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How to write theory-driven policy analysis

Abstract. Here is a guide to writing theory-driven policy analysis. Your aim is to identify a policy problem and solution, know your audience, and account for the complexity of policymaking. At first, it may seem like daunting task to put together policy analysis and policy theory. On its own, policy analysis seems difficult but relatively straightforward: use evidence to identify and measure a policy problem, compare the merits of one or more solution, and make a recommendation on the steps to take us from policy to action. However, policy process research tells us that people will engage emotionally with that evidence, and that policymakers operate in a complex system of which they have very limited knowledge and control. So, how can we produce a policy analysis paper to which people will pay attention, and respond positively and effectively, under such circumstances? I focus on developing the critical analysis that will help you produce effective and feasible analysis. To do so, I show how policy analysis forms part of a collection of exercises to foster analysis informed by theory and reflection.

Aims of this document:

1. *Describe the context*. There are two fields of study – theory and analysis – which do not always speak to each other. Theory can inform analysis, but it is not always clear how. I show the payoff to theory-driven policy analysis and the difference between it and regular analysis. Note the two key factors that policy analysis should address: your audience will engage emotionally with your analysis, and the feasibility of your solutions depends on the complexity of the policy environment.

2. *Describe how the coursework helps you combine policy theory and policy analysis.* Policy analysis is one of four tasks. There is a reflection, to let you 'show your work'; how your knowledge of policy theory guides your description of a problem and feasible solutions. The essay allows you to expand on theory, to describe how and why policy changes (and therefore what a realistic policy analysis would look like). The blogs encourage new communication skills. In one, you explore how you would expect a policy maker or influencer to sell the recommendations in your policy analysis. In another, you explain complex concepts to a non-academic audience.

Background note. I have written this document as if part of a book to be called *Teaching Public Policy* and co-authored with Dr Emily St Denny. For that audience, I have two aims: (1) to persuade policy scholars-as-teachers to adopt this kind of coursework in their curriculum; and, (2) to show students how to complete it effectively. If you prefer shorter advice, see Writing a policy paper and blog post and Writing an essay on politics, policymaking, and policy change. If you are interested in more background reading, see: The New Policy Sciences (by Paul Cairney and Chris Weible) which describes the need to combine policy theory-driven research with policy analysis; Practical Lessons from Policy Theories which describes eight attempts by scholars to translate policy theory into lessons that can be used for policy analysis. The theories make more sense if you have read the corresponding 1000 Words posts (based on Cairney, 2012). Some of the forthcoming text will look familiar if you read my blog because I am consolidating several individual posts into an overall discussion. I'm not quite there yet.

What do we want public policy students to learn? How do we do it?

When we teach public policy we focus on *what* to learn and *how* to learn. The former can be split into two main objects of study, both of which are crucial to our understanding of the policy process and our role within it (Cairney and Weible, 2017):

1. The 'basic science' of public policy research. We focus on using policy models, concepts, theories, and frameworks to understand policymaking dynamics, from the actions of individual policymakers to overall patterns of policymaking in systems.

2. The 'applied science' of policy analysis, in which we apply our knowledge of the policy process to identify a policy problem and possible solutions.

From that simple starting point, we can produce a series of broad learning outcomes which combine *knowledge* of the subject with the *skills* we require to understand the subject:

1. *Knowledge of key definitions of policy and the discussions they raise*. Most introductions to policy focus on the problem of defining it, and the insights we generate while trying. We can start with a basic definition, such as the 'sum total of government action, from signals of intent to the final outcomes' (Cairney, 2012: 5). Then, for example, we ask if 'government action' includes what policymakers say they will do as well as what they actually do; if policy includes the effects of a decision as well as the decision itself; and if 'the government' is a useful term if we seek to include elected and unelected policymakers in our analysis. Each point is relevant to research on policymaking, but the latter point is particularly important to policy analysis, since to 'know your audience' is to know *who they are* as well as how they think.

2. *How to understand the policy process using frameworks, theories, and concepts*. Students require some knowledge of the ways in which researchers describe the policy process. They learn key concepts and how they are applied, including to 'zoom in' to focus on individuals, then 'zoom out' to consider institutions and networks, and zoom out further to analyse policymaking systems. Theory-rich courses identify the role of policymaker psychology, the complexity of the policy environment in which they engage, and intermediate concepts such as the networks connecting people and systems.

3. *How to understand the relationship between policy theory and policy analysis*. In most cases, modern theories seek alternatives to an understanding of policymaking based on comprehensive rationality and the stages of a policy cycle. Yet, the assumption of policymaker rationality and the policy cycle remains a key reference point for policymakers, seeking to project a coherent image of their activities. Therefore, policy analysts, trying to identify problems and describe feasible solutions to a policymaker audience, cannot afford to simply reject this approach (Cairney, 2015). Instead, they need to adapt new knowledge to existing ways of thinking and communicating.

4. *How to visualise the policy process*. Another cause of the policy cycle's endurance is that it is a simple image. It is difficult for policy theories to capture the complexity of policymaking *and* present a simple and memorable image. The cycle is visually and politically appealing. Yet, it is now common for policy makers and advisers to project a far messier policy environment, which undermines its value and memorability. In this new context, there is hope for more useful and as-simple visualisations of the policy process.

5. *How to conduct research in public policy*. Basic science may focus on research skills to produce new knowledge. Applied science may focus on skills to combine existing knowledge with the analysis of new contexts and problems. Evidence gathering for policy analysis is more likely to be constrained by time, reflecting the speed of politics and demand for synthesises information at short notice.

I describe some of these differences in focus and approach in table 1. Note the differences between the left and right columns but also the inevitable – and often valuable – overlaps between them both. They are often taught separately, but the separation should not be artificial.

Table 1: The separation and overlaps between basic and applied policy sciences

	Basic Science	Key overlaps	Applied science
Key questions to guide research	What is the policy process? How can we identify and measure policy change?	What is policy? How should we study it?	What is the policy problem? What policy solutions are technically and politically feasible?
Conceptual and analytical skills	Theoretical analysis. Micro, macro, meso levels of analytical abstraction Frameworks, theories, concepts, and models	Conceptual and empirical analysis How useful is the 'policy cycle' to (a) understand the policy process, and (b) engage in the policy process?	Policy analysis Problem definition, formulation, implementation, and evaluation.
Research skills	Using research methods to produce new knowledge of the policy process	Combining research methods - quantitative and qualitative methods, modelling, social networks analysis, ethnography	Using research methods to generate knowledge of a policy problem and calculate the likely success of solutions.

The theory and analysis divide

Ideally, there would be a high overlap between scientific and practical policy analysis, but students often learn quickly that there is a gap between theory-driven studies of the policy process and more hands-on analysis of how people should act within that process to identify problems and solutions. Indeed, often these studies appear in separate courses or modules. A student can often decide to learn about basic *or* applied science. These choices are more or less stark according to the ways in which we design and deliver policy courses. In full undergraduate or postgraduate degrees, we can offer modules covering almost all topics and skills. If we expect students to pursue a PhD, we expect training in a variety of research methods. *However, in shorter or more introductory online or executive courses, we need to make more difficult choices about the skills and knowledge we can reasonably expect a student*

to learn and apply. Further, most students will graduate and leave with a bachelor's or master's level degree, perhaps seeking to apply a core set of skills to pursue theoretically informed policy analysis, while some will return from public service to revisit their knowledge and analytical skills. As teachers, we may work on the assumption that their engagement with all relevant basic and applied research will be limited, to help us adapt to their needs, but to stress that they will only generate a full understanding of policymaking by studying basic and applied science.

For example, Cairney and Weible (2017) argue that this gap should be smaller, partly to help identify the practical benefits of theory-driven policy research; to make sure that policy analysis is informed by state-of-the-art research instead of relying on unrealistic assumptions and models. This aim was central to Lasswell's (1951; 1956; 1971) original vision for the 'policy sciences': to use policy process research to identify the policymaking context, and the tools of policy analysis to provide a systematic way to think about how to identify and solve key problems within it.

Yet, Cairney and Weible (2017) argue that these two separate concerns – to describe policymaking, and prescribe action – have diverged. Policy process research has morphed into a basic science in which the audience of policy theorists is primarily a group of other policy theorists. There is clear potential to translate their insights to a wider audience, and there are many notable attempts to do it systematically (Weible and Cairney, 2018; Weible et al., 2012; Cairney, 2015; 2016; Shipan and Volden, 2012). However, there is a stronger professional incentive to focus on theory development and empirical research and to publish it for a small audience in high profile political science journals.

The unintended consequence is a highly specialized field of policy theory in which there are barriers to entry: it takes a lot of time and effort to decode the policy theory jargon, understand each theory or approach in depth, and understand how the insights of one theory relate to another (Cairney, 2013). There are blogs – see the [1000 Words](#) and [500 Words](#) series - and textbooks designed for this task, but they either scratch the surface of the field (Cairney, 2012; John, 2012), provide a huge amount of material (Parsons, 1996), or summarise theories without decoding them enough to make them accessible to new readers (Weible, 2017). There is no substitute for intense and sustained study to understand this field in sufficient depth, perhaps unless our audience trusts us enough to accept our key arguments on the principle of 'I've read it, so you don't have to' (see for example, Cairney 2016 on the applicable of policy theory to studies of 'evidence based policymaking').

Consequently, one danger is that policy analysts will not have the time or incentive to learn from this field. The 'opportunity cost' is high. Instead of reading a jargon-filled literature, often with no clear payoff to policy analysis, students can go straight to the relatively clear and simple tools of policy analysis, including economic approaches such as cost-benefit analysis, more abstract or sophisticated models or decision trees, or step-by-step guides to policy analysis which incorporate some policy research insights (for example, Weimer and Vining, 2017).

Policy Analysis: the classic advice

In fact, Bardach's (2012) classic text [A Practical Guide for Policy Analysis](#) combines policy analysis and a valuable focus on the need for political awareness. He describes policy analysis in eight steps:

1. 'Define the problem'. Provide a diagnosis of a policy problem, using rhetoric and eye-catching statistics to generate attention.

2. 'Assemble some evidence'. Provide relevant data in an efficient way (to reflect resource constraints such as time pressures in politics). Make sure to think about which data are essential - to describe the nature and size of the problem, the available resources to deal with it, and the impact of previous policies – and when you can substitute estimation for research. Speak with the likely consumers of your evidence to anticipate how they will react.

3. 'Construct the alternatives'. Identify all of the relevant and feasible policy solutions that your audience might consider, preferably by identifying the causal effect of the intervention (how does the solution work, and what will be the effect, if implemented as intended?). Think of these solutions as on a spectrum of acceptability, for example according to the extent to which your audience will accept market or state solutions. Your list can include things governments already do (such as tax or legislate), or a new policy design. Focus first on the extent to which you are locking-in policymakers to your solution even if it proves to be ineffective (such as if you need to purchase new resources).

4. 'Select the criteria'. This step involves the use of values to decide which solution will produce the best outcome, recognising the political nature of policy evaluation, which is influenced by the measures you choose to determine a successful outcome. Typical measures relate to efficiency, equity and fairness, the trade-off between individual freedom and collective action, and the extent to which a policy process involves citizens in deliberation. They also relate to well-understood or established attitudes summed up in what seems legally and politically feasible.

5. 'Project the outcomes'. This step involves predicting what will happen if you select each solution. Focus on the outcomes that key actors care about (such as cost savings or value for money), and quantify and visualise your predictions as far as possible. Since prediction involves estimation based on past experience (or guesswork), be careful not to over claim or encourage too much optimism. Instead, for example, establish that your solutions will meet an agreed threshold of effectiveness in terms of the money to be spent, or, present a variety of scenarios based on changing your assumptions underpinning each prediction.

6. 'Confront the trade-offs'. Working out how to express and compare the pros and cons of each solution, such as how much of a bad service policymakers will accept to cut costs, or how much security is provided by a reduction in freedom. This will help you assess the combination of technical and political feasibility; some solutions may appear to be more technically effective but producing costs that are too unpopular. Establish a way to establish a baseline for the measurement of marginal changes, and compare costs and benefits preferably in relation to money.

7. 'Decide'. Try to look at your case through the lens of a likely policymakers, and decide if they are likely to deem it persuasive. For example, ask yourself: if this is such a good solution, why hasn't it been done already.

8. 'Tell your story'. Identify your target audience and tailor your case to them. Focus on coherence and clarity of exposition, making sure your story is logical. Weigh up the benefits of oral versus written presentation. Keep it short and simple, with an executive summary and other ways to communicate effectively. Avoid overcomplicated, academic language, stuffed with facts and jargon.

This advice, for students in the US, bears close resemblance to the advice I received from Professor Brian Hogwood as a student in the UK (see the end of Writing a Policy Paper). It can be summarised as follows:

1. Assume that your audience is not an experienced policy analyst.
2. Assume a political environment in which there is limited attention or time to consider problems, and some policy solutions will be politically infeasible.
3. Describe the policy problem for your audience: why would they see it as something worthy of their energy?
4. Discuss 3-5 possible solutions, the differences between them, and their respective costs and benefits. Costs include financial, staffing, social, and political (e.g. is it feasible in your political party? Will it be electorally popular?).
5. An 'unthinkable' option can be useful, to help sharpen the mind, but only if this option can be kept secret. In other words, consider the potential political fallout if your option – designed to aid thought, not to be a realistic choice – was leaked and described by your opponents as a 'trial balloon'.
6. Do not 'flood' your audience with information. Keep it short with the aid of visual techniques (tables, figures) that sum up the issue concisely. In fact, Hogwood seems to recommend well below 10 pages and suggests that policymakers may only pay attention to 2-3 pages of analysis. Although far shorter than you might expect, this advice is consistent with insights from policymaker psychology about the need to minimise cognitive load and make the problem seem solvable (Cairney and Kwiatkowski, 2018). Therefore, in my coursework guidelines, I set a maximum of 2000 words (plus bibliography) to be shared between policy analysis and reflection.

So, what is missing? 1. Policymaker psychology

What should policy analysis incorporate from policy process research? Cairney and Weible (2017) suggest two key modifications. The first is to build on the idea of 'telling your story' with greater reference to policymaker psychology:

> 'Policy analysts have always known the value of some responses to human cognition. For example, the exhortation to keep policy analysis short, minimise jargon, and favour concrete examples over an abstract problem, is based generally on the need to minimise the cognitive load on your audience …Yet, consider if policymakers feel antagonism towards a person giving what they perceive to be dubious evidence without realising they are 'carrying' a group emotion with them … A sole focus on cognitive load is futile if policymakers have a reason to not pay attention to an issue *at all* or to *reject the analysis completely* because they find it threatening'.

They suggest that, 'if people engage emotionally with information, there is no way to appeal to all audiences with the same information'. In other words, we cannot simply make an 'evidence based' case for identifying and solving a policy problem. Theory driven policy

analysis is about 'skilful persuasion which appeals to emotion', and policy theories provide extensive discussion about how policy actors seek to persuade with evidence. For example, Cairney et al (2017: 401) identify four examples for the literature:

- 'Combine facts with emotional appeals to prompt lurches of policy maker attention from one policy image to another (True, Jones, and Baumgartner 2007, 161).
- Tell simple stories that are easy to understand, help manipulate people' s biases, apportion praise and blame, and highlight the moral and political value of solutions (Jones, Shanahan, and McBeth 2014).
- Interpret new evidence through the lens of the pre-existing beliefs of actors within coalitions, some of which dominate policy networks (Weible, Heikkila, and Sabatier 2012).
- Produce a policy solution that is feasible and exploit a time when policy makers have the opportunity to adopt it (Kingdon 1984).'

Of course, the policy analyst will likely face a stark ethical dilemma about how to draw the line between an appropriate persuasive argument and inappropriate manipulation. However, the solution is not simply to withdraw from any form of psychology-informed communication. Policy research suggests that such a move will undermine the effectiveness of policy analysis. Rather, we need to incorporate ethical questions into policy analysis training, to develop a set of principles to guide our behaviour in these new circumstances. Policy analysis is already about critical thinking about a policy problem, which involves critical thinking about the role of the analyst and how not to cross ethical lines.

What is missing? 2. Policy context and complexity

The second modification is to build on what Bardach (2012: 57) calls the 'emergent-features problem'. Given such policymaking complexity, we need to account for our lack of understanding of the policymaking environment or context. As the 1000 Words and 500 Words series suggest, there are dozens of policy theories and concepts devoted to the identification of a wider environment in which policymaking takes place. Each concept reinforces the point that policymakers do not operate in a world in which they can oversee a policy cycle with linear stages. Guides to policy analysis do recognise these constraints associated with policymaking context, but we need to draw more from policy theories and studies to understand them fully. Put simply, most theories identify five or six constituents of a policy environment (Heikkila and Cairney, 2017).

First, the environment contains many policy makers and influencers spread across many levels and types of government (or other venues in which authoritative choice takes place). Consequently, it is not a straightforward task to identify and know your audience, particularly if the problem you seek to solve requires a combination of policy instruments.

Second, each type of government is an institution driven by formal and informal rules. Formal rules are often written down or known widely. Informal rules are the norms and practices that are difficult to understand, and may not even be understood in the same way by participants. Consequently, it is difficult to know if your solution will be a good fit with the standard operating procedures of organisations (and therefore if it is politically feasible or too challenging).

Third, policymakers and influencers operate in subgovernments, forming advocacy coalitions based on shared beliefs, or networks built on resources such as trust. Effective policy analysis may require you to engage with or become part of such networks, to allow you to understand the unwritten rules of the game and encourage your audience to trust the messenger. In some cases, the rules relate to your willingness to accept current losses for future gains, to accept limited impact of your analysis now in the hope of acceptance at the next opportunity.

Fourth, actors relate their analysis to shared understandings of the world – how it is, and how it should be – which are often so established as to be taken for granted. Common terms include paradigms, hegemons, core beliefs, and monopolies of understandings. These dominant frames of reference give meaning to your policy solution. They prompt you to couch your solutions in terms of, for example, a strong attachment to evidence-based cases in public health, value for money in treasury departments, or with regard to core principles such as liberalism or socialism in different political systems.

Finally, your solutions relate to socioeconomic context and events which can be impossible to ignore and out of the control of policymakers. Such factors range from a political system's geography, demography, social attitudes, economy, while events can be routine elections on unexpected crises. To some extent, crises can be described opportunistically to encourage new solutions. Or, the unpredictability of events can prompt you to be modest in your claims, since the environment may be more important to outcomes than your favoured intervention.

What are the implications of these extra considerations?
There are many, but here are some key examples:

1. Do not assume that you know who your audience is or should be. Policy research shows is that the key actors are not necessarily at the 'centre' or the actors in formal positions of power. Further, most actors ignore most issues most of the time, and our analysis may be more geared towards encouraging attention from a particular audience, rather than assuming that all audiences will be interested.
2. Avoid 'single shot' policy analysis in which there is a one size fits all policy solution. A policy that works here and now may not work there or later.
3. Avoid the idea that the selection of a policy solution sets in motion an inevitable process of legitimation, implementation, and evaluation. Instead, your analysis may be multi-faceted, to allow you to track progress and make further recommendations.
4. Encourage critical analysis among your audience. This may be the trickiest task of all. An emotionally or cognitively satisfying solution may be based on a simple description of a problem and the sense that it can be solved in a quite straightforward way. Yet, policy success may also depend on your audience recognising its need to learn continuously and adapt strategies through processes such as trial and error.
5. Remember that policy analysis is about power (Bacci, 1999). In your analysis you might choose between 'speaking truth to power' (Wildavsky, 1980) or a [more pragmatic approach](#) based on gaining trust in you as the messenger, but you don't have the chance to reflect on power in a more meaningful way. A separate reflection exercise allows you to explain the wider context of considerations such as 'political feasibility' which can relate superficially to widespread public preferences or fundamentally to profound race and gender based inequalities of power in political systems.

Much of the policy literature also suggests that the context for policymaking may be more important than the actual substance of your policy advice. To be an effective messenger:

> 'focus on engagement for the long term to develop the resources necessary to maximise the impact of policy analysis and understand the context in which the information is used. Among the advantages of long-term engagement are learning the 'rules of the game' in organisations, forming networks built on trust and a track record of reliability, learning how to 'soften' policy solutions according to the beliefs of key policymakers and influencers, and spotting 'windows of opportunity' to bring together attention to a problem, a feasible solution, and the motive and opportunity of policymakers to select it … In short, the substance of your analysis only has meaning in relation to the context in which it is used. Further, generating trust in the messenger and knowing your audience may be more important to success than presenting the evidence' (Cairney and Weible, 2017).

Overall, our key aim is to help all students - with various backgrounds and motivations to learn – study public policy with reference to the same foundational story about policymaker psychology and policy context. We provide a narrative of the policy process, to represent substantive knowledge of the discipline of public policy, and use it as a key reference point for policy analysis, to help identify how students can learn about and engage in the policy process.

From policymaker psychology and policy context to reflective and creative coursework

To achieve this aim, we combine seminar discussion with coursework. In seminars, we can discuss key concepts and theories in policy process research and how they relate to the policy advice we might give. In coursework, we can combine exercises to develop specific skills then consider how those skills contribute to an overall approach to 'intelligent policymaking' (Sanderson, 2009).

Although difficult to pin down and define, intelligent or critical thinking is crucial to policy analysis. The world is too unpredictable, and it changes too much, for us to develop and stick to a specific type of analysis (such as cost-benefit analysis) and hope that it applies to all eventualities. Instead, Cairney and Weible (2017: 7) emphasise the development – in ourselves and, hopefully, in our audience – of critical thought and analysis:

> 'Scholars can help actors in the policy process to ask better questions, identify their own assumptions and cognitive filters and biases, see the world through different viewpoints, recognize the strengths and limitations of their information searches and networks, and better specify the source of their successes and failures. Above all else, we can dispense with the idea of comparing real-world policymaking with the myth of comprehensively rational action, to advise people not to give up their bounded and irrational minds but to look for opportunities to learn and adapt their strategies to better achieve their goals. To make it happen, we need to recognize the combined value of basic and applied science'.

One step to combining policy analysis and policy process research is to modify the former according to the insights of the latter. In other words, we consider how a 'new policy sciences' inspired policy analysis differs from the analyses already provided by scholars such as Bardach and Hogwood.

It could turn out that the effects of our new insights on a policy briefing could be so subtle that you might blink and miss them. Or, there are so many possibilities from which to choose that it is impossible to provide a blueprint for new policy science advice. Therefore, I encourage students to be creative in their policy analysis and reflective in their assessment of their analysis. Our aim is to think about the skills you need to analyse policy, from producing or synthesising evidence, to crafting an argument based on knowing your audience, and considering how your strategy might shift in line with a shifting context.

To aid creativity, I set a range of tasks so that students can express themselves in different ways, to different audiences, with different constraints. For example, we can learn how to be punchy and concise from a 3-minute presentation or 500-word blog, and use that skill to get to the point more quickly in policy analysis or clarify the research question in the essay. The overall effect should be that students can take what they have learned from each exercise and use it for the others. In each section below, I describe this mix of coursework to students then, in each box, note the underlying rationale.

1. A 3-minute spoken presentation to your peers in the seminar.

In 3 minutes, you need to identify a problem, describe one or more possible solutions, and end your presentation in a convincing way. For example, if you don't make a firm recommendation, what can you say to avoid looking like you cop out? Focus on being persuasive, to capture your audience's imagination. Focus on the policy context, in which you want to present a problem as solvable (who will pay attention to an intractable problem?) but not make inflated claims about how one action can solve a major problem. Focus on providing a memorable take home message.

The presentation can be as creative as you wish, but it should not rely on powerpoint in the room. Imagine that none of the screens work or that you are making your pitch to a policymaker as you walk along the street: can you make this presentation engaging and memorable without any reference to someone else's technology? Can you do it without just reading out your notes? Can you do it well in **under** 3 minutes? We will then devote 5 minutes to questions from the audience about your presentation. Being an active part of the audience – and providing peer review - is as important as doing a good presentation of your own.

BOX: rationale for 3-minute presentation.

If students perform this task first (a few weeks before the coursework is due), it gives them an initial opportunity to see how to present only the most relevant information, and to gauge how an audience responds to their ideas. Audience questions provide further peer-driven feedback. I also plan a long seminar to allow each student (in a group of approximately 15 people) to present, then ask all students about which presentation they remember and why. This exercise helps students see that they are competing with each other for limited policymaker attention, and learn from their peers about what makes an effective pitch. Maybe you are wondering why I discourage powerpoint. It's largely because it will cause each presenter to go way over time by cramming in too much information, and this problem outweighs the benefit of being able to present an impressive visualisation. I prefer to encourage students to only tell the audience what they will remember (by only presenting what they remember).

Provide a policy analysis paper which has to make a substantive argument or recommendation in approximately two pages (1000 words), on the assumption that busy policymakers won't read much else before deciding whether or not to pay attention to the problem and your solutions.

Then provide a reflection paper (also approximately 1000 words) to reflect your theoretical understanding of the policy process. You can choose how to split the 2000 word length, between analysis and reflection. You can give each exercise 1000 each (roughly a 2-page analysis), provide a shorter analysis and more reflection, or widen the analysis and reject the need for conceptual reflection. The choice is yours to make, as long as you justify your choice in your reflection.

When writing policy analysis, I ask you to keep it super-short on the assumption that you have to make your case quickly to people with 99 other things to do. For example, what can you tell someone in one paragraph or a half-page to get them to read all 2 pages? It is tempting to try to tell someone everything you know, because everything is connected and to simplify is to describe a problem simplistically. Instead, be smart enough to know that such self-indulgence won't impress your audience. In person, they might smile politely, but their eyes are looking at the elevator lights. In writing, they can skim your analysis or simply move on. So, use these three statements to help you focus less on your need to supply information and more on their demand:

1. *Your aim is not to give a full account of a problem*. It's to get someone important to care about it.
2. *Your aim is not to give a painstaking account of all possible solutions*. It's to give a sense that at least one solution is feasible and worth pursuing.
3. *Your guiding statement should be*: policymakers will only pay attention to your problem if they think they can solve it, and without that solution being too costly.

Otherwise, I don't like to give you too much advice because I want you to be creative about your presentation; to be confident enough to take chances and feel that you'll see the reward of making a leap. At the very least, you have three key choices to make about how far you'll go to make a point:

1. *Who is your audience*? Our discussion of the limits to centralised policymaking suggest that your most influential audience will not necessarily be an elected policymaker, but who else would it be?
2. *How 'manipulative' should you be*? Our discussions of 'bounded rationality' and 'evidence-based policymaking' suggest that policymakers combine 'rational' and 'irrational' shortcuts to gather information and make choices. So, do you appeal to their desire to set goals and gather a lot of scientific information and/or make an emotional and manipulative appeal?
3. *Are you an advocate or an 'honest broker'* (Pielke, 2007)? Contemporary discussions of science advice to government highlight unresolved debates about the role of unelected advisors: should you simply lay out some possible solutions or advocate one solution strongly?

For our purposes, there are no wrong answers to these questions. Instead, I want you to make and defend your decisions. That is the aim of your policy paper 'reflection': to 'show your work'. You still have some room to be creative in your reflection: tell me what you know about policy theory and how it informed your decisions. Here are some examples, but it is up to you to decide what to highlight:

1. Show how your understanding of policymaker psychology helped you decide how to present information on problems and solutions.
2. Extract insights from policy theories, such as from punctuated equilibrium theory on policymaker attention, multiple streams analysis on timing and feasibility, or the NPF on how to tell persuasive stories.
3. Explore the implications of the lack of 'comprehensive rationality' and absence of a 'policy cycle': feasibility is partly about identifying the extent to which a solution is 'doable' when central governments have limited powers. What 'policy style' or policy instruments would be appropriate for the solution you favour?

I use the following questions to guide the marking on the policy paper: Tailored properly to a clearly defined audience? Punchy and concise summary? Clearly defined problem? Good evidence or argument behind the solution? Clear recommendations backed by a sense that the solution is feasible? Evidence of substantial reading, accompanied by well explained further reading?

In previous years, successful students gave a very clear and detailed account of the nature and size of the policy problem. The best reports used graphics and/ or statistics to describe the problem in several ways. Some identified a multi-faceted problem – such as in health outcomes, and health inequalities – without presenting confusing analysis. Some were able to present an image of urgency, to separate this problem from the many others that might grab policymaker attention. Successful students presented one or more solutions which seemed technically and/ or politically feasible. By technically feasible, I mean that there is a good chance that the policy will work as intended if implemented. For example, they provided evidence of its success in a comparable country (or in the past) or outlined models designed to predict the effects of specific policy instruments. By politically feasible, I mean that you consider how open your audience would be to the solution, and how likely the suggestion is to be acceptable to key policymakers. Some students added to a good discussion of feasibility by comparing the pros/ cons of different scenarios. In contrast, some relatively weak reports proposed solutions which were vague, untested, and/ or not likely to be acted upon.

BOX on rationale for policy analysis and reflection.

Students already have texts such as Bardach (2012) at their disposal, and they give some solid advice about the task. However, I want to encourage students to think more about how their knowledge of the policy process will guide their analysis. First, what do you do if you think that one audience will buy your argument, and another reject it, wholeheartedly? Just pretend to be an objective analyst and put the real world in the 'too hard' pile? Or, do you recognise that policy analysts are political actors and make your choices accordingly? For me, an appeal to objectivity combined with insufficient recognition of the ways in which people respond emotionally to information, is a total cop-out. I don't want to contribute to a generation of policy analysts who provide long, rigorous, and meticulous reports that few people read and fewer use. Instead, I want students to show me how to tell a convincing story with a clear moral,

or frame policy analysis to grab their audience's attention and generate enthusiasm to try to solve a problem. Then, I want them to reflect on how they draw the line between righteous persuasion and unethical manipulation.

Second, how do you account for policymaking complexity? You can't assume that there is a cycle in which a policymaker selects a solution and it sets in train a series of stages towards successful implementation. Instead, you need to think about the delivery of your policy as much as the substance. Students have several choices. In some cases, they will describe how to deliver policy in a multi-level governance environment, in which, say, a central government actor will need to use persuasion or cooperation rather than command-and-control. Or, if they are feeling energetic, they might compare a top-down delivery option with support for Ostrom-style polycentric arrangements (Ostrom, 2007; Poteete et al, 2010). Maybe they'll recommend pilots and/ or trial and error, to monitor progress continuously instead of describing a one-shot solution. Maybe they'll reflect on MSA (below) and think about how you can give dependable advice in a policy process containing so much serendipity. Who knows? Policy process research is large and heterogeneous, which opens the possibility for some creative solutions that I won't be able to anticipate in advance.

4. One kind of blog post (for the policy analysis)

Write a short and punchy blog post which recognises the need to make an argument succinctly and grab attention with the title and first sentence/ paragraph, on the assumption that your audience will be reading it on their phone and will move on to something else quickly. In this exercise, your blog post is connected to your policy analysis. Think, for example, about how you would make the same case for a policy solution to a different audience. Or, use the blog post to gauge the extent to which your policymaker audience could sell your policy solution. If they would struggle, should you make this recommendation in the first place?

Your blog post audience is wider than your policy analysis audience. You are trying to make an argument that will capture the attention of a larger group of people who are interested in politics and policy, but without being specialists. They will likely access your post from Twitter/ Facebook or via a search engine. This constraint produces a new requirement, to: present a punchy title which sums up the whole argument in under 140 characters[1] (a statement is often better than a vague question); to summarise the whole argument in approximately 100 words in the first paragraph (what is the problem and solution?); then, to provide more information up to a maximum of 500 words. The reader can then be invited to read the whole policy analysis.

The style of blog posts varies markedly, so you should consult many examples before attempting your own (for example, compare the LSE with The Conversation and newspaper blogs to get a sense of variations in style). When you read other posts, take note of their strengths and weaknesses. For example, many posts associated with newspapers introduce a personal or case study element to ground the discussion in an emotional appeal. Sometimes this works, but sometimes it causes the reader to scroll down quickly to find the main argument. Perhaps ironically, I recommend storytelling but I often skim past people's stories. Many academic posts are too long (well beyond your 500 limit), take too long to get to the point, and do not make explicit recommendations, so you should not emulate them. You should aim to be

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[1] Yes, I know that Twitter now allows 280, but assume that no-one reads a 280-character post. They're scrolling all the time, and only reading what they can as the words fly by.

better than the scholars whose longer work you read and occasionally enjoy. You should not just chop down your policy analysis to 500 words; you need a new kind of communication.

Hopefully, by the end of this fourth task, you will appreciate the transferable life skills. I have generated some uncertainty about your task to reflect the sense among many actors that they don't really know how to make a persuasive case and who to make it to. We can follow some basic Bardach-style guidance, but a lot of this kind of work relies on trial-and-error. I maintain a short word count to encourage you to get to the point, and I bang on about 'stories' in our modules to encourage you to present a short and persuasive story to policymakers.

This process seems weird at first, but isn't it also intuitive? For example, next time you're in my seminar, measure how long it takes you to get bored and look forward to the weekend. Then imagine that policymakers have the same attention span as you. That's how long you have to make your case! Policymakers are not magical beings with an infinite attention span. In fact, they are busier and under more pressure than us, so you need to make your pitch count.

BOX on rationale for blog post 1

This exercise forces students to make their case in 500 words. It helps them understand the need to communicate in different ways to different audiences. It suggests that successful communication is largely about knowing how your audience consumes information, rather than telling people all you know. I gauge success according to questions such as: Punchy and eye grabbing title? Tailored to an intelligent 'lay' audience rather than a specific expert group? Clearly defined problem? Good evidence or argument behind the solution? Clear recommendations backed by a sense that the solution is feasible? Well embedded weblinks to further relevant reading?

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5. Writing a theory-informed essay

I tend to set this simple-looking question for coursework in policy modules: *what is policy, how much has it changed, and why?* Students get to choose the policy issue, timeframe, political system, and relevant explanatory concepts.

On the face of it, it looks very straightforward. Give it a few more seconds, and you can see the difficulties:

1. We spend a lot of time in class agreeing that it seems almost impossible to define policy (explained in 1000 Words and 500 Words)

2. There are many possible measures of policy change (1000 Words and 500 Words)

3. There is an almost unmanageable number of models, concepts, and theories to use to explain policy dynamics (I describe about 25 in 1000 Words each)

I try to encourage some creativity when solving this problem, but also advise students to keep their discussion as simple and jargon-free as possible (often by stretching an analogy with diving, in which a well-executed simple essay can score higher than a belly-flopped hard essay).

Choosing a format: the initial advice

1. Choose a policy area (such as health) or issue (such as alcohol policy).

2. Describe the nature of policy, and the extent of policy change, in a particular time period (such as in the post-war era, since UK devolution, or since a change in government).

3. Select one or more policy concepts or theory to help structure your discussion and help explain how and why policy has changed.

For example, a question might be: *What is tobacco policy in the UK, how much has it changed since the 1980s, and why?* I use this example because I try to answer that – UK and global – question myself, even though my 2007 article on the UK is too theory-packed to be a good model for a student essay.

Choosing a format: the cautionary advice

You may be surprised about how difficult it is to answer a simple question like 'what is policy?' and I will give you a lot of credit for considering how to define and measure it; by identifying, for example, the use of legislation/ regulation, funding, staff, and 'nodality' and/ or by considering the difference between, say, policy as a statement of intent or a long term outcome. In turn, a good description and explanation of policy change is difficult. If you are feeling ambitious, you can go further, to compare, say, two issues (such as tobacco and alcohol) or places (such UK Government policy and the policy of another country), but sometimes a simple and narrow discussion can be as, or more, effective. Similarly, you can use many theories or concepts to aid explanation, but one theory will do. Note that (a) your description of your research question, and your essay structure, is more important than (b) your decision on what topic to focus or concepts to use.

BOX: rationale for the essay

The wider aim is to encourage students to think about the relationship between different perspectives on policy theory and analysis. For example, in a blog and policy analysis paper they try to generate attention to a policy problem and advocate a solution. Then, they draw on policy theories and concepts to reflect on their papers, highlighting (say): the need to identify the most important audience; the importance of framing issues with a mixture of evidence and emotional appeals; and, the need to present 'feasible' solutions.

The reflection can provide a useful segue to the essay, since we're already identifying important policy problems, advocating change, reflecting on how best to encourage it – such as by presenting modest objectives – and then, in the essay, trying to explain (say) why governments have not taken that advice in the past. Their interest in the policy issue can prompt interest in researching the issue further; their knowledge of the issue and the policy process can help them develop politically-aware policy analysis. All going well, it produces a virtuous circle.

Some examples from my pet subject

Let me outline how I would begin to answer the three questions with reference to UK tobacco policy. I'm offering a brief summary of each section rather than presenting a full essay with more detail (partly to hold on to that idea of creativity – I don't want students to use this description as a blueprint).

What is modern UK tobacco policy?

Tobacco policy in the UK is now one of the most restrictive in the world. The UK government has introduced a large number of policy instruments to encourage a major reduction of smoking in the population. They include: legislation to ban smoking in public places; legislation to limit tobacco advertising, promotion, and sponsorship; high taxes on tobacco products; unequivocal health education; regulations on tobacco ingredients; significant spending on customs and enforcement measures; and, plain packaging measures.

[Note that I selected only a few key measures to define policy. A fuller analysis might expand on why I chose them and why they are so important].

How much has policy changed since the 1980s?

Policy has changed radically since the post-war period, and most policy change began from the 1980s, but it was not until the 2000s onwards that the UK cemented its place as one of the most restrictive countries. The shift from the 1980s relates strongly to the replacement of voluntary agreements and limited measures with limited enforcement with legislative measures and stronger enforcement. The legislation to ban tobacco advertising, passed in 2002, replaced limited bans combined with voluntary agreements to (for example) keep billboards a certain distance from schools. The legislation to ban smoking in public places, passed in 2006 (2005 in Scotland), replaced voluntary measures which allowed smoking in most pubs and restaurants. Plain packaging measures, combined with large and graphic health warnings, replace branded packets which once had no warnings. Health education warnings have gone from stating the facts and inviting smokers to decide, and the promotion of harm reduction (smoke 'low tar'), to an unequivocal message on the harms of smoking and passive smoking.

[Note that I describe these changes in broad terms. Other articles might 'zoom' in on specific instruments to show how exactly they changed]

Why has it changed?

This is the section of the essay in which we have to make a judgement about the type of explanation: should you choose one or many concepts? If many, do you focus on their competing or complementary insights? Should you provide an extensive discussion of your chosen theory?

I normally recommend a very small number of concepts or simple discussion, largely because there is only so much you can say in an essay of 2-3000 words.

For example, a simple 'hook' is to ask if the main driver was the scientific evidence: did policy change as the evidence on smoking (and then passive smoking) related harm became more apparent? Is it a good case of 'evidence based policymaking'? The answer may be that policy change seemed to be 20-30 years behind the evidence, and it only occurred when key policymaking conditions were met:

1. Policymakers framed tobacco as a public health epidemic requiring a major government response (rather than primarily as an economic good or issue of civil liberties);
2. They placed health departments or organisations at the heart of policy development, formed networks with medical and public health groups at the expense of tobacco companies; and responded to greater public support for control, reduced smoking prevalence, and the diminishing economic value of tobacco.

3. Key actors exploited windows of opportunity for each tobacco control policy instrument.

This discussion can proceed in a relatively straightforward way, with the further aid of policy theories which ask further questions and help structure the answers. For example, one might draw on punctuated equilibrium theory to help describe and explain shifts of public/media/ policymaker attention to tobacco, from low and positive in the 1950s to high and negative from the 1980s. Or, one might draw on the ACF to explain how pro-tobacco coalitions helped slow down policy change by interpreting new scientific evidence though the 'lens' of well-established beliefs or approaches (examples from the 1950s include filter tips, low tar brands, and ventilation as alternatives to greater restrictions on smoking). One might draw on multiple streams analysis to identify a 'window of opportunity for change (as I did when examining the adoption of bans on smoking in public places). Any of these approaches will do, as long as you describe and justify your choice well. One cannot explain everything, so it may be better to try to explain one thing well.

BOX: rationale for blog post 2

In my MPP I get students to do the analysis/reflection/blog combination in the first module, and an essay/ blog combo in the second module. The second blog post has a different aim. Students use the 500 words to present a jargon-free analysis of policy change. The post represents a useful exercise in theory translation. Without it, students tend to describe a large amount of jargon because I am the audience and I understand it. By explaining the same thing to a lay audience, they are obliged to explain key developments in a plain language. This requirement should also help them present a clearer essay, because people (academics and students) often use jargon to cover the fact that they don't really know what they are saying.

How can we visualise these processes? What is the relevance to your coursework?

One of our aims is to consider how to incorporate policy process research into policy analysis. This is not easy because the practical lessons from policy theories are not always clear (see Practical Lessons from Policy Theories). Visualisation can help.

Figures 1-6 help us consider some ways in which to visualise key stories of the policy process and use their insights to think about each piece of coursework. Images of the policy process serve many functions. They help us: imagine and describe key aspects of the policy process, and show how they relate to each other; check if we mean the same thing when we describe policymaking (such as when communicating by metaphor); and, compare accounts of the policy process, perhaps to see if we can combine their insights (Cairney, 2013).

These comparisons can add value to each piece of your coursework, and might even prompt you to use different images for different tasks. In particular, the policy cycle image could still be useful for policy analysis even if you reject its value in explaining policy change in your essay.

Figure 1 presents the classic idea of a policy cycle which describes policymaking in a series of ordered stages. For people like me, the cycle's modern purpose is to describe what does not happen (Cairney, 2012; 2016). A cycle is, to all intents and purposes, an ideal-type to use to compare with the real world, in the same way that we compare comprehensive with bounded rationality. It does not help us conduct research on policymaking built on cause and effect

analysis. For example, it does not help us identify key players, organisational or network rules, the role of dominant ideas, or the socioeconomic context. Instead, we have a snapshot of an artificially simple process that may not exist. When describing trends in policy scholarship, I show that the cycle was once the staple of core textbooks in the field, with one chapter devoted to each stage (Jones, 1970; Anderson, 1975; Brewer and deLeon, 1983; Hogwood and Peters, 1983; Hogwood and Gunn, 1984). Now, policy theory texts will mention the cycle but not as a source of modern scholarship (Cairney, 2012; John, 2012; Weible, 2017).

## Figure 1: The Simple Policy Cycle
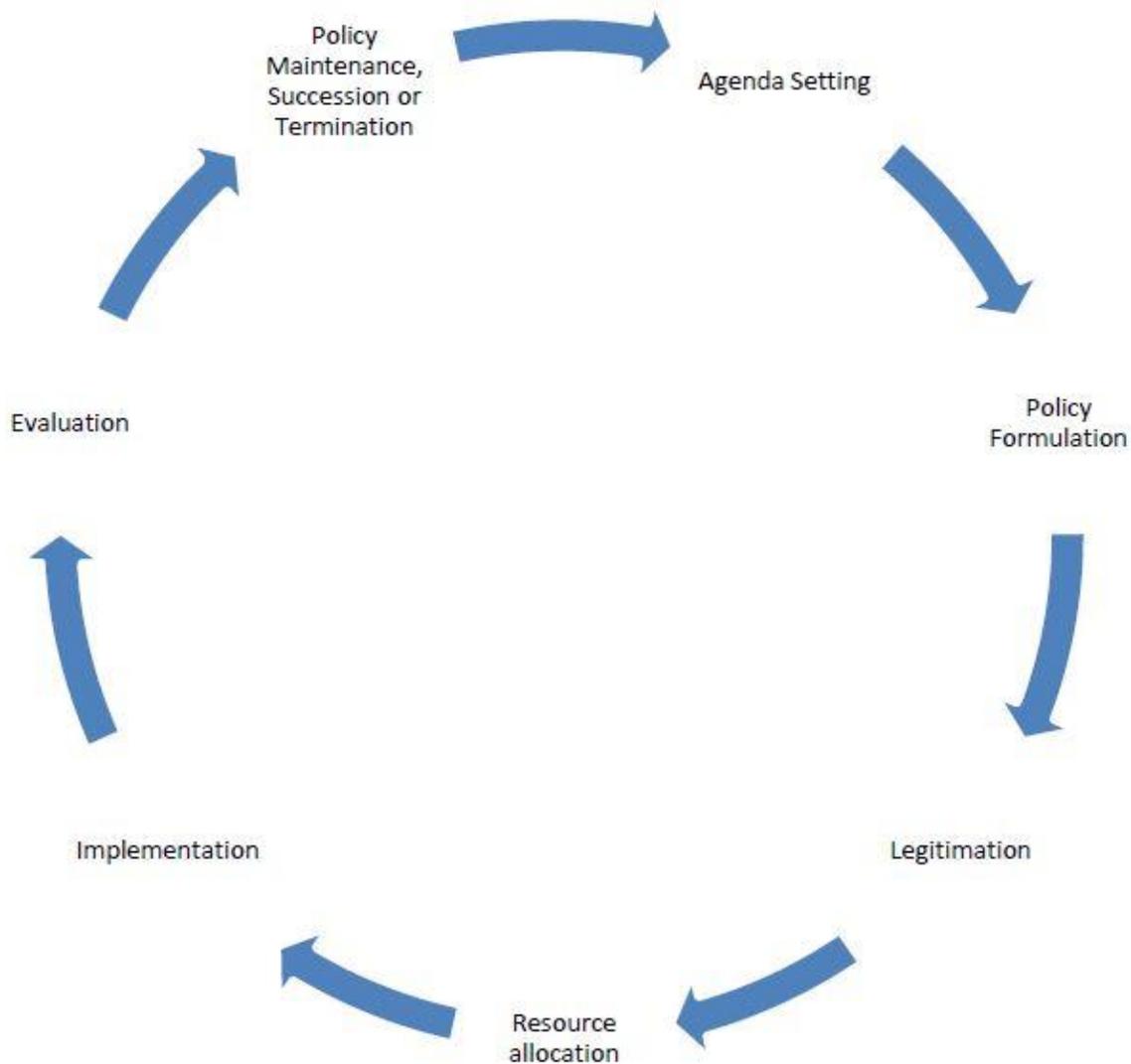
Source: Cairney (2012: 34)

However, some texts still see value in ordering a book around stages (Althaus et al. 2007; Howlett and Ramesh, 2003; Hill, 2009). Indeed, the pros and cons of the cycle metaphor for practical purposes – to teach students and help practitioners – were debated in a special issue of the *Australian Journal of Public Administration* (Everett, 2003; Bridgman and Davis, 2003; Colebatch, 2005; Howard, 2005). The experience prompted two contrasting responses. Althaus et al. (2007: xi) maintained that the cycle contains 'a particular sequence practitioners can use

to comprehend and implement the policy task' (2007: xi), while Colebatch's (2006) edited book argued that 'effective participation in the policy process calls for a clear understanding of complexity and ambiguity' (Colebatch, 2006: paperback cover).

In other words, the simple model of a cycle with stages might endure because it can help policymakers and practitioners understand their task in the simplest way, then describe what to do in similar terms. The world is complex, but policymakers have to simplify it to take action *and* to explain their account to the legislatures and public to which they are accountable (Cairney, 2015: 26). Or, at least, they must tell a story of what they'd like to do: identify their aims, identify policies to achieve those aims, select a policy measure, ensure that the selection is legitimised by the population or its legislature, identify the necessary resources, implement, then evaluate the policy. All the while, you can hold them to account because they are in control. Indeed, imagine the alternative: policymakers tell the public that the policy process is too complicated to understand (far less control) and explain what they are doing.

Yet, as far as I can tell, policymakers don't tell this cycle story as consistently as they used to. Take for example, the European Commission (2011) which uses the cycle approach to describe its better regulation activities, but also describes a far more complicated picture (figure 2).

Figure 2: The Messy Policy Cycle
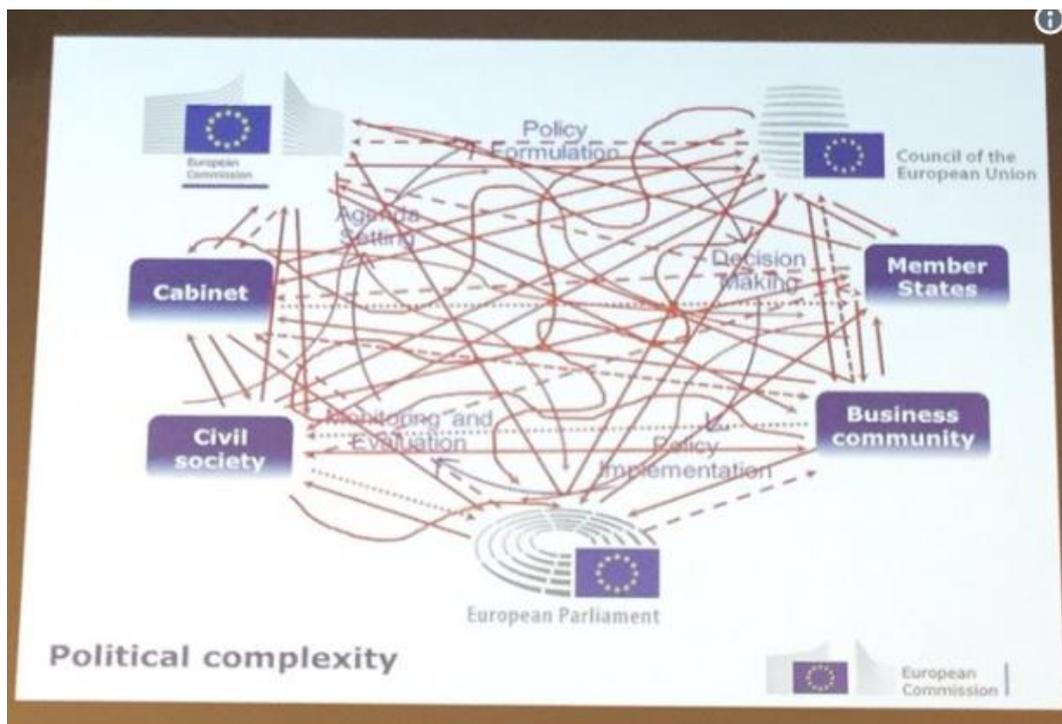
Source: European Commission presentation captured by @r0bdavies
https://twitter.com/r0bdavies/status/879239843011862528

By the time we add the squiggly lines there is too much mess. The image no longer helps policymakers or practitioners understand their role in the policy, or help elected governments explain to the public what they are doing. If we remove the *simplicity* of the cycle, we reduce its value, to the extent that more complicated and accurate theories of the policy process can be more useful.

BOX: Why do these image comparisons matter for your coursework?

At this point, let's make sure we know why we are comparing images of the policy process and how the comparison relates to your coursework. When you write an essay, in which your aim is to describe and explain policy change, you will need a theory that helps. Theories give you a language and structure for empirical investigation, and an account of policy dynamics to help you explain what is going on. They also allow you to take part in a collective effort to generalise more widely from many case studies. If we use the same language and approach, we can be confident that our results are comparable to others.

However, policy theories are not obviously applicable to policy analysis. They are full of jargon. If you decipher the code, you may still be left with uncertainty about how to proceed. The cycle gives you a plan in a series of well-defined stages; a means to simplify action. Effectively, your cycle-driven advice is: here is the problem, here are some possible solutions, and here is a plan to go from policy selection to legitimation, implementation, and evaluation, before considering if your solution still works.

Most theories do not come with such simple practical advice. However, they can help you (a) reflect on the relationship between your policy analysis and the real world (in your 'reflection' exercise), and (b) propose alternatives to a stage based plan if you feel it has limited practical value. To do so, we need to provide a way to explain an alternative to stage-based accounts.

But which alternative images can we use?

I select one image from three of the most-researched policy theories – multiple streams analysis, punctuated equilibrium theory, advocacy coalition framework (described in more depth in the 1000 Words series and beyond) and produce a fourth image for comparison.

Figure 3: The Spaceship Metaphor for Multiple Streams Analysis

The 'multiple streams' approach (MSA) uses metaphor to describe a messier world than portrayed by a simple cycle (Kingdon, 1984; Zahariadis, 2007; Cairney and Jones, 2016; Cairney, 2018). Instead of a linear cycle - in which policymakers define problems, *then* ask for potential solutions, *then* select one – MSA describe these 'stages' as independent 'streams'. Each stream – heightened attention to a problem (*problem stream)*, an available and feasible solution (*policy stream*), and the motive to select it (*politics stream*) – must come together during a 'window of opportunity' or the opportunity is lost.

Many scholars and students like MSA because it contains a flexible metaphor which is simple to pick up and use. However, it's so flexible that I've seen many different ways to visualise – *and make sense of* - the metaphor, including literal watery streams, which suggest that when they come together they are hard to separate. There is the Ghostbusters metaphor which shows that key actors ('entrepreneurs') help couple the streams. There is also Howlett et al's attempt to combine the streams and cycles metaphors (reproduced here, and criticised here).

However, I'd encourage Kingdon's space launch metaphor in which policymakers will abort the mission unless every factor is just right (the weather, the integrity of the spacecraft, the health of the pilots, etc.). This is the 'window of opportunity' in which major policy change only happens when all three streams come together.

BOX: the applicability of MSA to your coursework

MSA is used frequently to structure and explain case study results (Jones et al, 2016). The best applications explain MSA's key components and use them to identify the presence or absence of major policy change during a window of opportunity. It's a very useful framework to help structure a simple essay. For your policy analysis reflection, it can offer some very useful advice: policy solutions have to be technically and politically feasible, which takes a long time to achieve. Your analysis should reflect this need for feasible options, and perhaps reject the policy cycle's idea that solution production happens after problem definition. By then, it is too late. Can MSA also inform your policy analysis directly? Compare with Bardach's 8 steps. Perhaps MSA provides more emphasis on the role of policy entrepreneurship in analysis

(Cairney, 2018), emphasising the need to frame your definition of the problem persuasively to increase the motivation to act, and to time the presentation of your analysis in relation to the current feasibility of your preferred solution.

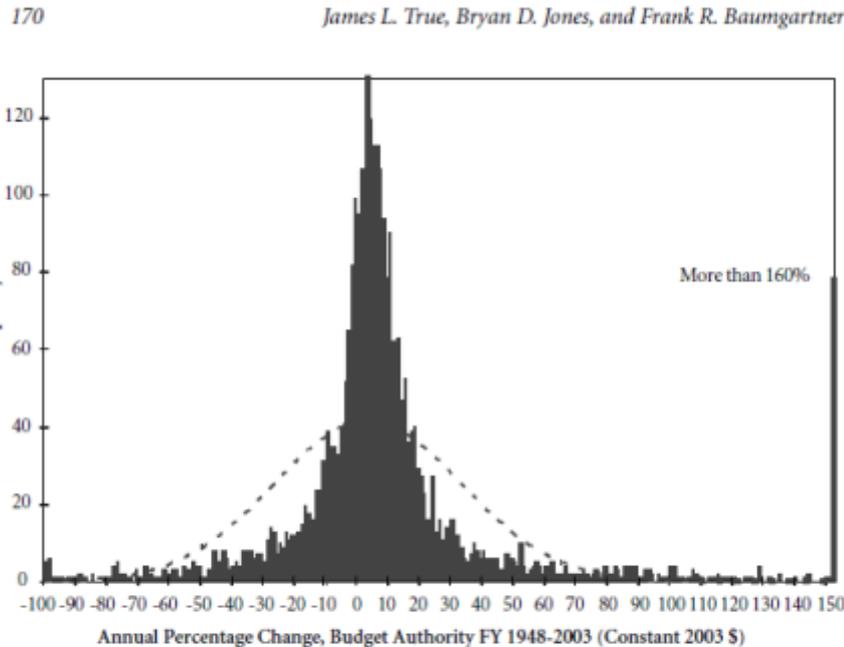**Figure 4: The Punctuated Equilibrium Graph**

FIGURE 6.2   Annual Percentage Change in U.S. Budget Authority for Office of Management and Budget Programmatic Subfunctions, FY 1947 through FY 2003
SOURCE: Calculated from data made available through the Policy Agendas Project, Center for American Politics and Public Policy, University of Washington. (http://www.policyagendas.org/).

Source: True et al (2007: 170)

Punctuated equilibrium theory is one of the most important approaches to policy dynamics, now backed up with a wealth of data from the Comparative Agendas Project. The image describes the result of the policy process rather than the process itself. It describes government budgets in the US, although we can find very similar images from studies of budgets in many other countries and in many measures of policy change.

It sums up a profoundly important message about policy change: we find a huge number of very small changes, and a very small number of huge changes. Compare the distribution of values in this image with the 'normal distribution' (the dotted line). It shows a 'leptokurtic' distribution, with most values deviating minimally from the mean (and the mean change in each budget item is small), but with a high number of 'outliers'.

This image helps sum up a key aim of PET, to measure and try to explain long periods of policymaking stability, and policy continuity, disrupted by short but intense periods of instability and change. One explanation relates to 'bounded rationality': policymakers have to ignore almost all issues while paying attention to some. The lack of 'macropolitical' attention

to most issues helps explain stability and continuity, while lurches of attention can help explain instability (although attention can fade before 'institutions' feel the need to respond).

BOX 3: The applicability of PET to your coursework

PET provides a profoundly important insight about the overall nature of policy change: systems produce a huge number of small changes and a small number of huge changes. The patterns resemble the distribution of seismic events. To a large extent, we can do little to predict or deal with them. This is key context for the study of policy change in your coursework. In an essay, you can use these insights to consider the non-incremental nature of change and its causes at a system level, such as bounded rationality and institutional friction (Baumgartner et al, 2017). In such cases, we assume that most people pay no attention to most issues most of the time (Baumgartner, 2017). Further, case studies of policy monopolies show us the importance of temporary rises in public attention and a tendency for a policy solution to receive no attention for decades (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993). Such insights can inform the questions you ask yourself in the reflection exercise (e.g. am I intervening during a period of high or low attention?) and perhaps the way in which you couch your analysis (e.g. with a mixture of facts and emotional appeals to help set the agenda – True et al, 2007).

Figure 5: The advocacy coalition framework 'flow diagram'
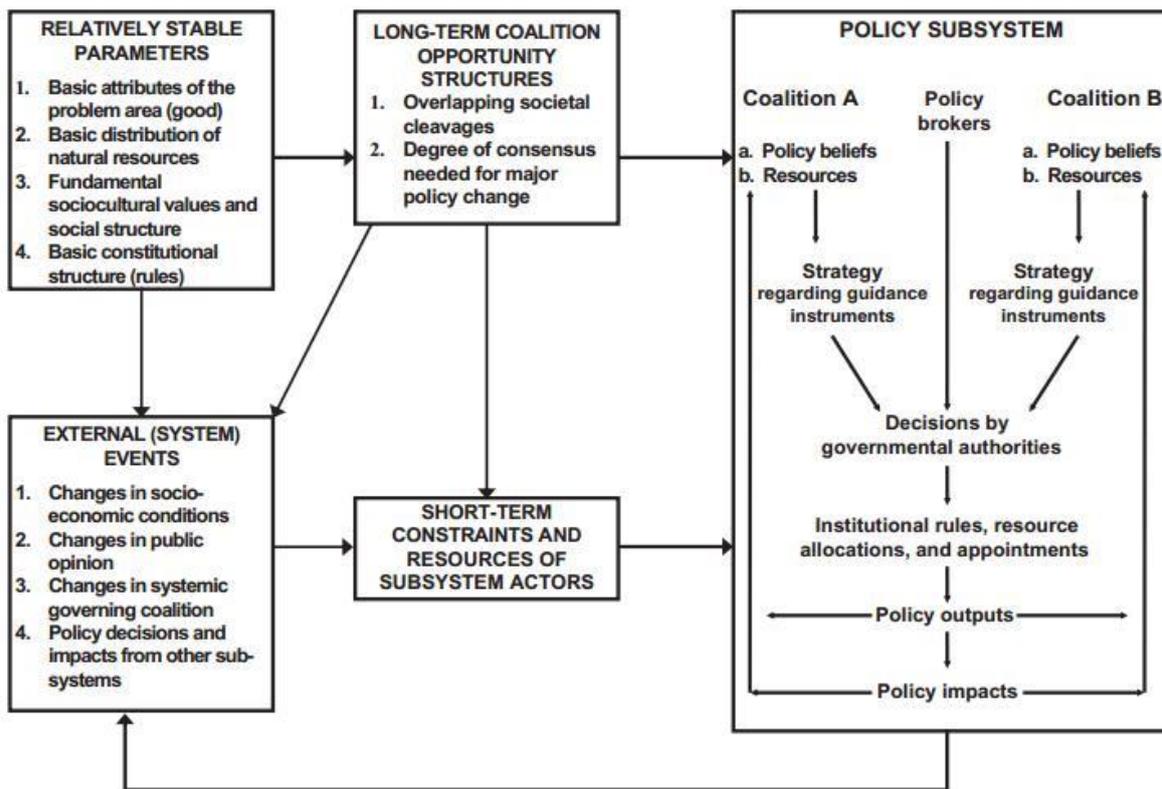
2007 Advocacy Coalition Framework Flow Diagram

The ACF presents an ambitious image of the policy process, in which we zoom out to consider how key elements fit together in a process containing many actors and levels of government (Jenkins-Smith et al, 2017; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993). Like many policy theories, it

situates most of the 'action' in [policy networks or subsystems](link), showing that some issues involve intensely politicized disputes containing many actors while others are treated as technical and processed routinely, largely by policy specialists, out of the public spotlight.

The ACF suggests that people get into politics to turn their beliefs into policy, form coalitions with people who share their beliefs, and compete with coalitions of actors who share different beliefs. This competition takes place in a policy subsystem, in which coalitions understand new evidence through the lens of their beliefs, and exercise power to make sure that their interpretation is accepted. The other boxes describe the factors - the 'parameters' likely to be stable during the 10-year period of study, the partial sources of potential 'shocks' to the subsystem, and the need and ability of key actors to form consensus for policy change (particularly in political systems with PR elections) – which constrain and facilitate coalition action.

Box: The applicability of the ACF to your coursework

The ACF provides an important account of policy continuity and change, and is a key staple of essays trying to describe and explain minor versus major change. Minor change follows 'policy-oriented learning' in which coalition actors interpret new information through the lens of their beliefs. Major change can result from a combination of external events and coalition responses, to produce sudden 'shocks'. An internal shock is akin to a crisis of confidence in which actors reconsider their beliefs or motive to remain in a coalition. An external shock refers to the ability of a coalition to use an event or new circumstances to reinforce its position within the subsystem. The shock relates partly to one coalition's ability to knock a formerly dominant coalition off its perch. In each case, coalitions compete to improve their positions within subsystems using resources such as the ability to gather and interpret information, mobilise public support, secure funding for campaigns, and show skilful leadership.

The implications for policy analysis could be profound. One coalition may accept your analysis while another rejects it wholeheartedly. If coalitions interpret the world through the lens of their beliefs, your analysis may be an easy sell to one audience but a futile exercise to another. You have a choice: do you frame your analysis to be consistent with a dominant coalition whose position of power is most useful to your purposes? Or, if yours is a challenging role, in which you 'speak truth to power', can you realistically expect to change minds with a short evidence-based briefing paper? The ACF helps us realise that policy analysis cannot be value free; any presentation of the evidence and its implications will interact with coalitions of actors expressing different beliefs.

Figure 6: An Image of the Policy Process as a Checklist
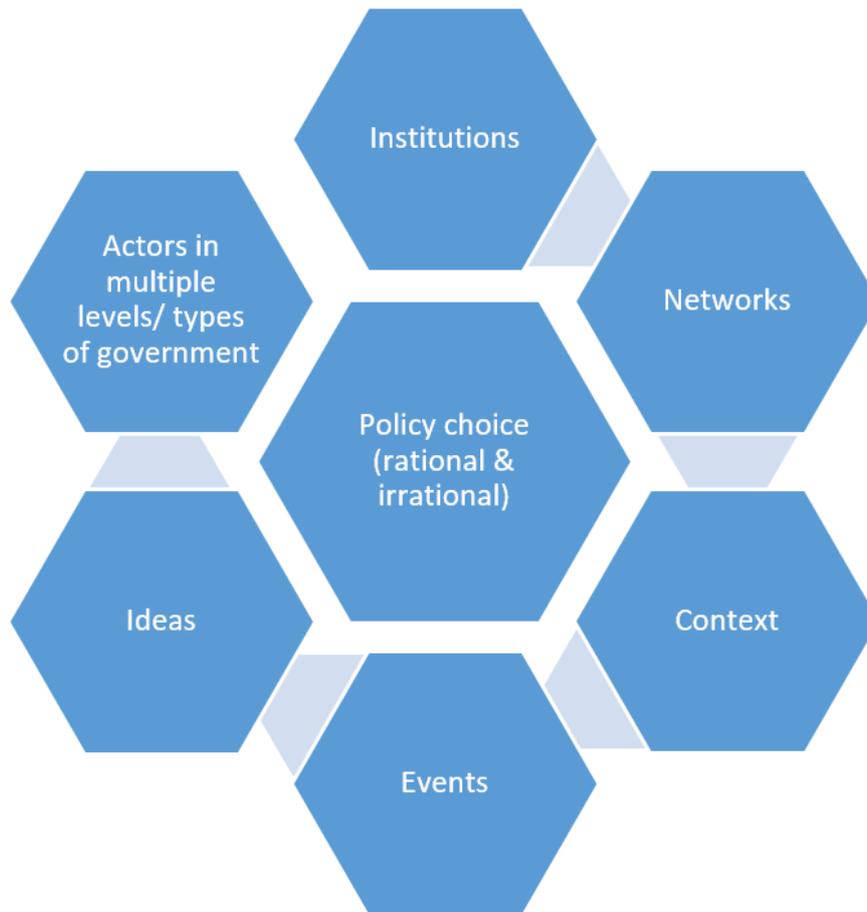
This final image provides something as simple as the policy cycle while capturing the complexity of choice and policymaking context. It provides a checklist for conceptual analysis, in which we need to account for policymaker psychology and the policy environment in any account of policy dynamics.

BOX 5: A checklist to aid your analysis

The value of this final image is to provide a checklist of concepts that you should cover in your analysis. When considering the role of choice, account for rational and irrational ways to gather and use information. When considering the policy environment, account for the involvement of many actors in many venues, the rules of organisations, why networks form, what are the dominant ways to describe the world, what is the socioeconomic context, and what events help explain policy dynamics. In essays on policy change, we often identify the ways in which key theories use these concepts to provide an overall account. In your reflection, you can make sure that you identify all of the relevant factors underpinning your analysis. In the analysis, you need to consider how people will engage rationally and irrationally with your evidence and presentation, as well as the standard operating procedures of organisations, the position of key actors in networks, the dominant language in which to couch your analysis, and the wider context which is often out of the control of policymakers but to which they need to respond.

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5 take home points

1. Our overall aim is to combine policy process research and policy analysis. The combination aids our understanding of the world and informs our attempts to engage with it.
2. Policy process research and policy analysis don't always speak with each other. One unintended consequence is jargon-fuelled research with untapped potential to inform analysis.
3. We can combine different kinds of coursework to help overcome this divide and produce theory-informed analysis and communication.

- We combine analysis and reflection.
- We write blogs to communicate clearly and succinctly.
- We produce essays with clear research questions, and reflect on the relationship between long terms trends and feasible policy analysis.

4. One way to help translate policy theory is to visualise the policy process and compare different visions.

- The policy cycle is not key to policy process research, but it has residual value for policy analysis and the projection of accountability.
- Yet, the cycle is now used to describe *complexity*. Its value is no longer clear.
- In that context, can we produce images of the policy process that are more useful than the policy cycle?

5. Have a look at the checklist at the end. Use it to check that each piece of coursework you produce is informed by key theories and concepts in policy process research.

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