The Policy Agendas Project: a Review

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In contrast to the study of elections, parties and political institutions, public policy has tended to lack integrated research programmes, with common theories, questions, data, methods and applications outside the experience of one country. Not that political science has ever had dominant or unchanging paradigms, even in the much-satirized 1960s; but public policy has not yet produced one like the comparative study of electoral systems, for example, where scholars have created comparable data sources and work closely in teams across countries. The typical mode of study owes much to the nature of policy-making itself, which encompasses a diverse set of activities, and where the boundaries between policy formulation, decision-making and implementation are unclear. The sheer difficulty of defining exactly what is public policy can act as bar to systematic study and place obstacles to the reliable collection of data and the development of common measures, especially quantitative ones.   Public policy tends to be often specific to country contexts, dependent on the sets of institutions and practices in place; but it is often not as well defined as the classic units of political behaviour, such as voting and participation. These features encourage specialization and detailed case studies. Students of public policy are also a varied group of scholars ranging from sectoral specialists, practitioners of different disciplines and country experts, which encourages a pleasing diversity, but again can limit common frameworks. Particularist methodologies, such as ethnomethodology, have been supportive of research into the detail and contexts

rather than the investigation of common patterns. So too the post-positivists, popular since the early 1990s, encourage rejection of so-called positivist research activities.

Of course, there are examples of the quantitative measurement of policy. One is the coding of party manifestos according to their content (Budge et al 2001). Though this exercise is an impressive data collection exercise and analytical achievement, it speaks to the literature on party competition rather than decision-making and implementation, though that need not be the case (e.g. Budge and Hofferbert 1990; Hofferbert and Budge 1992). Then there has been an extensive study of policy outcomes across nations (Wilensky 2002). The study of policy advocacy coalitions has also generated large datasets, mainly on in the USA (e.g. Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). Budgets is a perennial topic, which is analysed according to function (Rose and Davies 1993, Soroka and Wlezien 2005). But such studies usually depend on classification of budgets within national systems.

Since the mid-1990s, a more ambitious research programme has gathered momentum. It seeks to correct for the lack of detailed information about the content of policy agendas in the United States of America. The Policy Agendas Project has coded the content of the US policy process since 1900 according to a common scheme. It extends beyond the usual aim to generate information for a single project, where the datasets are rarely used again once the research has finished. It has created a massive publicly-available accessible dataset, with a long enough time series that can satisfy most statisticians' need for larger numbers. The next stage in this research programme is the application of the

coding system to other nation states and arenas, such as the European Union or state and local governments. A valid application of a common categorisation of the content of policies and the measurement of the frequency of their occurrence in policy documents allow comparisons across time, sector and across nation states, which covers the three main kinds of variations in public policy outputs. Such an expansion of data leads the research questions away from concerns about the nature of USA politics to more universal themes in public policy.

The relatively youthful age of the research programme at present permits a reflection and stock-take, both addressing the achievements of the project so far and its more recent foray into the comparative arena, which is also the subject of this comparative volume. In both looking backwards and forwards, the question remains whether the nature of public policy permits valid generalizations across many sets of activities and national contexts, and whether the particularist character of the policy process defies schemes of universal classification, disguising the contingent and protean nature of public decision-making. Moreover, can a system of classification exist independently of the context that created it? As the Policy Agendas Project system of classifying public policy originates from the US, does it carry its assumptions, institutional practices and norms, making descriptions and data from other national systems misrepresentations of their actual policy content? To answer this question, this review starts from the beginning and traces the evolution of the project to its current state.

The Origins: Agendas and Instability in American Politics

Baumgartner and Jones's *Agendas and Instability in American Politics* is the starting

place for the Policy Agendas Project. This book – a classic of political science and

public policy – seeks to answer one of the most important questions about public policy

in the USA – is the political system characterized by a stifling stability of decision-

making or is there the potential for policy change and the intrusion of new groups and

public opinion?   By examining the character of agendas in various policy sectors, such as

urban policy and nuclear power, the authors find that the policy process is indeed

characterised both by stability and change. The art of the policy analyst is to understand

the dynamics, in particular the interaction between forces for agenda change and

institutional constraints acting upon it. The novelty of the book is the claim that the very

institutions that slow down agenda change can at certain times accelerate it also.

Baumgartner and Jones collected longitudinal data according to policy topic, such as

numbers of regulations, the frequency and tone of congressional hearings, articles in the

print media, and opinion polls. They used each data source to map out the agenda and

the key relationships in the selected policy sector, which form the core chapters of the

book. These procedures were the first steps on a systematic and comprehensive data

collection exercise. Even though each topic made different demands on the data (1993:

254), there were similar coding procedures for their policy areas - pesticides, smoking

and tobacco, alcohol, drugs, urban affairs, nuclear power, automobile transportation

policy and child abuse.

After *Agendas and Instability in American Politics*, and related papers (Jones and

Baumgartner 1991, Jones et al 1993), the authors 'thought the ideas that we initially

developed there could be expanded into a more robust understanding of decision-making

... Our initial efforts to assess policy change quantitatively were crude, but we knew that

in theory at least they surpassed the then-current focus on budget outlays or counts of

enforcement activities' (Baumgartner and Jones 2002, vii). With a National Science

Foundation grant, supplemented by local sources of funding, and helped by an army of

coders, PhD students and academic collaborators, they started on their ambitious project

of coding the agenda of US government according to topic, covering Congressional

budgets, Congressional hearings, Congressional Quarterly (CQ) Almanac Stories,

Presidential executive orders, the New York Times, public opinion, and public laws. The

researchers developed the Topic Codebook

(http://www.policyagendas.org/codebooks/topicindex.html), which enabled them to

allocate 19 major codes on major aspects of public policy, such as the economy,

education and so on, and sub-codes within these categories, which now reach 225. They

expended considerable effort to make the data set reliable, which involved extensive

supervision of the coders and cross-checking of their work. There are numerous

problems that had to be resolved, such as ensuring that budget categories remain

consistent over time; but what allowed the research to proceed was the flexibility in the

way in which codes could be added and modified (see Baumgartner et al 1998 for a full

account of the methodological issues). It is a truly massive dataset, for example

containing 70,000 Congressional hearings and 400,000 bills coded according to policy

content. It is a major resource for scholars, students and practitioners. It is still

developing as new years appear and the researchers agree refinements to the codebook, the last one occurring in April 2005.

Jones, Baumgartner and other scholars used the data from the project to test the punctuated equilibrium model, first on budgets (e.g. Jones et al 1997, 1998). In time, these budgets and the rest of the data were deployed for the main test of punctuations, the analysis of frequency distribution of bands of per cent changes in policy interest or activity, which has informed a series of publications (Baumgartner 2006, Jones 1996, Jones et al 2003, Jones and Baumgartner 2005a b). To create a law-like proposition, the test needs the large number of cases, which the project provides. In addition to this important seam of work, the Policy Agendas Project has generated more general information and tests about the workings of US politics, about how agendas are shaped and are linked to punctuations, such as Jones et al's (2000) study of the evolution of Congressional jurisdictions. Most of all, the chapters in Baumgartner and Jones' (2002) edited volume showcase the project, with essays on telecommunications (MacLoed 2002), immigration (Hunt 2002), health care (Hardin 2002), science and technology (Feeley 2002), national security (True 2002); general surveys of the policy agenda (Talbert and Potoski 2002), the use of omnibus legislation (Krutz 2002), detailed studies of Congressional committees (Adler 2002), policy windows in health care policy (Wilkerson et al 2002), the agendas of Congress and the Supreme court (Baumgartner and Gold 2002). The publications using the dataset continue to grow in number, such as Sulkin's (2005) analysis of 'issue uptake' in Congress, looking at the link between the content of Congressional campaigns and the policy agenda, and Jones and Baumgartner's

(2004) study of representation, the link between public opinion and the content of policies. There are a number of book manuscripts in progress, which will appear in 2006 and 2007, and papers under review.

The Comparative Challenge

There is no doubt that the Policy Agendas Project is on the way to becoming a mature research programme. There is basic agreement on the methodology and measures, and scholars want to use the data to solve a range of substantive problems. One natural extension is to examine the content of policies outside the US to generate hypotheses about the nature of policy-making in different institutional and cultural contexts. At first, US ideas influenced research on policy punctuations applied to existing categories of data, such as the functional categories of budgets in the UK (John and Margetts 2003) and local budgets in Denmark (Mortenson 2005). While these studies have reliable categories of budget heads, and verify the punctuated equilibrium model, they do not permit comparative analysis of the content of the policies. So the next stage becomes the coding of non-USA policy arenas with the topics codeframe, projects that have started at various times (see

http://polisci.la.psu.edu/faculty/Baumgartner/Comp_Agendas_Files/Comparative_Agendas_Projects.htm for a summary). Many of these researchers gathered at a conference in Aarhus in July 2005, and some of their papers appear in this edited volume. The introduction and the chapters themselves are the best place to read about their work; what is of interest here is in the validity of the coding scheme when applied outside the USA.

In the main researchers seek to carry out a straight application of the topics codeframe to a national system, which the scholars in France, Canada and Denmark have been coming to terms with.[1] Thus the researcher can find a code and subcode that corresponds to the US one, and either apply it directly or create a new codebook, which has the same structure, but contains different examples. In the main, researchers find that the codeframe works, but they have to acknowledge there are certain aspects of the USA institutional system have no parallel in other countries. The legislative system is no where as near as developed as it is in the USA, so certain procedures defined as legislative in the USA appear in executive policy making elsewhere. There are also sets of institutional categories, which exist only in non-US countries, such as Queen's speeches, parliamentary questions, minutes of cabinet meetings, for example, though many of these are functionally equivalent. A major difference for policy is the different set of state activities, reflecting less well-developed welfare states, means that some codes are incomprehensible to a non-US audience. For example, countries that have universal welfare systems have no need of the sub code on comprehensive health reform, because their policy-makers would be seeking to change health systems already in existence, but there is no code for matters that pertain to a nationalized health care system. In practice, coders tend to create new categories for their own system, such Denmark's category relating to issues of the Danish National Church and creating the topic fisheries because it is of particular salience in Denmark.

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[1]. Their application also the central feature of the author's project, 'The Policy Priorities of UK Governments: a Content Analysis of King's and Queen's speeches, 1945-2005', funded by the British Academy.

It is also true that certain topics exist because of particular aspects of the US: the large tracts of open spaces and native populations, such as species and forest protection, and the major topic code given to Public Lands and Water Management, though this is more a question of degree of attention, and researchers may be interested in seeing how much attention there is to generic policy issues with ones that come from country particularities.   Another issue is that the codes have developed and specialized because of the attention they get in the US. Thus the definition of foreign affairs is in terms of relationships that are important for the United States, but which are less important elsewhere, so Latin America get its sub-code as does the Panama and other canals, whereas Western Europe and the 'Common Market' only get one. Then the District of Columbia gets a separate code.   But it is also possible to get too concerned about these distinctions because the coder can usually allocate a code, seeking to locate the functional equivalent for policies and institutions, which is tribute to the universal nature of policy problems in western countries. If all the researchers had started from scratch, it might have been better to have started from a more non-USA focused starting point, but the coding scheme in existence does not cause problems in most cases. In fact, usually researchers can allocate a code and cases where it is impossible to do so are rare.

One potentially troubling issue comes from the process of placing something new on the agenda into the policy codes. An example is the ministerial initiative in the UK of anti-social behaviour, which is about not strictly criminal, but unattractive and intimidating behaviour. There is no place for it in the scheme, so it gets coded under 'other'; but there is a temptation to put it into Juvenile Crime and the Juvenile Justice System sub-code.

New codes can be found, but of course too many would undermine the simplicity of the scheme. So it is possible that the coding scheme works against picking up changes? If this were true, it would be ironic outcomes as one of the routes of agenda change is through the redefinition and expansion of policy agendas. It may be the case that the redefinition of policy fields has expanded in recent years, such as the re-classification of issues as environmental, such as energy and agriculture, as global environmental problems increase. The topics codebook may find it hard to capture the multidimensional character of many modern policy issues, though the cross-checking by the coders who work independently guards against this tendency.

Some of these issues appear when there is not such a straight-forward mapping of the coding scheme. The Belgian project (see Walgrave et al 2006, this issue) emerged independently out of an interest in the media and politics. Their coding scheme was different, with fewer categories, which involved a considerable re-gigging of the codes to make them compatible with the US ones, and much of the data cannot be made comparable. At one level, that there cannot be an exact read across in terms of the codes does not matter as the researchers can still ask interesting questions, such as dynamics of change and the spread of attention across topics.

The Belgian case raises the issue as whether the coding schemes reflect random differences between researchers: would the Belgians have created their scheme in the US and what would have Baumgartner and Jones have done had they started in Belgium? The flexibility in the creation of the codes leads to a natural diversity - no two teams,

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without prior information, would code policy documents in the same way. There are indeed different ways of chopping up the policy space; but these are limited because of the more frequently occurring policy topics that appear in each country, such as agriculture, energy and so on. To an extent – and this is a constructivist point – what gets defined as a particular policy topic may be to do with a dominant value system, e.g. a productivist one that defined food issues in an agricultural ministry for example, but this type of dressing is easy to spot and to allocate the proper code.

The final application is to institutional systems that are very different to the national level. The European Union is defined by its limited formal policy competencies, which means that there is disproportionate amount of effort directed to a few policy areas, such as agriculture and regional policy. But at the same time the very attention of the European Union to particular topics means that it must disguise its more general policy activity under the cover of these powers, which enhances the multidimensional nature of policy-making. For this reason the European Union is the toughest test for the Policy Agendas Project. If the codeframe can apply to such an unusual policy-making system, then researchers may have more confidence its ability to represent policy agendas at the national level. It is a tribute to Prince's (2005) project on EU environmental and health policy that he has found a way through these difficulties to produce a valid revision to the codeframe by revising the topic codes and adding more coding rules, such as caution when coding for his core topics.

With these lessons, there is no reason why the codeframe cannot apply to other levels of government such as to the US state level, such as the Pennsylvania Policy Agendas research. Whether it can survive further expansions, such as to international organizations, such as the United Nations, or to other countries outside the highly specialized and expert policy world of mature developed countries, is a matter for empirical investigation.

Conclusion

The Policy Agendas Project is a major research programme, which applies to the core problems in comparative public politics and policy. Given the large size of the datasets, this is a major achievement in US public policy, and which has the potential to develop into a major resource and source of research across European and North American systems. It is a model of its kind.

This review has mapped out the background and development of the project, with the aim of commenting on the method and validity of the coding exercise. It was important to invoke the incubus of particularism – in the form of the social construction of policy ideas and the alleged pre-dominance of contextual understandings – because it is an important dimension to the more general study of public policy. It is a natural criticism many policy scholars may like to make. Whilst the topic codes have examples and categories that identify it with US policy-making and its institutional framework, that is merely an accident of history (like the 1 for the US in international telephone dialing

codes or lack of a country suffix in e-mail addresses). The coding system is applicable to

any arena that makes policy, and can be a measure that allows scholars to compare

countries. With a greater understanding of the differences as well as the similarities

across nation states, researchers can start to answer the central questions in comparative

politics: why are political solutions and outcomes different in countries that share many

background problems, and what is the impact of different political institutions on policy

choices? With answers to these questions, more tests of the impact of institutions on

policy punctuations, the Policy Agendas Project is truly an integrated research

programme.

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