1. Introduction

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Elgar Modern Guides offer curated reviews of selected topics authored by leading scholars in the field. They survey the significant trends and issues of contemporary research for both advanced students and academic researchers. The books provide an appraisal and guide to the current research landscape, offering selective overviews of critical matters of interest in a specific field alongside a survey of recent developments.

This book deals with Public Policy, an interdisciplinary field which is relatively new in that its foundational works appeared only in the late 1950s and early 1960s. While developed originally in the United States and often limited in application to that polity, since the 1980s studies of government decision-making, its origins and impact have branched out both cross- and trans-nationally to many national and sub-national governments as well as to those policy actors and institutions operating at the global or international level. This movement as well as the movement away from its origins in economics-inspired policy analysis and evaluation to encompass many more methodologies and approaches has necessitated a volume like this which can serve as an entry point into current research findings and methods for both aspiring academics and practitioners.

As the chapters in the book show, the policy sciences emerged in North America and Europe as students of politics and government searched for new understandings of the reasons behind and impact of the tremendous growth of public-sector activity in many countries involved in creating increasingly ambitious economic and social programmes following World War II (DeLeon and Martell, 2006; DeLeon, 2006). Before the era of big and active governments, studies of political life tended to focus either on the normative and moral dimensions of governing, or on the minutiae of how specific legal and political institutions functioned and paid much less attention to the details of the large- and small-scale policy processes and programme designs involved in welfare state expansion.

At one end of the analytical spectrum, scholars concerned with the normative or moral dimensions of government historically have studied the great texts of political philosophy, seeking insights into the purpose of governing and the activities that those in power should undertake if their citizens are to

attain the good life. These inquiries generated a wealth of rich discussions of the nature of society, the role of the state, and the rights and responsibilities of citizens and governments which are relevant to policy-making. However, the gap between normative political theory and the political practices of modern states led many to search for another method of examining policy-making, one that could better inform practice through the systematic evaluation of outputs and outcomes generated by actual government programmes (Torgerson, 1990; Smith, 1982).

This work incorporated studies in many fields to the corpus of legal-historical and philosophical works, from economics to psychology, and put the insights and concepts from these fields to work alongside knowledge generated from other detailed empirical examinations of legislatures, courts, and bureaucracies conducted by legal scholars and students of public administration and public management, among others. Taken together, insights from these many disciplines generated the basis for evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of policies in the new era of large public programmes, and their effects on achieving government targets and goals (Mintrom, 2007).

The policy science which emerged in this period thus represented an effort by students of the subject to find an approach that would connect examinations of governmental processes, structures and disbursements more directly with substantive questions of justice, equity and the pursuit of social, economic and political development (Mead, 1985). Substantially, the policy sciences, according to its founder, must focus “upon the fundamental problems of man in society, rather than on the topical issues of the moment” (Lasswell, 1951, p. 8).

This call for a problem-centred approach to the study of governments and government action represented, and still represents, a critical turning point in the social sciences and, above all, in how to describe, understand and explain governments and governing as well as politics and governance (Capano, 2020).

The shift towards a policy perspective on government and governance has meant not only that social problems should be the core of any analysis, but that the complexity of policy-making should be analysed by taking into consideration the different drivers of policy-making and the way they interact to produce outcomes. This is a pathbreaking shift both from the normative / juridical perspective that had characterized the study of government and politics until World War II and the restricted focus on power and its effect that had characterized the empirical political science launched during the 1920s by Merriam and his Chicago School of Political Science (Heaney and Hansen, 2006). But this shift has also represented an incredible challenge for those interested in understanding the puzzle of policy-making as they have developed a whole new set of concepts, theories and methods in order to advance knowledge in this new field. It has required a search for new ways to

understand how governments really work and how complex processes deliver (or not) expected outcomes and what the impact of this is on society and future public policy-making.

In this context several new approaches to studying policy-making have appeared over the past several decades for which this book serves as an introduction and guide. Some focus on the micro-level of human behaviour and the psychology of citizens, electors, leaders and followers; others focus on the characteristics of national societies and cultures; while still others focus on the nature of national, sub-national and global political systems. Most of these approaches – behaviouralism, elite studies, studies of political culture, and political cybernetics – have come in and gone out of intellectual and academic fashion but all have informed, and provide the background to, the contemporary policy orientation (Heineman et al., 1990).

The book also serves as a guide to contemporary public policy studies which continue to retain the same intellectual vitality of those who originated the approach. They continue to focus on both the structure of governments and the behaviour of political actors, in order to understand and inform what governments actually can and should do, but do so in new ways, having learned and expanded upon the lessons of past work.

Policy studies continue to focus on the development of generalizations about public policies and public policy-making. But it is important to underline that the object of public policy as a field of study – that is, public policies – does not have a self-evident meaning (Heclo, 1974), and thus different definitions have resulted, more or less directly related to the different roles played by government in dealing with policy problems. Different approaches and different perspectives on policy-making continue to characterize the field and have led to the development of competing visions and theories of policy-making and policy processes which cause confusion and require explication. As the chapters in the book show, on the one hand, there are those definitions emphasizing the role of governments and of legitimate coercion as pillars in driving the analytical lenses of researchers (Dye, 1972; Lowi, 1970): from these definitions, policy-making and policy solutions depend on how governments behave and on how legitimate coercion is exercised. On the other hand, there are those definitions that shift the focus of analytical attention to certain characteristics like the density or type of actors playing a role in policy-making, the presence of common/divided ideas and conflicts, the role of institutions and constraints and facilitators of activity, the intrinsic processual nature of policy-making or the impact of government interventions on individual, group and societal behaviour. These perspectives all assume that governments are relevant and pivotal in public policy-making but flag that governments act in a very complex context where different actors interact, negotiate and conflict

in trying to solve collective problems or pursue individual or group interests (Ranney, 1968; Anderson, 1975; Dunn, 1981).

It is also the case that, unlike physics or chemistry, because of the multifaceted, multi-level and contested nature of policy-making, there is no universally recognized methodology for analysing policy problems or matching problems and solutions. Instead, a range of quantitative and qualitative methods, skills and techniques found in the policy analysis toolkit drawn from fields such as law, economics, organizational analysis, sociology and budgeting are used to describe policies and policy-making and grasp causality and change in these areas. Policy analysts populating bureaucracies and research organizations from consultancies to think tanks, for example, utilize generic analytical tools, along with cases, simulations, and real-world projects designed to illustrate the best policy tools or instruments appropriate to specific circumstances and contexts. This combination of analytical tools applied by policy analysts inside and outside government to help understand policy problems and potential solutions are addressed by other chapters in the book along with their implications and application to policy problems and their resolution.

While many scholars and practitioners have concentrated on acquiring insights into which approaches and applications will work in a given context (Thissen and Twaalfhoven, 2001), it is also the case that other policy scholars have broader interests and have sought to discern more general overall patterns of policy-making, examining patterns of influence and outcomes which emerge from among the potentially infinite variation of policy practices (Howlett and Tosun, 2019).

Empirical studies of the ways in which policy-making occurs over time, for example, have revealed how policy-making processes are affected by factors such as the needs and beliefs of ultimate users, the delicacy of the political relations, coalitions and conflicts among decision-makers, as well as individual personalities and agendas, but also by the history of previous policy reform efforts, organizational routines, and other more long-term factors (DeLeon, 1986; Capano and Howlett, 2009). These studies have shown, on the one hand, that “one size does not fit all” in terms of the policies which result from the interaction of these variables because policy opportunities are often idiosyncratic, requiring pragmatic judgement (Dunn, 2019) of the appropriate techniques to apply in specific circumstances. But, on the other hand, they have also demonstrated that governments tend to develop preferences for specific types of policies and that long-term patterns or styles of policy-making emerge alongside relatively long-lasting policy regimes (Van Waarden and Unger, 1995; Bayerlein and Knill, 2019), a subject also examined in this Modern Guide.

Taken together, these studies have shown how public policy is, above all, a practical discipline whose explicit purpose is to advise policy-makers on

how best to address public problems. But it is one in which generating and providing advice is not a trivial task and requires careful study and analysis of not only contemporaneous problem situations but also the evidence and knowledge found in past studies.

Accessing the large corpus of studies and concepts in policy studies within a multi-disciplinary framework is not easy and, ultimately, it is towards this goal that this Modern Guide is dedicated. Towards this end, the Guide looks at the definition of the subject and the major approaches to it as well as the epistemological and ontological foundations of inquiry and knowledge in the field. It also examines the contextual factors which influence public policy-making and the kinds of actors and institutional arrangements which characterize those processes. More specifically, it examines the assumptions about policy-makers and policy-takers behaviour which operate in the field and the nature of the policy tools and instruments which comprise policy efforts. And, finally, it addresses the manner in which policies change and evolve over time. It shows some of the more innovative and promising perspectives being used in the contemporary period to deal with the theoretical challenge that understanding public policy implies, while still offering insightful analytical tools to policy-makers and practitioners.

Each of the chapters in the volume reviews key concepts in a specific area and as well as the manner in which experts in the subject examine and conceptualize policy-relevant actions and activity in that area.

The book is divided into five parts.

Part I deals with the nature of public policy and how it is studied. In this part Michael Howlett and Benjamin Cashore, Anthony Perl, and Daniel Béland and Léonore Haelg set out the basic definitions of public policy utilized in the field and the assumptions made about how government efforts affect policy targets. They also examine the basic models used to describe policy processes and outcomes, including policy cycles and policy regimes, and the pivotal roles of actors such as epistemic communities, advocacy coalitions and instrument constituencies. Here what a public policy is and how it should be analytically tackled is defined; the complexity of the policy cycle and of its stages is analysed and made theoretically relevant; and the complex role of actors and how they act and interact to solve collective problems is presented.

Part II looks at policy contexts and processes in more detail. Sreeja Nair, Nihit Goyal and Michael Howlett, and Moshe Maor examine the manner in which policy-makers deal with uncertainties around the correct form of action to adopt and how they assess the nature of policy agents and interests, as well as how these agents operate in policy streams related to the nature of policy problems, solutions and the politics surrounding them. What is clarified here is how uncertainty and ambiguity are intrinsically embedded in policy-making and what logics of action drive decision-makers when puzzling through these

dilemmas: how it is possible to theoretically grasp this complexity by utilizing a powerful policy framework capable of containing all relevant policy elements in an ordered way; how and why policy-makers often under- or over-react when deciding how to respond to an issue and how it is possible to drive them towards a reaction more proportionate to the severity of the problem at hand.

Part III then looks at policy mechanisms and policy-making and policy-taking behaviour in more detail. Giliberto Capano, capitalizing on a large collection of multi-disciplinary literature, shows how a mechanistic perspective on policy-making provides a better explanation of how policies “work” and what it is that makes them effective or ineffective. Simone Busetti and Giliberto Capano then examine the different kinds of mechanisms which policies trigger or activate by applying the mechanistic perspective to a specific decision. They use a case study to show how a mechanistic approach can be analytically powerful and fruitful in illuminating and highlighting the causal mechanistic chains through which policies develop over time. Michael Howlett then looks at the nature of policy compliance and its problems, showing how governments need to have a detailed understanding of the bases on which compliance occurs, or not, and how this knowledge is necessary for effective policy-making.

Part IV deals with the policy tools governments deploy in order to achieve their ends and the kinds of resources or capacities they need to do this effectively. Here Michael Howlett sets out the basic nature of policy instruments, while Xun Wu, M. Ramesh and Michael Howlett detail what kinds of resources and capacities governments need in order to deploy them effectively to achieve their ends. Sebastian Sewerin then examines the complications and challenges governments face in packaging tools together into more or less complex portfolios in order to operate more effectively. This part allows us to have a clear view about what instruments are, how they work and how they can be designed; what kinds of skills and resources – or competences and capabilities – present at the individual, organizational and systemic level are necessary to ensure tools perform the policy functions they are expected to; and how a mix of different principles, goals and instruments can be coherently designed to perform as expected.

Finally Part V looks at resulting patterns and sequences of policy outputs and outcomes, why these patterns emerge and how they change. Giliberto Capano and Ishani Mukherjee set out how policies develop through processes such as replacement, layering, stretching and patching, and show how the capacity of and intention for design, on the part of policy-makers, are key for keeping policies aligned with fluctuating policy goals. Claire Dunlop and Claudio Radaelli look at the manner in which the lessons of policy-making feed back into further deliberations in a process of policy learning, and sometimes non-learning, which drives forward policy changes. And finally, Christoph Knill, Yves Steinebach, Christian Adam and Steffen Hurka examine

how policies develop through processes of policy accumulation and dismantling and how, all in all, accumulation is a common trend of policies over time: a factor that allows adaptation but also the potential risk of undermining the effectiveness and legitimacy of public policies and policy-making.

Taken together, these chapters provide a very rich but concise guide to both the empirical reality of public policy-making and the literature in the field. They set out and answer key questions ranging from basic definitions and assumptions to the nature of key actors and institutions, the mechanisms, tools and resources that make policies work, and the manner in which policies evolve and change over time. They present not only the state of the art of the topics treated, but also a source of inspiration for further theoretical advances and new research into this still young field of academic inquiry.

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