

Ms. Review – Ms. 33410 revision
“Punctuated Equilibrium in Comparative Perspective”

This is a revision to a manuscript that provides cross-national comparison of distributions of a variety of policy outputs in examining the “efficiency” of government. I had reviewed the earlier version with a number of comments about the conceptualization and underlying assumptions. This is a much improved manuscript that entails a very impressive set of data and analyses, and a very robust set of findings.

My main concerns at this point is that the authors seem to promise more at the outset than what they eventually deliver and do not explain all of this in as straight forward manner as possible. While their findings convince me that the results do change due to increased friction from early inputs to later budget considerations, the notion of stages of the policy process is weakly developed. Given the importance of this to the findings, it needs attention. More specifically:

1. The central research question (pg 5) “entirely new facet” is posed as three questions that raise questions about differences in “design” that are unclear about the specific aspects of design that are being considered, which are quickly dismissed given that “fundamental dynamics” overwhelm institutional differences. It’s not really clear what the author(s) is saying in this critical paragraph that sets up the whole paper. Indeed, later in the paper the authors note “we do not systematically compare institutions and lay bare the cause of their differential friction patterns.” So, if not, why the emphasis here on institutional differences?
2. The concept of stages of the policy process is of course not new, but typically stages are demarked very differently than those for this analysis (social processes, governmental inputs, policy processes, and outputs). Indeed, the policy process “stage” is what scholars typically break into different components. As such, I’m not convinced that framing this in terms of stages is at all relevant. This is more of an Eastonian framework of conversion of inputs into outputs (what the author lists as outcomes is better considered outputs).
3. One key expectation is that outputs should “fall in order of greater extreme values as we examine change distributions further along the policy cycle.” It is unclear what further along the policy cycle means given the vagueness of the conceptualization of the policy cycle.
4. The abstract is still very obtuse. Concepts central to the paper--institutional friction, processes further along the policy cycle, policymaking institutions, activities proportionate to changes in social inputs—are included in the abstract without most readers knowing what these are and why they are useful to think about. The statement of findings “higher decision-making costs show progressively higher kurtosis values” means little to the broader audience.