APPLICATION FORM FOR PROSPECTIVE WORKSHOP DIRECTORS

Title of proposed workshop:
The determinants of policy change: advancing the debate

Abstract of proposed workshop. Maximum of 250 words (suitable for publication in the academic programme leaflet and on the ECPR web site):
The task of explaining exactly how and why public policies change, remains a difficult question for scholars in the political science and public policy fields. The underlying processes, sequences of events or outputs that reveal these changes are very difficult to explain. In order to understand how policies change, political scientists – like all other social scientists involved in explaining social change – have borrowed several concepts and theories from other academic areas (ranging from psychology to palaeontology).

Many studies of policy change, however, continue to show a remarkable blindness when it comes to such epistemological and methodological premises, and provide an equally remarkable variety of theories and frameworks. Such theoretical diversity often encourages the compartmentalization of perspectives which fail to enrich each other, and too often it produces isolated, incomparable forms of research. Many theoretical and empirical problems in the study of policy change need to be assessed and resolved. For example, there is considerable debate over the revolutionary or evolutionary nature of policy change, over which levels of abstraction are best suited to the analysis of policy change, and over the classification of types of policy change. Then there is the unresolved dilemma of the scope and timing of change: when can any given change be considered fundamental or marginal? How does time influence the scope of change? And over what time period must a study be conducted in order to discern actual policy dynamics? There are also a number of substantially different views regarding the drivers of change (ideas, interests, political institutions, political and policy actors, networks, socio-economic conditions, etc.) and their forms of interaction (can they be ordered in a sequence or a causal chain capable of substantiating a general theory of change, or does the theoretical framework have to be adjusted to the specific type of change and level of abstraction?). The present workshop aims to contribute to the establishment of some order in this field, and at the same time to contribute towards existing research into policy change. We particularly welcome theoretical and methodological papers capable of providing an innovative contribution towards such questions. We expect empirical papers to be strongly theory-laden.

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1. Outline of the topic and its relation to existing research

1.1. The epistemological pillars and questions

To explain change is one of the most fascinating challenges for any scientific enterprise. To explain social, political and policy changes, the social sciences (sociology, economics, political science, organization theory, public policy, public administration and management, and others) have borrowed theories, concepts and metaphors from other disciplines, especially from biology, psychology, system theory and palaeontology (see Gersick 1991; Eldridge and Gould 1972).

The different conceptualizations of change can be reduced to four general theoretical perspectives: cyclical, dialectic, linear (evolutionary) and teleological (Hernes 1976; Van de Ven and Poole 1995). However, social scientists very often endorse a specific perspective without being aware of the consequences of this adoption for research design, operationalization and choice of methodology (Abbott 1988, 1990). In fact the acceptance of one of the four epistemological perspectives strongly constrains the design of theoretical frameworks and methods used to explain and investigate policy change. For example, as political science and public policy studies show:

a. the emphasis placed on **structure vs. agency** in explaining patterns of policy change affects the nature of the variables sought and the models constructed to explain change. If structure prevails, then the analysis tends to be rigidly deterministic; if agency prevails the process is often conceived of as too open to alteration and it is very difficult to design convincing ex-ante hypotheses. The solution chosen to this antinomy also often determines the choice of the level of analysis and type of change analyzed (Knill and Lenschow 2001);

b. the choice of a focus upon **endogenous vs. exogenous variables** in the search for causal factors is heavily influenced by the model of change adopted or endorsed. Cyclical and linear models of change tend to focus on structural continuities which
prevent internal factors from altering an homeostatic equilibrium and look for exogenous variables to explain change. By contrast, dialectical and other ‘learning’ models tend to focus on endogenous variables (La Porte 1975; Sabatier 1988);

c. the general dichotomy of “revolution vs. evolution” often assumed to underlie all change, affects all aspects of the methods adopted to understand the phenomenon. Assumptions of incrementality vs the possibility of large-scale change affect choices of methods and time periods used to analyze change, among others (Kuhn 1962, Lindblom 1977; Lustick 1980; Hayes 1992);

d. The focus on output vs process as the dependent variable to be analyzed also affects all aspects of the study to be undertaken such as whether quantitative or qualitative data or the pursuit of a-historical or historical modes of inquiry will be used (Birkland 2001).

To gain epistemological awareness of the meta-theoretical decisions to be made in the analysis of policy change is the first step towards clarifying the theoretical challenge constituted by its explanation in the policy sciences. We need to be conscious of the assumptions and implications of each theoretical perspective, and this Workshop is firstly designed to clarify concepts, relationships, the object of analysis and theories, and to assess new theoretical solutions put forward by policy scholars in recent years. It should be pointed out that the important problem of the determinants of policy change has never been the subject of an ECPR workshop before now. Although public policies have been treated in some of the workshops featured in recent editions of the ECPR- Joint Sessions (also thanks to the leadership of the Standing Group on Theoretical Perspectives in Policy Analysis), the core of our proposal –i.e. to gain a deeper understanding of the various theories and concepts employed to explain policy change - has not been the “special topic” of any workshop for at least the last ten editions of the Joint Sessions.

1.2. The solutions offered by existing research

At the present time in the policy sciences, the most common models of policy change are linear-teleological—“path dependent” narratology (Pierson 2000; Mahoney 2000; Liebowitz and Margolis 1995; Abbott 1992; Roe 1994; Buthe 2002; Ospina 2005; Czarniawska 2004), linear stepped evolutionary “punctuated equilibrium” or ‘threshold” models (Wood and Doan 2003; True 2000; Baumgartner and Jones 2002; True, Jones and Baumgartner, 1999), and
linear – (moderately) dialectic models such as the Advocacy Coalition Framework (Sabatier and Jenkins Smith 1993).

These hybrid models, like the general models set out above, contain assumptions and presuppositions which influence methodological choices and bias investigations of policy dynamics in specific ways. Focusing on the three types of neo-institutionalism common in contemporary political science, for example (Hall and Taylor 1996), it can be shown that historical-institutionalist approaches create a strong polarization between incrementalism and path-dependence and revolutionary or punctuated equilibrium models of paradigm change. Rational-institutionalist approaches, on the other hand, are usually incrementalist and deterministic while sociological-institutionalism, by privileging the logic of appropriateness, is path-dependent and structurally incrementalist and favours narrative methods of analysis.

Moreover, several key features of the currently most prominent models remain to be developed (Kay 2005; Mortenson 2005). These include some very basic issues such as the unit of analysis to be studied and the length of time most appropriate to the study of policy dynamics (Sabatier 1993; Cashore and Howlett 2006). Beyond these important, but basic, questions, there are also questions relating to the drivers of change – from ideas to actors (Capano 2003; Hall 1990) – and, most recently, to the question of the generalizability of any general model of policy change (Mortenson 2005; Howlett and Rayner 2006).

2. The Aims of the Workshop

This workshop will address all of these issues and will look at the literature in the field whilst doing so. Key questions to be examined include the following:

a. what are the different levels of abstraction at which policy change can be conceptualized and analyzed? Moreover, what are the theoretical and methodological implications of choosing a specific level of abstraction?

b. how can policy change be operationalized? (changes in values, strategies, policy instruments, sectorial change, systemic change and so on);

c. how can the scope of policy change be assessed and measured? (in other words: how, when and with respect to what, can we define a policy change as being either incremental or radical?);

d. what are the essential drivers influencing the different kinds of policy change, and above all, what are their interactions? There may be several different types of drivers
of policy change: ideas, interests, nature of policy issues, policy and political actors, institutions, socio-economic conditions, public opinion, and so on. What understanding can we get of the dynamics and content of change, if we favour one of them or arrange them in a given sequence?

e. how much “time” is essential in influencing the features of the process (revolutionary/evolutionary) and of the outcome (revolutionary/evolutionary)?

f. is it really possible to theorize and design a single, general, comprehensive model of policy change? If so, what intrinsic characteristics should such a model have? If not, what possible approaches can be adopted in trying to explain policy change?

3. 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, EU, US, and National public policy, and to those interested in improving their theoretical grasp of policy analysis. 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. We also wish to bring together both North American and European researchers. We strongly expect the participation of scholars belonging to different theoretical and methodological schools of thought (historical institutionalist, rational-choice, post-positivist policy analysis, constructivism, etc.). What we would like to receive are mainly innovative theoretical, methodological, and empirical papers focusing on the specific questions raised in Point 2 above. Theoretical and methodological papers are expected to be strongly committed to advancing the current state of literature: we expect to provide more suitable solutions to the questions raised in Point 2, ones that are capable of being empirically tested. Empirical papers must advance the theoretical, conceptual and methodological debate rather than simply providing (additional) descriptive cases. Empirical papers capable of shining further light on some of the questions raised in Point 2, by comparing different policies or different countries, would be particularly welcome.
4. Funding

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

References


Biographical Notes

Giliberto CAPANO is Professor of Political Science and Public Policy at Dipartimento di Organizzazione e Sistema Politico, University of Bologna. Currently he is also Dean of the II Faculty of Political Science of the University of Bologna (located in the Forlì campus). He is member of the Steering Committee of the ECPR Standing Group on Theoretical Perspectives in Policy Analysis and is the organizer and co-director of the Ecpr- European Summer School in Policy Analysis. He has been the co-editor of the Rivista Italiana di Politiche Pubbliche (Italian Public Policy Journal). His main research interests are focused on theories of public policy, higher education policy, legislative behaviour, and public administration. In Italian he has published five monographs and edited four books. In English his work has been published in several book chapters and in journals as Higher Education, Journal of Legislative Studies, Public Administration, Southern Europe Society and Politics.