 1991), suggested that design was largely functional and automatic. Although “networkization” could just
have been seen as a new contextual design challenge (Agranoff and McGuire 1999), for many authors the alleged weakening of the centrality of the state as an author of policy was accompanied by a waning in interest in the authorship (or design) of policy.

More recently, however, the government-to-governance thinking behind these models has been challenged by studies which revealed the continuing high profile and important role played by governments both in contexts of social “steering” and in more traditional areas of policy activities (Capano 2001; Tollefson et al 2011; Howlett et al 2009). These studies have found that even in ostensibly high-network areas of activity such as social policy and health, governments (or more generally, public institutions) still have the prime responsibility for governing society and choosing governance techniques and policy content although they may choose to modify the way they perform this role if they feel the need to be more effective in dealing with stake-holders, or they wish to avoid paying an excessive political costs for their actions.

Accurately describing and understanding the nature of the policy design „space” or context thus remains a crucial activity for policy designers and students of policy design. Designers must avoid simply advocating “stock” solutions unless this is called for by the limited nature of the space available for new designs (May 1981). Rather they should “consider the range of feasible” options possible in a given circumstance and package these into sets of “competing strategies” to achieve policy goals (May 1981: 236, 238). As David Weimer (1992: 373) has argued, “Instruments, alone or in combination, must be crafted to fit particular substantive, organizational and political contexts”.

Old or new, “Policy Design” has never been the subject of an ECPR workshop. However as a topic and field of research in the policy sciences it has a history dating back over 50 years. In recent years this orientation towards policy studies has received new impetus (Howlett and Lejano 2013) and a renaissance of studies in this orientation has begun. The present workshop will collate these new efforts, consider their relationship with prior work, and outline future research directions and questions.

2. Its Relation to Existing Research:

Policy design as a field of inquiry has had a checkered history. After a promising beginning in the 1970s and 1980s the field languished in the 1990s and 2000s as work in the policy sciences focused on the impact on policy outcomes of meta-changes in society and the international environment. Both globalization and governance studies of the period ignored traditional design concerns in arguing that changes at this level predetermined policy specifications. However more recent work re-asserting the role of governments both at the international and domestic levels has re-vitalized design studies.
Much of the original design literature in the 1960s and 1970s focused attention on "technical" analysis. That is, upon efforts to assess the functional capacities of specific tools. The newer design literature keeps this focus but adds to it the need to also assess contextual factors involved in tool choices and use, especially political ones. While the old design literature recognized that the process of design and instrument selection is made simpler once the fact that some of the elements of public policies remain more amenable to careful thought and deliberate government manipulation than others (Schon 1992; Gero and Kannengiesser nd; Kannengiesser and Gero nd), the new design field is concerned with understanding exactly how instrument choices are constrained by higher-order sets of variables (Baliga and Maskin 2003; Maskin 2008).

Re-focusing on the issue of policy design is a promising way to better understand the processes through which policies are formulated and implemented and see how their content is continuously chosen and developed. From this point of view the "new" policy design wave in public policy is a fruitful way through which different theoretical and empirical streams in political science can join together on a specific strategic research theme related to the nature of policy advice and decision-making dynamics both in theory and practice.

In fact to understand how policy design matters in policy-making means to read from a multi-theoretical perspective on the different stages of the policy-making trying to understand how institutional arrangements, governance modes, institutional behaviors (above all those of governments and parliaments), institutionalized patterns of actors' relations, conflicting policy ideas interact each other in designing the content of agendas, political decisions, implementation strategies.

Seen from this point of view, to call for a renewed focus on policy design means to call for a convergence of those streams of research, both in political science and in public policy, which study how political and policy decisions are made and implemented, that is, in other words, how the policy design space is delimited and fulfilled.

3. Likely Participants:

The idea of the workshop is to extend a general invitation to the many colleagues who work on the topics listed above – from the nature of policy formulation and policy advice to legislative and executive decision-making and policy implementation and others - to come together to help evaluate when (agenda, formulation, implementation) policy design matters, and how (through which factors, mechanisms, dynamics) it matters.

Previous ECPR panel sessions (Bordeaux 2013 and Glasgow 2014) have dealt with aspects of the subject, looking at the design perspective and how it has evolved over
time, and identifying the series of research questions which motivate this workshop. The field is very interesting for many policy-oriented political scientists but that there is the necessity to better address and consolidate debate and research. Hence we expect to invite not only policy scholars but also those political scientists who are involved in studying: how political institutions (governments and parliaments) decide on the policy content; how specific political actors (above all political parties and leaders) influence the policy design in each policy stage; and how institutional arrangements can delimit the design space.

4. Type of Papers:

The workshop would include both theoretical treatments relating to policy design as well as empirical studies assessing design efforts in practice. We welcome theoretical studies capable to enlighten the dynamics through which policy are designed as well empirical papers with a significant comparative perspective.

5. Funding:

Most participants will be self-funded from their home institutions.

6. Biographical note:

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7. References


