



Comparative policy agendas: a review essay

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Jonathan Drew

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BOOK REVIEW



Comparative policy agendas: a review essay

Jonathan Drew 

School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia

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Comparative policy agendas: theory, tools, data, by Frank R. Baumgartner, Christian Breunig, and Grossman Emiliano, Oxford, OUP Oxford, 2019, 405 pp., AU\$118.74 (hbk), ISBN: 978-0-19883-533-2

ABSTRACT

The two books that are investigated in this review essay consider new ways to explain policy processes by focusing on a spectrum of methodological approaches, theories, time periods and political systems. The first book examined investigates policy change in Australia and considers for the first time how relevant the Policy Agendas Project (PAP) is for the Australian political system. A recent contribution to the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP), the second book reviewed is a collection of comparative studies applying different methodologies and theories to analyse CAP datasets with the view to exploring how policy changes in a variety of political systems. Together these books showcase the best of PAP/CAP's qualities to provide a common platform for cross-comparative policy change studies and standalone country-specific studies. These books are also an indispensable resource for Australian political scientists interested in the unique policy change dynamics in Australia.

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For some time now, a central problem with which political science has been concerned is how to analyse policy change (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Béland 2009; Hall 1993; Heijden and Kuhlmann 2017; Mahoney and Thelen 2010). This problem stems from the plurality of typologies of policy change that an analytic model must explain (Heijden and Kuhlmann 2017). Policy *behaves* very differently in the gridlocked Federalist US political system (Baumgartner, Green-Pedersen, and Jones 2008) as opposed to the Australian system in which federalist and parliamentary elements have been integrated (Althaus, Bridgman, and Davis 2012). The books reviewed in this essay consider this problem with a focus on Australian and cross-country comparative studies. There is much in these books that would appeal to Australian political scientists, including

important findings about Australia's unique policy change dynamics as well as a helpful discussion about updates to the latest Australian CAP datasets for those interested in undertaking research in this space.

This difficulty to construct a framework that can explain the different ways policy changes between political systems and nation states has led theorists to one of three claims. The first claim (e.g. punctuated equilibrium) is that a theoretical model is highly relevant for some but not necessarily all nation states (Baumgartner, Green-Pedersen, and Jones 2008, 6–8). The second claim (e.g. agency-focused historical institutionalism) is that more or less all instances of change are captured by the analytic model (Mahoney and Thelen 2010), albeit critics highlight the need of scholars to resort to concept stretching or concept proliferation to capture outlier observations of change which this model cannot explain (Heijden and Kuhlmann 2017). A third perspective is that the many different levels on which change can occur – direction, speed, end of change and means (Cashore and Howlett 2007, 537; Durant and Diehl 1989, 195; Hall 1993; Hall 2013) – suggests that while one model is better tailored to explain one mode of change, another model is suited to explain yet a different mode (van der Heijden 2013, 68).

The first and third claims are the most empirically viable for comparative studies where a theory must be sensitive to a spectrum of political systems and contexts. While the first claim made by punctuated equilibrium has traditionally been the flagship theoretical framework of the Policy Agendas Project (PAP), it has largely lost credibility in the literature by its limited capacity to explain change outside of the US (Baumgartner, Green-Pedersen, and Jones 2008; Dowding, Hindmoor, and Martin 2016). It has further been argued that the theory is misleading by its implication that policy change oscillates between times of stable equilibrium and times of sudden radical change, but in praxis this equilibrium is better described as a state of constant change with observed 'variation in the rate of that [constant] change' (Dowding and Martin 2017, 35). In this way, punctuated equilibrium (and other grand theories) are sidelined by some PAP scholars (Dowding and Martin 2017), and there is an increasing preference to draw upon a variety of theories to understand a standalone instance of change under investigation (Baumgartner, Breunig, and Grossman 2019).

PAP has recently evolved into the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) with a special focus on using PAP data for cross-national comparative studies. PAP/CAP are both empirically and comparatively impressive and have contributed much to institutional theory and the broader discourse on policy change (Baumgartner, Green-Pedersen, and Jones 2008; Baumgartner and Jones 1993). Using agenda attention as its unit of analysis, PAP/CAP assign legislative, budgetary and judicial agenda items (alongside items in the media and public opinion) to 255 minor codes (e.g. military readiness, health insurance and unemployment), nested within their respective 19 major codes (e.g. defence, health, macroeconomics) (Dowding and Martin 2017, 4, 5). While PAP began in the US, scholars in many other countries have constructed datasets according to the PAP coding scheme (e.g. Belgium, Denmark, Canada, France, Australia, the UK and others), which has given rise to exciting comparative studies (Baumgartner, Green-Pedersen, and Jones 2008).

By focusing on a spectrum of methodological approaches, theories, time periods and political systems, the two books that are investigated in this review essay consider new ways to explain policy processes. Concerned with policy change predominantly in Australia, the first book examines the relevance of PAP for the Australian political system. The second book reviewed is a recent contribution to CAP and embodies a collection of

comparative studies that each consider how policy changes in a spectrum of political systems by consulting a range of methodologies and theoretical approaches. Eclectic is a fitting description of the breadth of theories and topics explored in these books. They both exhibit the ability to provide deeper analysis of a single political system as well as sophisticated comparative studies.

Policy change in Australia

Dowding and Martin's book, *Policy Agendas in Australia*, considers the relevance of the Policy Agendas Project theory and methodology for Australia. They do this by constructing and analysing an impressive new Australian dataset coded according to the PAP scheme (1, 2). The raison d'être of this book is to examine levels of attention on the Australian government agenda with reference to the role that attention given to issues in the media, public opinion, Governor General speeches and opposition questions during Parliamentary question time have to play (1). Does public opinion influence legislative agenda attention or does the media have greater determinative power to force an issue onto this agenda (1)? The large-N PAP approach makes it possible to explore these and other questions in a way that has not been done before in Australia (2). The ability to analyse different levels of government attention to different issues over time is a unique strength of PAP (1). However, Dowding and Martin build upon this strength by partnering the conventional large-N analysis for which PAP is well known with qualitative case study analysis (2). A stimulating read, this book unearths new insights into the way agenda attention changes in Australia (1, 2).

Chapter 2 deals with the theory and methodology used to analyse agenda attention over time. As the authors acknowledge, there is an abundance of theory currently available that explains how, when, why and where policy changes (15). These range from grand theories to middle range theories and while some aim to explain different typologies of the policy process, others are mutually exclusive (15). While there is a role for studies that investigate specific typologies of policy change like this, PAP provides a unique opportunity to analyse the policy process from a broader perspective (16).

PAP has many strengths, but the uninitiated need to be very clear about what it actually measures (18). The unit of analysis, agenda attention given to different issues in different policy areas, is capable of uncovering much about policy processes, but it does not and is unable to measure the effect of policy on individuals in society (18). It is acknowledged that a correlation exists between agenda attention and policy impact (20, 21). The authors are very careful, however, to emphasise that correlation is not causality here (23). The advantages in using PAP to analyse structural and causal changes in the underlying policy process nevertheless makes this a worthwhile compromise.

A significant contribution of this book is to highlight the importance of turning points. On the one hand, the authors define punctuations as 'a larger than normal increase in change in attention (or expenditure)' (37). On the other hand, turning points are not only marked by a change in attention that is higher than the normal rate of change, but the return to a normal rate of change following a turning point is higher than the normal rate of change before the turning point (40). Understanding turning points is more meaningful than understanding punctuations because the former is followed by lasting, structural change, whereas the latter is at best momentary radical change (40) and at worst 'artefacts of a statistical technique' (John et al. 2013). For those who are

interested in considering what turning points might look like in praxis, noteworthy examples are provided in chapter 5 such as the election of the Whitlam government. For those interested, examination of the Whitlam government as a 'turning point' has received attention elsewhere in the literature (Dowding et al. 2010).

The authors draw on common theories used to explain policy change – path dependence, slip-stick dynamics, framing, bounded rationality, policy entrepreneurs and venue shopping, party effects, and crisis and attention cycles – but a theory with which scholarship is less familiar is randomness (41–50). Randomness is put forward as a baseline theory suitable for explaining certain instances of agenda attention change to which other theories can be attached (41). It is particularly suited to explaining punctuated change arising from crises (41). They give an example of how one punctuation arising from a defence related crisis may be explained by a certain theory and a different punctuation arising from an environmental related crisis may be explained by yet another theory, but the only way to explain the occurrence of both punctuations is randomness (41).

A useful distinction that is mentioned here is the identification of tokens or types, a 'token' being a certain class nested in a 'type', the larger category (41). Kevin Rudd is underlined as a fitting example of a token (41). Rudd's personality and the circumstances under which he became Prime Minister are a token example of what is required to become Prime Minister (42). These qualities may be unhelpful or helpful for other individuals to become Prime Minister (42). Therefore, while it may appear that many token examples can be used to explain the type, the type itself can ultimately only be explained by randomness (42).

Chapter 4 provides a snapshot of the Australian political system for the uninitiated (59, 60). While Dowding and Martin acknowledge that this chapter will be most useful to readers unfamiliar with Australian institutions and politics (60), its value for students of Australian politics should not be underestimated. It would both make a valuable complement to an elementary subject on Australian politics as well as being a useful resource for academics unfamiliar with the implications of Australian social and political life.

Chapters 5–7 commence an analysis of the agendas of formal institutions in Australia. The author's analysis of the Executive and Government agendas in chapter 5 was for me the most memorable. While the Executive agenda varies between country project (e.g. the US project using State of the Union Addresses) (Hearings 2017), the authors use Governor-general speeches containing the policy intentions of government at the beginning of each government term for Australia (88). The Legislative agenda 'is measured by legislation passed by parliament' (88). In this way, the chapter proceeds with a fruitful comparison of attention levels on what the government intended to accomplish and what it actually accomplished over time (88).

Similar studies have been undertaken to assess the difference between what government says it will do and what it actually does (Colomer 2012; Thomson et al. 2017). What distinguishes Dowding and Martin's exercise from others is that it does not analyse instances of government fulfilment of party promises, a topic comprehensively examined by others (Thomson et al. 2017). In a similar vein it does not use party manifesto data to determine policy change stability in light of the number of parties in a political system (Colomer 2012). What it does is measure the difference in attention levels the government committed to an issue at the beginning of government relative to what legislation government actually passes (88).

Many findings are covered in this chapter and are worth reading in depth. Of particular importance for those interested in Australian policy change is how instances of structural change are identified (124). However, the most important of these instances are neither momentary punctuations nor are they turning points, but they are what John et al call 'focused adaptation' (124). John et al explain focused adaptation as being 'when attention to policy areas passes a change point in time, the government enters a new epoch of policy-making whereby attention is unlikely to return to its prior mean, breaking out of an issue attention cycle or pattern of incrementalism. The change is structural, relating to the mean that governs the series, rather than captured in its size, as in the case of punctuations' (John et al. 2013). An example of focused adaptation in this book is the considerable increase in agenda attention to social issues during the Rudd / Gillard government, a discussion of which takes place earlier in this chapter (104, 124).

Chapters 8 and 9 tackle the influence that external forces have on the government agenda. A salient external influence considered is the role of the media (173). Indeed, the importance of the media for getting issues onto the legislative agenda cannot be emphasised enough (176). In order to force an issue onto the legislative agenda, the issue must gain traction with the wider public, and the media is the best way to do this (176). The authors argue that an issue that reaches a heightened level of attention in the media can mean it is impossible to ignore for policymakers (176).

The authors underline key differences between how attention to an issue rises in the media as opposed to the government agenda (175). Where the government undertakes parallel processing of a broad spectrum of issues, the media covers no more than two policy issues each day to capture their audience (175). Furthermore, the media are largely driven by commercial interests, meaning what makes the headlines will be what their audience wants to digest (174). This means that policy technicalities are overlooked, and policymakers' mistakes and scandals are highlighted (174).

In this chapter, the media's role in setting the government agenda is examined at high level areas (social policy, infrastructure and environment, and economics etc.), and the bigger questions about the performance of democracy are explored (173). In particular, the capacity of the media to serve an accountability role to government is investigated (198). In matters relating to defence and the economy, the study suggests that the media does indeed perform an accountability role with some measure of success (198). Beyond these areas, however, the government and media agendas are largely unrelated in the data, suggesting that the media performs a limited accountability function (198).

This is a brilliant read and the authors ought to be commended for making a meaningful contribution to the literature on policy change processes. The book has much to say much about the strength of democratic institutions and the unique shape and dynamics of Australian policy processes. Dowding and Martin also catalogue a valuable range of methodological strengths and limitations for PAP scholarship, as well as proposed improvements. While the authors admit to the Australian PAP project being limited in scope before the US and UK versions of the project which boast richer datasets, this book represents an impressive and promising beginning to investigating agenda attention change in Australia.

Comparative policy agendas: tools, theory, data

Comparative policy agendas: tools, theory, data embodies a collection of Comparative Agenda Project (CAP) articles from a range of countries that use a spectrum of methodological and theoretical frameworks to investigate one common factor: agenda attention. The editors emphasise that while the inaugural Policy Agendas Project committed to examining punctuated equilibrium theory, there is no limitation for CAP scholars to work with this theoretical framework or another (5). There are also no restrictions on what methodological approaches scholars wish to apply to the data, except for the focus of making the activity of government central to a study (5). While at earlier stages in the evolution of CAP, the number and richness of comparative works was fewer (Baumgartner, Green-Pedersen, and Jones 2008), this contribution demonstrates that CAP scholarship has indeed reached a high level of methodological sophistication that has much to say for praxis as well as for theory. Perhaps the crown of CAP is the editors' claim that it makes the study of policy change possible on four levels - by time, over no less than a dozen countries, over many policy areas, and across 'the policy cycle' (10).

The book is separated into three parts, so it is certainly possible to read later chapters of the book that most interest you (13). Part 1 covers theoretical, methodology and codebook concerns as they relate to the project at large (5, 13, 14). This section is a useful aid for those who want to understand the evolution of the project itself and ways in which PAP/CAP might contribute towards their own research goals. Part 2 considers each specific country or area (e.g. EU) that has constructed a dataset (14). This section details the many different political systems and contexts considered in constructing different country datasets (14). For those interested in the completeness of datasets for their country of research interest, a succinct and clear guide of the status of each country dataset and research undertaken therein is provided here (14). While much is to be gained by first reading Part 1 and Part 2, this is not essential. If you are more interested in actual comparative studies of policy change processes, it is quite possible to begin reading at Part 3 of the book (15). The reader will here be encouraged by both the rich range of countries and political systems contained in each comparative project, as well as with the eclectic assortment of topics covered.

Where chapters 1 and 2 deal with explaining the theory and methodological development of PAP/CAP, chapter 3 provides a very interesting review on the scope of research designs and frequency of agendas (e.g. legislative, media or court agendas) analysed in the PAP/CAP community (35, 37). Here the authors Walgrave and Boydston analyse the frequency of agendas covered in abstracts at PAP/CAP conferences which unearths interesting trends about what agendas are most commonly studied (37). The four most popular agendas studied in descending order are the media, public opinion, laws and manifestos; and the four least popular agendas in ascending order are hearings, court, government agreement and protest (37). The authors observe that what is noteworthy about these findings is that the most commonly analysed agenda types are not what one would expect (38). Unlike much policy agenda literature that does not study phenomena at earlier stages of the policy process, CAP scholars investigate varied topics that take place all along the policy process (38). This can be seen in the two comparative chapters reviewed in this essay that are interested in studying different phenomena of the policy process.

The first comparative article in Part 3 by Bevan and Jennings examines effects and causes of the public agenda by undertaking a large-N study in Spain, the UK and the US (221, 223). While the study investigates the relationship between the public agenda and policy and media agendas, their study of the media and public agenda was, for me, particularly insightful. Notably, the authors found that the influence of the media for setting the public agenda is relatively less than some might expect (221).

Three possible explanations for what determines the public agenda are considered (221, 222). The first explanation is the attention setting power of the media (221). The second explanation is that public opinion is directly determined by the rise and fall in seriousness of issues in realpolitik (221) as observed by John et al. (John et al. 2013). Finally, 'elite mobilisation' is outlined as the third possible way the public agenda can be effected (221). This refers to the way government can make certain issues salient in the public agenda by drawing upon the institutional and rhetorical means available to them (221). Overlap between the above-mentioned explanations can clearly be seen between the media's influence and the need for government to access the media to promote the rhetoric surrounding an issue they wish to promote (222). A parallel aim of this study, to investigate the power of the public agenda on the government agenda, is explained simply in that the government will be more interested in setting an issue on a policy agenda if it already has salience on the public agenda due to the sensitivity of policymakers to public opinion (222). This phenomena is studied by Baumgartner and Jones (Baumgartner and Jones 1993).

While the authors detected correlation between the media and public agendas in all three countries, they were unable to determine the 'direction of temporal causality' (238). Did the media determine public agendas or vice versa (238)? Another interesting finding is that the relationship between the public agenda and government agenda varies between each country (238). In Spain, with a proportional representation electoral system, the relationship is strongest (238). While it is less strong, the federal-presidential system in the US also has a high correlation between these agendas (238). However, the UK's Westminster-system produced the weakest correlation (238).

A very worthwhile read, this chapter employs some advanced statistical techniques and stands as an impressive example of comparative work in the CAP scholarship (239). The authors, Bevan and Jennings, are both eminently published, and it is a pleasure to read their well-articulated review of the literature and discussion of findings.

Chapter 33 showcases the diversity of methodological approaches with which CAP scholarship engages. This chapter aims to identify and explain times of 'drift' in the US and Spain by utilising CAP data to inform within-case analysis (362, 363). Hacker coined the term 'drift' to explain the way in which the outcomes of policy can change when the policy itself is not updated to be appropriate for the way in which the current environment causes it to operate differently to the environment in which it was established (Hacker 2004) (361). Interesting findings are uncovered by empirically investigating and explaining drift, however, a key contribution of the article relates to Shpaizman's specification of how to use CAP data in case study selection.

Shpaizman demonstrates how the distinct CAP categories can be helpful for case study selection, especially when it is difficult to identify cases that contain evidence of one's research interest (359). While there is not space in this review essay to detail technicalities of the author's case selection procedure, it will suffice to say that Shpaizman selected

relevant cases according to the value of independent variables in CAP data (361, 362). Independent variables that play a role in drift that are contained in CAP are few, but it is possible to determine 'when efforts to update the policy are blocked' (361, 362). To measure this, Shpaizman takes the percentage of bills for a given policy that were unsuccessful in becoming legislation to represent attempts to revise policy that were 'blocked' (362). Upon receiving a list of relevant cases with these findings, Shpaizman proceeds with within case analysis to identify positive cases (363). She does this by identifying what policies of those listed as being relevant had an impact (363). Evidence of policy impact for cases identified as being relevant was found in the author's review of the literature, including long-term health care in the US and childcare policy in Spain. These two policies are thus put forward as well evidenced examples of drift. Shpaizman's subsequent review of the literature, furthermore, provides convincing explanations for why drift occurred in each case (363, 364).

There is much to recommend this chapter. While it chiefly provides a roadmap for qualitative and mixed methods researchers in search of new ways to investigate their research interests, it is also worthwhile reading for those interested in comparative studies, drift and by extension policy change processes. It is also a valuable contribution to CAP scholarship, being the first study to formally catalogue ways in which CAP can partner with qualitative techniques (359).

Conclusion

PAP/CAP represents an exciting new way to investigate policy change processes in one's country of interest as well as for comparative purposes. It has many benefits for undertaking impressive large-N studies, as well as providing ways to strengthen aspects of qualitative studies in political science. There are nonetheless areas for improvement. Firstly, I consider that while the freedom to use any and every theoretical framework to explain policy processes is necessary and helpful for scholarship, it comes at the expense of theoretical coherence in the literature. Dowding and Martin's type-token/randomness argument provides a persuasive account of why not to construct grander theories for explaining policy change. However, perhaps some instances of change identified as random can be attributed to the limitations of PAP/CAP itself. Shpaizman's chapter on qualitative approaches to PAP/CAP is one example of how these instances of randomness might be better substantiated by partnering large-N and small-N methods. It could be that deeper small-N analysis is capable of more effectively explaining the nuances underlying random change, such that we find that this change is in fact not random. If so, it may then be possible for scholarship to revisit grander theories in PAP/CAP literature. The great potential of CAP for large-N and mixed methods methodologies, as well as its capacity to analyse structural change in policy processes has and will continue to make it a valuable vein of scholarship for political science. Finally, the authors underline that important policy issues would be more effectively measured with an Australian budgetary dataset which is yet to be coded at the time of a 2019 publication (Baumgartner, Breunig, and Grossman 2019; Dowding and Martin 2017, 23). Therefore, a way in which future research might significantly further our understanding of Australian policy processes would be to code and analyse an Australian budgetary dataset coded to the PAP scheme.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Jonathan Drew is a second year PhD candidate and causal academic at Deakin University, Australia. He holds a Master of Public Policy (RMIT University), a Graduate Diploma of Arts (Advanced) – Public Policy & Management (University of Melbourne) and a Bachelor of Arts (Professional & Creative Writing) (Deakin University).

ORCID

Jonathan Drew  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8046-9746>

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