Policy instruments – tools used by governments to pursue a desired outcome. Examples include economic tools (taxes, spending, incentives), and regulations (voluntary, legal).

Complex: complicated/multifaceted. Compare with ‘complex system’, used to describe a range of systems, with similar properties, in the natural and social world (Cairney, 2012c).


Chapter 2 Policymaking in the UK: What is Policy and How is it Made?

This chapter examines:

- The meaning of ‘policy’ and ‘public policy’
- How we categorise, measure and describe public policy
- The differences between comprehensive and bounded rationality
- The effect of bounded rationality on policymaking
- The links between comprehensive rationality and the Westminster model
- The differences in policymaking styles between the UK and devolved governments

‘Policy’ and ‘public policy’ are difficult to define, but our attempts to give them meaning are important. For example, some definitions refer explicitly to the actions of government, while others identify a wider range of actors. Some talk about the difference between what governments do and what they choose not to do. Some discuss the difference between a range of activities, from the general statement of intent to the actual policy outcome. Overall, these definitions show us that the policy process is complex; the inability of one, concise, definition to capture our field of study demonstrates that complexity.

Even if we can settle on a definition of public policy, we may struggle to measure it. ‘Public policy’ is a collection of policies made at different times and, in many cases, different organisations. Even when we break policymaking down into particular areas and issues, we find that policy is a collection of different instruments. In some cases, these instruments may be used to form a coherent strategy. For example, high taxes may be combined with public education and regulations on tobacco advertising to discourage smoking. In others, individual instruments may be used by different organisations with insufficient thought about how they will combine. For example, a Department for Education may face problems when coordinating the transition from key educational stages involving different actors (including early years, primary, secondary, and post-compulsory). This is a more regular feature of fragmented policymaking, in which different government departments may be responsible for individual aspects of policy and have different ideas about how to solve the problem. For example, in mental health, a high profile Home Office policy on detaining people with mental illnesses before they commit serious crimes may conflict with a Department of Health focus on challenging mental health stigma. Consequently, the ‘what is policy?’ question has an important practical element. To know what policy is in each area, we must know how to categorise, measure and describe a wide range of government activities.
This question also informs our discussion of how policy is made. The unrealistic idea of a single, coherent, policy strategy can be linked to ‘comprehensive rationality’ in which a single authoritative policymaker is at the heart of the process. This ideal-type is a traditional starting point for policy studies - as a way to highlight the implications of bounded rationality. For example, policymakers may respond to their own limitations by developing shortcuts to gather information, engaging in incremental rather than radical policy change (to address their uncertainty about the effects of their policies), and/or focusing on some issues at the expense of most others (Simon, 1976; Lindblom 1959; 1979; Baumgartner and Jones, 1993).

A key aspect of comprehensive rationality is that the policy process is linear; there is a clear beginning and end, reached through a series of steps. Policymaking is also cyclical – the end of one process marks the beginning of another. ‘Policy cycle’ sums up this process. It involves breaking policy down into a series of stages including agenda setting, policy formulation, legitimation, implementation and evaluation. This overall image of policymaking is now less popular in academic research, but there is still considerable attention to individual stages – including the difference between formulation and implementation, the role of bodies other than Parliament in legitimation, and the politics of evaluating the success of policy.

A final important aspect of comprehensive rationality is that it demonstrates important similarities and differences between the UK and other political systems. On the one hand, we can associate its emphasis on sole, central control with the Westminster model’s focus on the centralisation of power in the core executive. In that context, a focus on bounded rationality shows us the practical limits to executive power. On the other, we find that policymakers in all political systems face similar constraints. A focus on bounded rationality shows us that governments are subject to universal policy processes that often produce common patterns of policymaking despite important differences in their institutional design. We can demonstrate these points by comparing the policymaking styles of the UK and devolved governments. In particular, the Scottish system was designed, in part, to diverge from ‘old Westminster’ – but UK and Scottish policy styles are often rather similar.

**Box 2.1 What is Public Policy?**

‘The actions of government and the intentions that determine those actions’ (Cochran et al. in Birkland, 2005: 18)

“Diverse activities by different bodies are drawn together into stable and predictable patterns of action which (as often as not) come to be labelled ‘policy’” (Colebatch, 1998: x)
“‘Policy’ is a general term used to describe a formal decision or plan of action adopted by an actor … to achieve a particular goal … ‘Public policy’ is a more specific term applied to a formal decision or a plan of action that has been taken by, or has involved, a state organisation” (Richards and Smith, 2002: 1)

‘Whatever governments choose to do or not to do’ (Dye in Birkland, 2005: 18)

The meaning of ‘policy’ and ‘public policy’ and the task of policy analysis

Although we may struggle to provide a concise definition of public policy, we can identify four common themes in the literature (see Cairney, 2012a: 23-6). First, ‘policy’ may describe one, or all, of a range of activities, including: a broad statement of intent (we will solve this problem), a set of specific proposals (such as a manifesto), proposals authorized by government and Parliament (such as legislation), proposals backed by resources such as funding and staffing (a policy programme), and the outcomes of decisions (Hogwood and Gunn, 1984: 13–19). The outcomes may be very different from the original stated intentions.

Second, ‘public’ policy is made by governments and the organisations which act on their behalf. We may associate policymaking with elected officials, but most policy is carried out by government bureaucracies and a range of – governmental, quasi-non-governmental and non-governmental - delivery organisations.

Third, policy may result from the interactions between policymakers and the actors (such as interest groups) which they consult. It is often difficult to know who is responsible for policy decisions, particularly when the issue is low on the agenda of elected officials (Colebatch, 1998: 18–22; 31–2; 2006a: 1; Rose, 1987: 267–8).

Fourth, the study of policy is as much about what governments don’t do. As box 1.3 suggests, power is often exercised to make sure that governments do not seek to solve certain policy problems.

In this context, policy analysis is about making sense of a world in which policy may refer to a range of activities carried out by a huge range of actors. It is about identifying a complex web of relationships and practices, but also finding a way to simplify that process to make sense of it (Sabatier, 2007a: 4). Chapters 3 and 4 discuss the various ways in which we can understand complex government and chapter 5 examines how governments decide what to do and not to do. The following section identifies ways in which we can make sense of the outcomes of their activities.

How we categorise, measure and describe public policy

We can categorise public policies to identify the different ways in which policy is made. Lowi’s (1964; 1972: 299) phrase ‘policies determine politics’ is often used to identify the calculations that policymakers make when deciding how to pursue policy aims (see Smith and Larimer, 2009: 36-41). For example, redistributive policy may be more controversial
than **distributive** policy because it involves a more high profile decision to benefit one (often large) group at the expense of another – by, for example, using a progressive tax system to fund social security programmes. Distribution to a smaller group may be less visible because, for example, the costs are relatively low and the link between taxation and distribution is not clear. **Regulatory** policy may often be less costly in an economic sense (the costs may relate primarily to the implementation of policy) but not political (since policies designed to constrain behaviour are often unpopular). So, policymakers may calculate the economic and political costs that they are willing to incur in each case – suggesting that the nature of the policy intervention, and the degree of coercion required, may be as important as the policy aim itself. These calculations may vary by policy area, and from issue to issue. For example, policymakers may be more likely to distribute benefits to recipients of healthcare than higher education or social security. They may be more likely to regulate the behaviour of some public sector professions than others, or to seek fewer regulations in the field of private business.

We should note two main qualifications to this idea. First, ‘calculation’ may give the sense of a policymaker working from a blank sheet of paper and weighing up her options. Yet, policymakers inherit previous distributive decisions and a large ‘regulatory state’ (Majone, 1994; 1997; Hood et al, 1999; Lodge and Weigrich, 2012). Policymaking is often more about dealing with those past decisions than calculating new approaches. Second, in practice, the boundaries between these broad policy types are blurry and governments use a mixture of economic, regulatory and other policies. We can identify a much larger and more detailed list of potential policy instruments (see Cairney, 2012a: 24; John, 2011) including:

1. **Taxation.** This includes deciding how to tax and how much money to raise. The UK tax system is a mix of **progressive** (for example, when higher earners pay a higher band of income tax) and **regressive** (for example, when people with different incomes pay the same sales taxes). The overall effect appears to be regressive when we focus solely on taxation, but the lowest earners generally receive more benefits (and other groups may benefit more from **tax expenditures**) (see ONS, 2013a; 2013b; Bourne, 2013).

2. **Public expenditure.** This includes deciding on which populations (such as those with low incomes) and policy areas (such as crime, health, and education) to spend, and the balance between current (e.g. the wages of doctors) and capital (building a new hospital) spending.
3. Borrowing (to address the difference between revenue and expenditure). The level of borrowing often seems to be outwith government control, although governments can set certain rules – including the ‘golden rule’ that governments should not borrow routinely to fund current spending (Honjo, 2007), and that there should be a maximum level of public borrowing to finance capital projects (with knock-on effects for, the level of non-governmental provision by bodies such as private construction companies and housing associations).

4. Economic penalties, such as taxation designed to reduce the sale and use of certain products (such as tobacco).

5. Economic incentives, including tax expenditures to encourage certain behaviour (such as giving to charity) and subsidies to encourage production (such as to farmers to produce certain crops).

6. Linking government-controlled benefits or services to behaviour (e.g. seeking work to qualify for unemployment benefits) or a means test (e.g. giving free school meals to people receiving income support).

7. Charges to use public services (such as higher education tuition fees).

8. Linking the provision of public services to behaviour (e.g. restricting the ability of smokers to foster children).

9. The use of formal regulations or legislation to control behaviour or punish non-compliance (such as criminal laws).

10. Voluntary regulations, including professional codes of practice and agreements between governments and other actors such as unions and business.

11. Legal penalties, such as when the courts approve restrictions on, or economic sanctions against, organisations.

12. Public education and advertising to highlight the risks to certain behaviours.

13. Providing services and advertising to help change behaviour (such as healthcare programmes to encourage healthy behaviour).

14. Providing resources or funding organisations to tackle illegal behaviour (such as customs and excise organisations used to challenge smuggling).

15. Funding organisations to influence public, media and government attitudes.

16. Funding scientific research or advisory committee work.

17. Organisational change, such as the establishment of a new unit within a government department or a reform of local government structures.

18. Providing public services directly or via non-governmental organisations.

19. The use of quasi-markets in areas such as healthcare.

20. The use of rhetoric, persuasion and exhortation – such as public statements on the behaviour of organisations or arm-twisting and ear-stroking in private.
Public policy as a whole is such a complex mix of a large number and many types of policy instruments, adopted by a range of organisations, that it is almost possible to measure. Instead, we are obliged to break this complete picture down into a description of a collection of policy areas or types (such as health, education and crime policy) and issues (such as healthcare, mental and public health). In each case, we have to decide which instruments to include or ignore when building up a picture of policy and seeking to describe policy change over time. This is no easy task. It may be straightforward to identify the high profile aims of central government, but not (for example) the different tools used by organisations to carry them out. The same policy instruments may also be routinely rebranded by governments to signal a shift in policy intent, without engaging in a major shift in approach (for example, ‘new’ funding or a ‘new’ unit may simply continue the work of programmes already initiated).

Consequently, the identification of public policy is more of an art than a science. It is a necessarily biased (or incomplete) account of government activity. The significance of policy decisions, and policy change, may therefore depend on the evidence we select and the ways in which we evaluate it. The potential sources of description bias include (see Cairney, 2012a: 29):

- The timeframe we use to analyse policy change, from vignette to long-term historical studies. For example, major policy change may only be visible after decades of policymaking.
- The level and types of government on which we focus, from the EU to the UK core executive to ‘street level bureaucrats’ (Lipsky, 1980). For example, we may identify major change in UK government policy intentions, but limited change in policy delivery.

**Empirical** – descriptive; evidence or discussion of how things are.

**Normative** – prescriptive; discussion of how things should be.

- The amount of policy change we expect under the circumstances or in terms of the size of the problem. This is when the **empirical** meets the **normative** side of public policy – we study and interpret information in light of our beliefs about how policy should work and what should be the outcomes. The classic example is by Crenson (1971) who seeks to explain (with reference to the power of business) why some policymakers did not do enough to control pollution. A relevant current example is inequality: if we think that there are remarkable inequalities in UK society (for example, along class, gender, racial and/or ethnic lines) we may seek to identify and explain a lack of proportionate government action. Others may not identify the same size of problem or lack of action.

- Our attempts to deduce the motivation of policymakers. For example, do governments maintain high taxes on fuel for ideological (to discourage excess consumption) or economic reasons? Can this ascribed motivation change when one government inherits and maintains the policies of another?

- The statistical categories we use to measure activity (such as spending per capita or as a proportion of revenue)

**Narrative** – an account of a series of events and decisions; a non-fictional ‘story’.
There are two, complementary, ways in which we can deal with this level of empirical uncertainty. First, we can be open about our methods of policy analysis; about why we chose to focus on some policy instruments and not others, and why we attached particular weight to them. We might even identify and compare more than one narrative of policymaking and policy change which attach different weights or meaning to the same events and decisions (Cairney, 2013a: 12-4). In other words, policy analysis may be most useful when it produces discussions among colleagues rather than an allegedly definitive conclusion. Second, we can use established models and theories of policy and policymaking to make sure that our evidence gathering is systematic and comparable to studies produced elsewhere (Cairney, 2012a: 30-2).

**Comprehensive Rationality and the Westminster Model: How Should We Make Policy?**

Traditionally, the way to provide that common conceptual focus is to make reference to the ideal-type of comprehensive rationality, as an unrealistic simplification of reality used to explore what really happens. In the early post-war period, comprehensive rationality represented, for some, an ideal to aspire to. The notion of systematic policymaking went hand in hand with prospect of a more scientific approach to policy analysis. As scholars and practitioners developed new research and analytical methods, they recommended ways in which policymaking could be disaggregated (into stages) and managed from the centre, aided by an elite group of analysts (see Lerner and Lasswell, 1951; Parsons, 1995: 16–28; Radin, 2000). Although new analytical approaches were developed primarily in the US, this identification of a policymaking centre is more consistent with the idea of a Westminster model concentrating power in the hands of a core executive. In both cases, we can detect a simplified image of a sole, central decision-maker at the heart of the process - identifying her values and aims, making sure that those aims are carried out by the government, and being held accountable, through Parliament and popular elections, for the outcomes. In this sense, the identification of core executive responsibility provides the ultimate form of accountability; we know who is in charge and who to praise or blame.

The Westminster model remains an important point of reference – such as when civil servants anticipate the ‘minister’s mind’ and ministers are held accountable for decisions made in their name. However, the accumulated knowledge from policy studies suggests that UK policymaking does not work this way – and this point is recognised increasingly in government and Parliament (Gay, 2012; Judge et al, 1997; Woodhouse, 2004). The policy process is much more messy and unmanageable, there are many limits to central control, and
it is difficult to conclude that ministers are responsible, in practice, for policy outcomes. Further, in most cases, it is difficult to know – in a meaningful way - what the ‘minister’s mind’ would be, since the reach of government goes far beyond the cognitive capabilities of any single person.

To demonstrate these limits, we can identify two main elements to comprehensive rationality (see Cairney, 2012a: 96-7; Simon, 1976; Lindblom, 1959; Jordan and Richardson, 1987: 9–10; John, 2012: 24-5; Hill, 2005: 146). First, policymakers have the means to translate values and aims into policy. This process is the policymaking equivalent of a rational individual weighing up information to help rank her preferences (and perhaps maximise her ‘utility’ or the positive outcomes from her choices). It depends on a number of requirements not met in the real world:

- It is not possible to completely separate the identification of facts and values. Our values and beliefs influence the ways in which we gather and interpret information, and our selective attention to facts influences our values and priorities. Indeed, political parties tend to exploit emotion-fuelled interpretations of facts when they present their policy aims. For example, the Conservative General Election manifesto (2010: 3) spoke of the need to tackle ‘irresponsible public spending, an overblown banking sector, and unsustainable consumer borrowing on the back of a housing bubble’.

- It is not possible to produce a complete and consistent list of policymaker preferences to cover the full remit of government. Instead, policymakers ‘pursue a small number of those aims which command their attention at any one time’ (Cairney, 2012a: 97). Further, our preferences tend to be vaguely defined (such as ‘sustainable economic growth’) and we may only know our detailed preferences when we have to choose between competing aims or solutions (such as to minimise pollution and climate change or expand air and road capacity to encourage economic activity).

- It is not possible to gather all relevant information about a policy problem or anticipate the effects of a solution. Instead, governments often seek ways to gather a sufficient amount of information to justify their decisions. One recent high profile example was the alleged reliance by several governments on the idea (linked to flawed evidence) that economic growth slows when a country's debt rises above 90% of its GDP (Alexander, 2013).

Consequently, policy studies tend to identify ‘bounded rationality’ (Simon, 1976). Instead of ‘maximising utility’, policymakers and organisations ‘satisfice’ – they seek an outcome that is ‘good enough’. Instead of gathering all information, they use rules of thumb or short cuts to gather the most relevant information possible (1976: xxviii).

A second requirement of comprehensive rationality is
that the values-to-policy process is linear. It follows an ordered set of stages: policymakers identify their values and aims, government organisations produce policy solutions to fulfil those aims, and policymakers select their preferred solution. This idea is summed up by the ‘policy cycle’ (figure 2.1) which describes a series of stages through which a policy travels to translate public demands, party manifestos and policymaker aims into policy solutions and outcomes:

- **Agenda setting.** Identifying problems that require government attention, deciding which issues deserve the most attention and defining the nature of the problem.
- **Policy formulation.** Setting objectives, identifying the cost and estimating the effect of solutions, choosing from a list of solutions and selecting policy instruments.
- **Legitimation.** Ensuring that the chosen policy instruments have support. It can involve one or a combination of: legislative approval, executive approval, seeking consent through consultation with interest groups, and referenda.
- **Implementation.** Establishing or employing an organization to take responsibility for implementation, ensuring that the organization has the resources (such as staffing, money and legal authority) to do so, and making sure that policy decisions are carried out as planned (compare with box 2.2).
- **Evaluation.** Assessing the extent to which the policy was successful or the policy decision was the correct one; if it was implemented correctly and, if so, had the desired effect.
- **Policy maintenance, succession or termination.** Considering if the policy should be continued, modified or discontinued (Cairney, 2012a: 33, based on Hogwood and Peters, 1983: 8; Hogwood and Gunn, 1984: 7–11; Jenkins, 1978; Lasswell, 1956; Parsons, 1995: 78–9).

**Figure 2.1 The Policy Cycle**
It is a truism in policy studies that the policy process does not resemble a cycle with clear cut and ordered stages (Cairney, 2012a: 41-2). We can identify a mix of analytical and empirical problems. First, it is difficult to separate the real world into discrete and ordered stages: sometimes the routine implementation of policy puts the problem back on a policymaker’s agenda very quickly (for example, if a health or social care problem puts the service under public scrutiny); the legitimation process, which includes consultation with actors affected by policy, may be important during formulation and implementation (particularly when policy aims are vague, then fleshed out during delivery); solutions may exist long before policymakers pay attention to a problem; and, a government may choose policies that are most likely to receive favourable evaluations (2012a: 40; 235-6; McConnell, 2010). Second, it is difficult to imagine a single, discrete, policy cycle; the policy process is a messy combination of ‘multiple interacting cycles involving numerous policy proposals and statutes at multiple levels of government’ (Sabatier, 2007a: 7). Third, the cycle suggests that policymaking begins and ends with the core executive. Yet, ministers are responsible for far more issues than they influence. In some cases, they administer ‘placebo’ policies, designed to look like they are being decisive, when they would rather delegate responsibility to other actors (Jordan and Richardson, 1987: 233). In others, they simply allow other types or levels of government to make policy on their behalf. Indeed, as chapter 4 suggests, most policy is processed by civil servants in continuous contact with actors such as interest groups (they are not merely consulted at the legitimation stage).

Consequently, this emphasis on cycles is generally used to present the ‘public face’ (McConnell, 2010: 222) of policymaking or suggest how policy should be made, rather than how it is made. For example, the Scottish Government (2009) and Cabinet Office (1999) identify several ways in which UK Government departments use cycles to describe their policymaking processes. This use of cycles relates to the Westminster model image of policymaking – departments present the process in this way to reinforce the model’s identification of core executive or ministerial centrality. Ministers identify their aims at the agenda setting stage and civil servants use the cycle model to turn that policy into a concrete outcome through a series of stages (Everett, 2003; John, 2012: 19). When one discusses with policymakers how policy is really made, we identify the cycle’s many limitations before seeking more useful concepts to describe the real world (Cairney, 2013b: 5; compare with Althaus et al, 2007 and Colebatch, 2006b).

**Box 2.2 Power and the Importance of Stages**

The policy cycle began as a way to turn a policy decision into an outcome. It has become a way to identify the importance of each stage:

- **Agenda setting and policy formulation** is about the power to: (a) draw attention to some problems and ‘crowd out’ most others; and (b) make sure that only some solutions are considered, while others are ignored (see box 1.3 and chapter 5).
• *Legitimation* through Parliament may generally be straightforward if the government enjoys a majority (but see Cowley, 2005). However, a more regular process takes place in consultation with actors such as interest groups. Civil servants, seeking to legitimate their decisions (particularly in the absence of ministerial direction), look for cues from the most knowledgeable and active policy participants. Given their lack of political legitimacy, they are, ‘ill placed to impose and conflict avoidance is likely to result’ (Jordan and Richardson, 1982: 86).

• *Implementation* remains important as long as policymakers identify an ‘implementation gap’ or wonder why their decisions did not translate into expected outcomes. This is a ‘top down’ perspective informed by attention to a large number of things that could go wrong with a policy: it is based on flawed evidence or logic; its aim is not clear or communicated well; it is not backed by sufficient resources (money, staff, political will); it is not implemented by skilful and ‘compliant’ officials; it does not receive support from groups essential to the policy’s success; and/or it is undermined by socio-economic conditions (such as the effect of rising unemployment on a policy to reduce social security costs) (Cairney, 2012a: 34-5; Hood, 1976; Hogwood and Gunn, 1984; Marsh and Rhodes, 1992a; Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973; 1979). It can be compared usefully with ‘bottom up’ perspectives which focus on the people or organisations responsible for policy delivery. These studies often suggest that central government aims provide only one of many sources of influence on outcomes. While ‘implementation’ is no longer a fashionable topic in policy studies, these bottom-up themes inform modern studies of governance (Cairney, 2009; see chapter 4).

• *Evaluation* is about the exercise of power to gauge a policy’s success. It can be a technical and routine process by civil servants or highly salient and linked, for example, to the debate between political parties about the competence of government (or, in some cases, post-legislative scrutiny by Parliament). It is important to consider whose perspective we use to gauge success (the government that introduced the policy or its target group?) and how they perceive success (did it make them more popular? Did the policy pass easily through Parliament? Did it have its desired long term effect?) (McConnell, 2010; Marsh and McConnell, 2010).

• *Policy maintenance, succession or termination* reminds us that policies rarely begin on a bank sheet of paper. The agenda setting stage for a policy is often prompted by the evaluation and continuation of a previous decision.

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**Bounded Rationality and New Policy Theories: How Do We Make Policy?**

The beauty of rationality and ordered stages is that they seem appropriate and easy to understand. Many of us would like to live in a world so simple (although we may worry about the concentration of power in such a small group of people). However, the trend in the literature is to identify new approaches to conceptualise a world that has changed markedly since the early postwar period. Modern accounts describe action within a complex policy
process. We have witnessed an end to the ‘clubby days’ of politics and the beginning of a more fragmented system with many more policy participants (Heclo, 1978: 94; Jordan, 1981: 96-100). A rise in governmental responsibilities has produced mutually reinforcing effects: more groups interested in government; and, a more stretched government, more reliant on outside advice. Issues which were once ‘quietly managed by a small group of insiders’ are now more likely to become ‘controversial and politicized’ (Heclo, 1978: 105).

Unfortunately, modern theories of policymaking may be more realistic, but they are often harder to understand – partly because the literature is full of jargon and partly because it is used as a way to describe complex government (box 1.2). This section is an attempt to make sense of what I describe as the ‘Key Tenets of Public Policy Studies’ (Cairney, 2012b: 239-42; each theory/concept is discussed at length in Cairney, 2012a). Most of these concepts make reference to bounded rationality and/or the policy cycle:

**Bounded Rationality and Punctuated Equilibrium Theory.** Policymakers can only pay attention to a small number of the issues for which they are responsible. So, they ignore most and promote a few to the top of their agenda. For every issue to which ministers (and senior civil servants) pay attention, they must ignore (say) 99 others. The tendency to focus on that one issue, producing the most potential for major policymaking instability and policy change, draws our attention away from the 99 issues in which we might expect relative stability and continuity. The outcome may be a combination of a small number of profound policy changes and a huge number of small or no changes (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; 2009).

**Bounded Rationality and Incrementalism.** The cognitive ability of policymakers, and their ability to gather information, is limited and so they tend to rely on trial-and-error strategies when developing policy. Policymakers pursue radical policy change rarely, for two main reasons. First, they are unsure about the effects of their actions and often prefer to engage in policy through a series on non-radical steps. Second, they attempt to build on past policies because considerable effort has been invested in seeking an agreed position among a wide range of interests (Lindblom, 1959; 1979). Top-down policymaking is often ‘politically expensive’ and a drain on the resources of time-constrained policymakers. Consequently, it does not represent the ‘normal’ policymaking style in most political systems (Richardson et al, 1982: 10).

**Policy Succession.** Policy often represents ‘its own cause’ (Wildavsky, 1980: 62) and ‘new’ policies are often pursued to address the problems caused by the old (Hogwood and Peters, 1983).

**Inheritance Before Choice.** Political parties make a difference but they also inherit massive commitments. Most policy decisions are based on legislation which already exists and most
Increasing returns – a term in economics to describe a rise in outputs greater than a rise in inputs (you get out more out than you put in) at the margins (not all the time).

Historical Institutionalism and Path Dependence. Events and decisions made in the past contributed to the formation of institutions that influence current practices. Institutions, and the practices they encourage, may remain stable for long periods of time. When commitment to a policy has been established and resources devoted to it, over time it may produce increasing returns (Pierson, 2000).

Multi-level Governance. There is no single, central decision-maker or decision-making organisation. Instead, there are multiple centres of authority and strong central government is increasingly replaced by bargaining government (Rhodes, 1997; Kooiman, 1993; compare with Marsh, 2008 who is sceptical about this point, arguing that power is still concentrated in the hands of the elite).

The Advocacy Coalition Framework. The policymaking world consists of subsystems containing coalitions of actors trying to adapt to their policy environments and learn from their experiences. The ‘glue’ that binds them together is belief systems – people go into politics to turn their beliefs into action and they join groups of like-minded people. So, learning about policy problems – and how to respond - is not a neutral process. It takes place through the ‘lens’ of deeply held policy beliefs. Groups interpret the world differently and their beliefs limit the extent to which they will consider new information and accept new policy solutions. Consequently, major policy change is infrequent because some groups, with relatively fixed beliefs, often dominate subsystems for long periods. Major change may require ‘shocks’ to subsystems – prompted by, for example, the election of a new government or a major socio-economic change, which affect the status of coalitions within subsystems (for example, some people may leave previously-dominant coalitions; other coalitions may exploit crises to put forward their solutions) (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Weible et al, 2009).

The Role of Ideas. Ideas are the beliefs shared by individuals or groups. We can identify two relevant types. First, policy-relevant beliefs can be deep seated and taken for granted; paradigms may inhibit new ways of thinking and undermine policy change (Hall, 1993). The adherence to some beliefs over others excludes certain actors. Some groups enjoy a ‘monopoly’ over the way in which policy is understood in government – their dominance may be ‘institutionalised’ following the production and maintenance of rules and norms used to guide policymaking behaviour (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; 2009). Second, ideas can be used to promote change - such as new policy solutions used to solve problems. In some cases, new ideas seem to resemble ‘viruses’ since they spread so quickly across political
systems (Richardson, 2000). The most dramatic change happens when new ideas clash with the old, producing ‘punctuations’ or shocks which produce major transformations in the way that policymakers think and act (Cairney, 2012a: 228-32). However, this is a relatively rare occurrence (often associated with the identification of major policy failures) compared to the more routine process in which actors follow and interpret established rules (2012a: 81-4).

Multiple Streams Analysis and ‘Garbage Cans’. The policy process is not linear. Policymakers identify problems, solutions are produced, and choices are made – but these three processes can happen in any order. In contrast to the idea of rationality and linearity, Cohen et al (1972: 1) identify: ‘collections of choices looking for problems, issues and feelings looking for decision situations in which they might be aired, solutions looking for issues to which they might be an answer, and decision makers looking for work’. The garbage can metaphor describes the often-unpredictable mix of these processes, producing an uncertain outcome. Kingdon (1984; 1995; see also Lieberman, 2002) argues that major policy change may happen only when a ‘window of opportunity’ opens and these three ‘streams’—problems, policies and politics—come together. In most cases policy does not change radically if a policy problem does not receive enough attention, an adequate idea or solution is not available and/or policymakers lack the motive and opportunity to do something with it. Policymaker attention lurches from issue to issue, often before an acceptable solution can be produced and adopted.

The Logic of Subgovernments and Consultation. UK General Elections often produce a new party of government, but regular changes of government do not cause wholesale shifts in policy because most decisions are beyond the reach of ministers. The sheer size of government necessitates breaking policy down into more manageable issues involving a smaller number of knowledgeable participants. Most policy is conducted through small and specialist ‘policy communities’ which process ‘technical’ issues at a level of government not particularly visible to the public or Parliament, and with minimal ministerial or senior civil service involvement. These arrangements exist because there is a logic to devolving decisions and consulting with certain affected interests. Ministers rely on their officials for information and advice. For specialist issues, those officials rely on specialist organisations. Organisations trade that information/advice (and other resources such as the ability to implement or ‘deliver’ a large group membership) for access to, and influence within, government (Richardson and Jordan, 1979; Jordan and Maloney, 1997; for the policy community/network terminology see Cairney, 2012a: 179; Jordan and Cairney, 2013: 238).

Street Level Bureaucracy. Although legislation is made at the ‘top’, its implementation is influenced heavily by ‘street level bureaucrats’. Examples include teachers, doctors, police officers, judges, and welfare officers – they are the people who take the final step of policy delivery. Since SLBs are subject to an immense range of requirements (many of which are vague) laid down by regulations at the top, they are powerless to implement them all successfully. Instead, they establish routines to satisfy a satisfactory proportion of central government objectives, while preserving a sense of professional autonomy necessary to maintain morale. So, radical policy change at the top may translate into often-routine decision making at the bottom (Lipsky, 1980).
These theories, concepts and descriptions are often considered to be universal rather than country-specific. Political systems may differ in important ways, but their policymakers are subject to similar pressures which often help produce similar behaviour. For example, commentators from other countries have, over the years, looked to the UK as an inspirational system that is not subject to the same incremental processes as theirs (see Hayes, 2001: 2 on the US, Krauss and Pekkanen, 2004 on Japan, Fabrini and Gilbert, 2000: 28 on Italy and Kitschelt and Streeck, 2003: 2 on Germany). Yet, most aspects of incrementalism do not relate specifically to individual political systems. Rather, they relate as much to limited information and cognitive abilities and the need to build on past policies as they do to the levels of bargaining and compromise within particular political systems.

The same can be said for the idea of inertia (Cairney, 2011c: 214). While ‘majoritarianism’ may be associated with the ability to change policy quickly form the top-down, the evidence is not persuasive. Rather, for example, Rose (1990; Rose and Davies, 1994) highlights the effect of decades of cumulative policies; newly elected policymakers inherit a huge government with massive commitments. Since governments are more likely to introduce new than terminate old policies, the cumulative effect is profound. Similarly, Hogwood and Peters (1983; see also Geva-May, 2004) argue that the size and scope of the state is such that any ‘new’ policy is likely to be a revision of an old one following a degree of policy failure. Policy succession is more likely than innovation because the issue already has legitimacy, the resources for a service delivery institution exist and policy has an established clientele. More significant innovations also require policy termination to reduce costs before committing new resources. Yet, complete termination also has immediate costs (financial and political), may smack of failure without direct replacement, may be opposed by groups and interests associated with the policy, and may be undermined by organisations operating in relative anonymity (if policy is ‘technical’ or obscure) or seeking new ways to justify their existence. Policymaking may therefore be about dealing with the legacies of past decisions rather than necessarily departing incrementally from them.

Cairney (2011c: 214) extends these comparisons to other universal concepts such as governance, power and ideas (discussed in chapters 4 and 5). Overall, these descriptions of policymaking show us that the UK shares with other countries a set of constraints that are not specific to individual political systems. Those systems may be different, and operate differently, in important ways – but we should examine and demonstrate those differences rather than assume they exist.

**Policymaking Styles: the UK and Devolved Governments**

This point is particularly relevant to our comparisons of policy and policymaking by the UK and devolved governments. The UK system is often portrayed as hierarchical; power is held at the centre and the government makes policy from the top-down and with limited concessions to Parliament or other actors. Lijphart (1999: 7) treated the UK as an archetypal
‘majoritarian’ system because, at the time, it fulfilled the majority of his ten criteria – including the use of a plurality system which concentrates power in the executive, fosters adversarial two-party politics and produces ‘free-for-all competition among groups’ (1999: 5) rather than close cooperation between groups and government.

Devolution has produced the potential for different forms of government, including the ‘power sharing’ model in Northern Ireland (although devolution was suspended in 2000 and from 2002-7), with the single transferable vote electoral system used to allocate proportional seats for parties representing protestant and catholic populations (the allocation of ministers in government is also proportional by party). The systems in Wales and Scotland were also designed with consensus democracy elements (see Birrell, 2012: 72-3; Cairney, 2013c). Both use more proportional electoral systems (mixed member proportional, or ‘additional member’) with a greater likelihood of minority or coalition government and some degree of cooperation between parties. The Scottish Parliament system is more proportional - it has a 73/56 constituency and regional member split, while the Welsh Assembly has 40/20 (for the effect on the proportionality of election results, see Scully and Wyn Jones, 2005). Both systems were also accompanied in 1999 by the (albeit vague) idea that their politicians would engage in a ‘new politics’ of cooperation across parties and between groups and government.

Flinders (2010: 176) finds some evidence for these differences. He identifies ‘bi-constitutionality’ following the promotion of consensus democracies within an overall majoritarian UK system. Scotland in particular is associated with the phrase ‘new politics’ as a symbol of a shift away from the politics of ‘old Westminster’ (Cairney and McGarvey, 2013: 10-13).

Yet, the policymaking processes in the UK and devolved governments are not as different as they appear to be, because they are all subject to universal policymaking constraints - such as ‘bounded rationality’, inheritance before choice, and the need to consult widely to secure the necessary knowledge and support for successful policy. The UK’s alleged tendency to engage in top-down imposition and insulate the policy process from other actors is often exaggerated. Our knowledge of policy theory helps explain why the UK governments are generally unwilling or unable to make policy in this way even if high profile examples suggest that it is their normal style (Cairney, 2012b; Jordan and Cairney, 2013). This is backed up by the empirical evidence which often demonstrates strong similarities in UK and devolved policy styles.

To guide (and help clarify) our analysis of policy areas in the second part of the book, we can break these similarities and differences into three main categories:

1. **Consultation styles.** Governments and groups engage regularly to exchange information and advice for access and influence within policymaking arenas. Interest groups in Scotland and Wales often refer to their close relationships with government and express the feeling that their access is superior to that enjoyed by their UK counterparts. Yet, with the exception of some high profile cases, UK groups often describe very similar access and influence (Cairney, 2008; 2009b).
2. Implementation styles and the use of policy tools. We may find greater differences in the ways in which the UK and devolved governments try to implement and deliver policy (Cairney, 2009a). Greer and Jarman (2008) identify a stark contrast between UK and devolved government styles. For example, the ‘top down’ UK uses market mechanisms, competition (including league tables) and targets backed by a punitive regime (2008: 173-8), while the Scottish Government puts more trust in partnerships with professional bodies and local authorities (2008: 178-83).

3. Policy choices and outcomes. These comparisons are often complicated by differences in policy choices which often seem to symbolise a different approach to government and/or the balance between the state and the market. High profile examples include higher education tuition fees (the UK Government raised maximum annual fees to £9000 while the Scottish Government abolished fees for Scottish residents), the introduction of ‘free personal care’ in Scotland; and the NHS internal market in England (which was largely dismantled in Scotland). Yet, their policy differences are generally harder to spot and they are often less apparent following implementation (Cairney and McGarvey, 2013: 187-9).

Conclusion

The word ‘complex’ is ever present in the study of policy. We begin by identifying the multifaceted meaning of ‘public policy’: from the identification of vague aims to the delivery of outcomes; from the core executive to a wide range of bodies inside and outside government; from recognised policymakers to the groups on which they rely; and from visible decisions to the decision not to act. This variation in meaning makes it difficult to measure, categorise and describe public policy. Governments have a huge range of tools at their disposal and the advantages of particular tools may be as important to policymakers as their desire to change the world. Public policy is the combination of a huge number of instruments used by a wide range of actors, all with their own aims and incentives to act. The result is a policymaking world that is difficult to study, understand and explain.

The solution to this problem is to use established models and theories of policy and policymaking to make sure that our evidence gathering is systematic, our understanding of action is couched in the same language, and our findings are comparable to studies produced elsewhere. Only then can we make enough sense of the policymaking world to share and learn from each other’s studies. This is easier said than done – there are many jargon-laden theories and concepts from which to choose. Our ability to translate the language and accumulate knowledge from these studies is not always clear.

In this context, chapter 2 outlines two main ways in which to generate a common description of policymaking. First, we begin with a study of comprehensive rationality and policy cycles. A focus on comprehensive rationality allows us to use an ideal-type to describe what would have to happen to produce the type of policymaking we associate with the Westminster model. We can then identify the factors – such as the cognitive limits of policymakers – which undermine that image and suggest a more complicated system in which power is more diffuse and policy is produced by a much wider range of actors beyond the core executive.
focus on the policy cycle reinforces that idea – it shows us the large number of stages through which policy would have to pass, unproblematically, to allow a policy decided at the top to be carried out in a straightforward way. As our discussion suggests, the real world is not that simple.

Second, we can generate – from a wide range of theories and concepts – the key tenets of policy studies. These studies describe a system in which long periods of policymaking stability and policy continuity are punctuated by instability and change. Policymakers may favour incrementalism as a rule, but pay attention to, and change profoundly, a small number of areas. In most cases, their inherited commitments, ideas (or ways of thinking) and agreements between powerful actors constrain their ability to pursue radical policy change. In some cases, major shocks or punctuations help produce profound changes in policymaking and policy. These profound changes may occur throughout the system, or only occur in some areas, only be modified as policy is made elsewhere (such as when it is delivered routinely by public service workers and other actors inside and outside government).

These insights can then be used to inform our empirical studies, when we make comparisons between UK and devolved government experiences and (our main concern) the outcomes of policymaking in different policy areas. As a whole, these insights suggest that differences across policy issues may often be as important as those in different jurisdictions. Let’s find out if that is true.

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