Chapter 1 Introduction to policy and policymaking

Key themes of this chapter

- **Why do we study public policy?** To compare simple stories of how it should be made with complex stories of how it is actually made.

- **Politics and power are central features of this story.** Politics is about many actors, with different beliefs and preferences, exercising power to get what they want. We misunderstand the policy process if we focus only on vague ambitions such as ‘evidence based policymaking’.

- **Definitions matter.** Policy can be defined as the sum total of government action, from signals of intent to the final outcomes. Or, refers to specific ‘tools’. ‘Policymaker’ often describes elected and unelected people or organisations.

- **Simple models help us understand how policy is not made.** Policy studies compare ‘ideal types’ with the real world: there is no ‘comprehensive rationality’, in which governments process all information relevant to policy, or ‘cycle’, in which they make policy simply via a well-ordered series of ‘stages’.

- **Policymakers have to take cognitive shortcuts.** They deal with ‘bounded rationality’ in two ways: ‘rational’, to seek reliable sources of information and analysis, and ‘irrational’, using gut instinct, habits, emotions, and beliefs.

- **The power of ‘the centre’ is limited.** Political studies often focus on the concentration of power in central government. However, elected policymakers share power with other actors, by choice (to produce checks and balances in political systems) and necessity (their controlling capacity is limited).

- **Policy networks and subsystems are pervasive.** Instead of one ‘centre’ in charge of all policy, we see many ‘communities’ of actors spread across government.

- **Complex policymaking environments limit policymaker control.** Policy studies focus on the environments in which policymakers operate but do not control. An environment contains many policymakers and influencers operating across many levels and types of government, each with their own institutions, networks, ideas, socioeconomic conditions, and key events.

- **Ideas matter.** Policy theories describe ‘ideas’ as dominant ways in which to understand the world and policy problems, and proposed solutions. In some cases, governments transfer policy solutions from one system to another.

- **How to analyse policy and policymaking.** At the heart of the study of public policy are definitions and measurements (how do we gauge policy change?), power (who or what is responsible for policy change?), and unpredictability (policymaking is often stable then suddenly unstable).
Why should we study public policy?

*Public policy* is so important because it influences, in some way, all aspects of our lives. It is difficult to think of any aspect of social life that has no connection to policy. If so, it is important to get policy right, or at least explain what goes wrong, and what anyone can be expected to do about it. In other words, we compare simple stories of how we think policy *should* be made with more complex stories of how it is *actually* made. For example, we can focus on why particular decisions are made. Why did so many governments decide to ‘bail out’ banks, rather than let them fold, after economic crisis? Why did many governments ‘privatise’ their industries and introduce private sector ideas to the public sector? Why have so many governments introduced major tobacco control policies while others have opposed further controls? Why did the UK government introduce the ‘poll tax’ or the Australian government reform gun laws (McConnell, 2010: 149-53)? Why do some groups seem to ‘win’ and others ‘lose’ when governments make key choices?

We study concepts and *theories* of public policy because we recognise that there are many different answers to these questions. These answers come from different sources, and we can learn a lot by comparing many perspectives carefully (Allison, 1969; 1971). We can compare insights from different theories, by asking ourselves, for example, if they can explain different parts of a complex question or if we can combine them to produce more general explanation. Although we cannot simply mash theories together (Cairney, 2013a), it is possible to identify a small set of core concepts that all theories seem to use to explain policymaking. Put most simply, they try to capture the role of individual choice within a complex policymaking environment which contains many *actors*, rules, and networks spread across many levels and types of government. Things only get complicated when we try to define each of these concepts, usually with reference to *bounded rationality* and the relationship between so many of the constituent parts of policy environments.

For example, consider the many ways in which we can begin to study policymaking. We can focus on individual policymakers, examining how they analyse and understand policy problems. We can consider their beliefs and how receptive they are to particular ideas and approaches to the problem. We can focus on institutions, as the rules that influence policymaker choice. We can identify the powerful groups that influence how policymakers think and act. We can focus on the socioeconomic context and consider the pressures that governments face when making policy. Or, we can try to
combine this analysis to present an overall picture of policymaking. Most contemporary accounts try to explain policy decisions by focusing on one factor or by combining an understanding of these factors into a theory. There will never be a single theory to unify all of these approaches to public policy, but we can at least generate a language to help us understand and compare many theories, and communicate our findings (Cairney and Weible, 2017). Most of this book is devoted to abstract concepts and theories, to help the reader understand how they provide a range of explanations of policymaking in the real world.

This conceptual understanding of policymaking informs discussions of how policy should be made. For example, there is currently a widespread interest in the idea of ‘evidence based policymaking’ (EBPM) (Cairney, 2016a). For our purposes, EBPM is interesting because it sums up a classic debate in policy studies about the potential trade-off between a reliance on (a) expertise and evidence to pursue good policy outcomes, and (b) the need to encourage the participation of as many people as possible to ensure good policy process. Of course we may want both things, but politics is about the choice between many preferences whenever they collide, and a process driven solely by expertise will produce very different outcomes to a process driven solely by participatory democracy. In practice, neither extreme is likely. Instead, the tensions between expertise and participation are reflected in the ways in which, for example, elected policymakers try to combine many relevant factors – research evidence, public opinion, their own beliefs, and their assessment of what policies are politically feasible – to produce what they consider to be good decisions under challenging circumstances.

Policy theory is crucial to the critical analysis, and full understanding, of what we might call ‘good policymaking’, of which EBPM is only one part. Without the insights of policy theories, it is too tempting to throw up one’s hands and declare that politics and policymaking are dysfunctional, and that policy is made with too much reference to ideology and too little to evidence. Yet, ‘there is a big difference between a policy process that does not work and a process we do not understand’ (Wellstead et al, 2018: 7). Without enough knowledge of the policy process, we will struggle to produce a thoughtful and practical understanding of good versus bad policymaking.

A focus on power provides the most important way to think about the relationship between how policy is and should be made (chapter 3). The most visible illustration of power is when elected policymakers are, in principle, given the authority to govern by the electorate. Our aim in this context is to examine the extent to which that power is used in good faith. For example, we may examine the responsiveness of public policy to public opinion or the electoral and legal mechanisms that keep policymakers in check.

Yet, policy studies also analyse the least visible elements of power, often reproduced by unelected actors. For example, powerful groups often maintain their position and get what they want by minimising attention to certain issues. Policy change requires attention from policymakers and other interested participants, but such attention
is a rare commodity: a policymaker can only consider so many issues, a newspaper can contain only a handful of headlines and the public will only pay fleeting attention to political issues. So, actors exercise power to make sure that important issues do not arrive at the top of the policy agenda, because greater attention could undermine the status quo. This outcome may be achieved in several ways. First, by portraying issues as not worthy of attention. They can be portrayed as issues that have been solved, with only the technical issues of implementation to address. Or, they can be described as private issues in which the government should not interfere. Second, issues can be ‘crowded out’ of the policy agenda by other issues that command more attention. Third, the rules and procedures of government can be manipulated to make sure that proponents of certain issues find it difficult to command policymaker attention.

This potential for a small number of unelected actors to be so powerful can be assessed empirically, in theory-driven accounts of policymaking, and normatively, in relation to a range of principles of good policymaking. Only then can we describe a realistic and pragmatic response to such findings. For example, instead of expecting evidence to speak for itself as part of EBPM, advocates of research may have to get their hands dirty by exercising power, and seeking to persuade, by using the techniques of their opponents (Cairney, 2018a). In doing so, they will encounter many other actors pursuing different ways – combining knowledge, values, deliberation, and governance principles - to ensure good policymaking (Cairney, 2016a: 2018b; Jasanoff 1986: 5; Weale, 2001).

The general approach of this book
Public policy is difficult to study but worth the effort. The policy process is complex, messy and often appears to be unpredictable. The idea of a single process is often a useful simplification. However, when we scratch beneath the surface we find that there are multiple policy processes: the behaviour of policymakers, the problems they face, the actors they meet, and the results of their decisions often vary remarkably. They often vary by region, political system, over time, and from policy issue to issue. Indeed, we might start to wonder how we can make convincing generalisations about all public policy. That is why much of the literature employs the case study method to make sense of very specific events in different political systems.

There are well-established ways to make sense of the process as a whole. The first step is to ensure that our language is clear enough to make sure that we are discussing the same thing. For example, we define public policy and compare definitions of policy to help identify our key focus (chapter 2). We identify types of policy choice, such as the ‘tools’ or ‘instruments’ of policy, to help us measure policy change. We also juggle definitions of ‘policymaker’, to recognise that they can be elected or unelected,
identifiable as individuals or representatives of organisations, and part of wider networks in which it is often difficult to separate the effect of choices made by policy makers and influencers.

The second step is to decide how to make the study of policymaking more manageable (chapter 2). For example, we can use ideal-types or artificial models to present a starting point to analysis. One classic approach is to describe the policy process as a cycle and break down its key features into a series of stages such as agenda setting, formulation, legitimation, implementation and evaluation. Another is to describe ‘comprehensive rationality’, in which a policymaker has the perfect ability to produce, research and introduce her policy preferences. We can then examine how useful are these concepts as a way to organise policy studies, and consider how best to supplement or replace them with policy theories. The main aim of this book is to identify those theories, explain how they work, and assess their current ability to explain key parts of the policy process.

The plan of each chapter is as follows. First, it sets out a key theory or concern of public policy. In some cases, such as punctuated equilibrium and the advocacy coalition framework, this task is straightforward because the theory is linked to a small number of authors with a coherent research plan. In others, the chapter describes a disparate literature with many authors and approaches (new institutionalism, policy transfer, multi-level governance). Or, the chapter describes an important issue (defining policy, structural factors, bounded rationality, the role of ideas and power) and outlines key concepts or theories within that context. Second, it identifies the questions that each theory seeks to answer. It is important to assess each theory according to its stated aims. Too much of the literature complains about the things that a theory does not explain, often to introduce the self-serving agenda of the author, rather than simply using theories when they are useful. Third, it considers the value of each theory in different circumstances. For example, many theories have developed from a study of the US political system characterised by a focus on democratic elections and a separation of powers. Therefore, some thought is required when we apply their lessons to many other political systems (see also chapter 5 on institutions). Fourth, it explores how the key themes and issues raised by each theory relate to concerns raised in other chapters. We explore the language of policy studies and the extent to which theories address the same issues, and often come to similar conclusions, in different ways. Finally, the concluding chapter tells an overall story of policy, policy change, and the policy process. It returns to the theme of EBPM as a case study, to show how we can combine the insights of many public policy theories to inform current debates on good policymaking. It also tells some cautionary tales about the limits to our knowledge of policy processes and global public policy.
Simple models help us understand how policy is not made

The ideal-type ‘comprehensive rationality’ suggests that elected policymakers translate their values into policy in a straightforward manner (Chapter 4). They have a coherent and rank-ordered set of policy preferences which organisations carry out in a ‘logical, reasoned and neutral way’ (John, 1998: 33). There are clear-cut and ordered stages to the process (to identify aims, describe ways to achieve those aims, and select the best way) and analysis of the policymaking context is comprehensive. This capability and process allows policymakers to maximise the benefits of policy to society in much the same way that an individual maximises her own utility (as described in chapter 7).

This simplified account could be described in aspirational terms, as part of prescriptive or normative policy analysis. Indeed, modern references to EBPM seem to invoke these kinds of aims (Cairney, 2016a: 19). However, most of the policy theories described in this book treat it primarily as a useful comparison to how policymaking really works, as part of descriptive policy analysis. The key phrase is ‘bounded rationality’ which Simon (1957; 1976) coined to describe people or organisations adapting to their real world limitations, using decision-making short-cuts rather than comprehensive analysis, and seek satisfactory rather than ‘optimal’ solutions to policy problems. Lindblom’s (1959) theory of incrementalism also suggests that decision makers generally do not look far and wide for policy solutions. Rather, their values limit their search and their decisions often reflect decisions that were taken in the past and seem difficult to change (because, for example, they were the result of extensive negotiation) (chapter 4).

Policymaker psychology

Although policy theories still describe ‘bounded rationality’, they are informed increasingly by modern studies of human and organisational psychology (Cairney and Kwiatkowski, 2017). There is still a focus on ‘rational’ ways to deal with bounded rationality, such as by setting goals and seeking high quality information by relying on expertise and scientific evidence. However, there is also a growing focus on the ‘irrational’ ways in which policy actors, including policymakers, limit their attention to information to help them make decisions quickly. They may draw on their deeply held beliefs about how the world works and should work - expressed as ideology or moral values – as well as their emotions, gut instinct, habits, and lived experience (in other words, ‘irrational’ thinking can relate to well-thought-out or efficient shortcuts).

Key policy theories use this simple insight, about human psychology, to show how actors exploit cognitive shortcuts to pursue their policy aims. The Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) identifies the role of narratives (Jones et al, 2014). Narratives are stylized accounts of the origins, aims, and likely impacts of policies. They are used
strategically to reinforce or oppose policy measures. Narratives have a setting, characters, plot, and moral. They can be compared to marketing, as persuasion based more on appealing to an audience’s beliefs than on the ‘facts’. Actors, such as policymakers, will pay attention to certain narratives because they are seeking shortcuts to gather sufficient information, and prone to accept simple stories that confirm their biases, exploit their emotions, and/or come from a source they trust.

Social Construction and Policy Design (SCPD) shows that politicians describe moral judgements about who should be rewarded or punished by government (Schneider and Ingram, 1993). They link policy agendas to stereotypes of ‘target populations’, by (a) exploiting the ways in which many people already think about groups, or (b) making emotional and superficial judgements, backed up with selective use of facts. These judgements are reproduced in policy and practice. Such ‘policy designs’ can endure for years or decades, since the distribution of rewards and sanctions is cumulative and difficult to overcome. The impact on citizens can be profound if they participate in politics according to how they are characterised by government and, therefore, how rewarding they think their participation will be.

**Policymaking complexity**

The idea of a policy cycle can also be used as a starting point for prescriptive and descriptive analysis (Althaus et al, 2013; Wu et al, 2017). We might start by saying that policymakers should divide the process into a well-ordered series of stages to ensure policy success: identify policymaker aims, identify policies to achieve those aims, select the best policy measure, ensure that the selection is legitimised by the public or its legislature, identify the necessary resources, implement, and then evaluate the policy to decide if it should continue (see Chapter 2). There are also modern literatures dedicated to the empirical study of key stages such as agenda setting, formulation and implementation, or built on the enduring point that policymaking seems cyclical and represents ‘its own cause’ (Wildavsky, 1980: 62; Hogwood and Gunn, 1984: 245). Yet, few modern texts suggest that the policy process resembles an orderly cycle. Indeed, many refer to the ‘stages heuristic’ to highlight its descriptive weaknesses and to recommend new ways to study the policy process (Sabatier, 2007a: 7; John, 2012). In this context, the aim of the book is to focus on theories of public policy rather than devote a chapter to each stage of the policy cycle (compare with Knill and Tosun, 2019 who treat each ‘stage’ as a key function of government worthy of analysis).

**The power of ‘the centre’ is limited**

One reason not to rely too much on the policy cycle approach is that it conjures up an image of a single centralised government: an elite group of people at the ‘centre’ decides what it wants, and uses a series to stages to get it. Indeed, if we treat comprehensive rationality and policy cycles as ideals, they suggest that power should be held centrally,
perhaps because central policymakers are elected and should have control over policy implementation (Hogwood and Gunn, 1984: 198). Yet, implementing officials may also be elected and have a legitimate and practical role in the making of policy. Further, a concentration of power in one place without checks and balances may be the best formula for its abuse. This assumption of centralisation would also be a big mistake empirically, because *formal* sources of power are concentrated but the *actual* power to make and influence policy is dispersed widely across political systems (chapter 8).

Studies of federalism suggest that this diffusion of power results partly from *choice*, such as when written constitutions guarantee a separation and balance of powers between many levels of government (from local to supranational) and types of organisation (including legislature, executive and judiciary). In some cases, such as the US and Switzerland, power is devolved to many *elected* organisations, and federalist studies examine how they negotiate with each other (intergovernmental relations).

Policy theories also focus on the *necessity* of power diffusion caused by bounded rationality and the sheer scale of the policymaking environment. For example, studies of ‘multi-centric policymaking’ (Cairney et al, 2019a) - such as ‘multi-level governance’ (MLG), complexity theory, and polycentric governance - identify a further dispersal of power to bodies such as quasi-non-governmental actors (‘quangos’) and the blurry boundaries between formal and informal sources of authority. MLG suggests that the process is messy: many actors are involved at many levels of government and their relationships vary across time and policy issue. Policy outcomes are difficult to predict because the formal responsibility for policy issues changes over time, different actors become involved, and there is scope to influence and change policy at different points.

**Policy networks and subsystems are pervasive**

The policy process is messy, but the logic of power diffusion is often simple: the scale of government responsibilities is so huge, and the environment so complex, that many decisions are effectively out of the control of individual policymakers. Bounded rationality dictates that they need to find ways to ignore almost all information and issues so that they can pay enough attention to some. If they focus on one issue they have to ignore most others. This type of decision becomes so routine that it is ‘institutionalised’ within government. Public policy is broken down into a series of sectors and subsectors and responsibility delegated largely to unelected policymakers. Policymaking tends to be specialised, with the responsibilities of government processed in venues that are often called policy networks, communities, or subsystems (Chapter 9).

**Sectors** – broad policy areas, such as economic, foreign, agriculture, health and education.

**Sub-sectors** – specific policy issues or niches within sectors, such as seed potato regulations or growth hormones in dairy production.
The ‘policy communities’ literature suggests that policymakers devolve responsibility to civil servants who, in turn, rely on interest groups and other ‘pressure participants’ for information and advice (Richardson and Jordan, 1979; Jordan et al, 2004). These arrangements exist because there is a logic to devolving decisions and consulting with certain affected interests. Policymakers rely on their officials for information and advice. For specialist issues, officials rely on specialist organisations. Those organisations trade information (and other resources, such as the ability to implement government policy) for access to, and influence within, government. Consequently, much public policy is conducted primarily via policy networks which process ‘technical’ issues at a level of government not particularly visible to the public, often with minimal policymaker or senior civil service involvement. Participants are specialists and relationships develop between those who deliver policy and those who seek to influence it.

The wider literature contains a mix of theories which try to capture this sense that there is no single ‘centre’ at the heart of policymaking, and that subsystems are pervasive, but without necessarily concluding that policy issues are insulated from wider attention. MLG (Chapter 8) links power diffusion to the unintended consequences of decisions made by governments in the past. For example, many governments reformed their public sectors from the late 1970s in the spirit of ‘new public management’, which describes the application of private sector business methods to the public sector. Many sold off previously nationalised industries and contracted the delivery of services to non-governmental organisations. The reforms have reduced the ability of central governments to deliver public services directly. They are now more likely to ‘steer’ rather than ‘row’, negotiating and making shared decisions with actors outside the public sector. In countries such as the UK, the era of Europeanisation, combined with the devolution of power to subnational authorities, has further complicated the national central government role. Responsibility is now shared across multiple levels and types of government. Consequently, the government is unable to centralise and insulate decision-making. Rather, the policy process contains a much larger number of actors that central government must negotiate with to pursue its policy aims. Further, the group-government world has become much more complicated, with many groups lobbying and seeking to influence policy in multiple venues.

Punctuated equilibrium theory (Chapter 9) explains why political systems can be characterised as both stable and dynamic. Most policies stay the same for long periods while some change very quickly and dramatically. Punctuated equilibrium explains this dynamism with reference to bounded rationality and agenda setting. Since policymakers can not consider all issues at all times, they ignore most and promote relatively few to the top of their agenda. This lack of attention to most issues helps explain why groups and officials can maintain policy communities and why most policies do not change. ‘Policy monopolies’ can be fostered by ‘framing’ an issue in such a way as to limit the number
of participants who can claim a legitimate role in the process. Groups argue that a policy problem has been solved, with only the technical and unimportant issues of implementation to address. If successful, the ‘technical’ description reduces public interest and the ‘specialist’ description excludes those groups considered to have no expertise.

Yet, sometimes policymakers do focus on these issues; their levels of attention are disproportionate and their response is ‘hypersensitive’. Change comes from a successful challenge to the way that an issue is framed, by finding other influential audiences with an interest in new ways of thinking. In many cases this shift can be explained by an increasingly crowded and multi-level policymaking process. When groups are excluded at one level, they ‘venue shop’, or seek influential audiences in other venues such as legislative committees, the courts or other levels of government. If they catch the attention of another venue, newly involved policymakers increase their demand for new information and new ways to think about and solve old policy problems. In a process characterised by interdependence between groups and government, and overlapping jurisdictional boundaries (in which many institutions can be influential in the same policy areas), these innovations can be infectious. The actions of one often catch the attention of others, producing a ‘bandwagon effect’ of attention and policy change.

For the advocacy coalition framework (Chapter 10), the policy process is driven by actors attempting to translate their beliefs into public policy. Common beliefs bring people together within advocacy coalitions. In turn, different coalitions with different beliefs compete with each other within subsystems. The ACF describes a complex and crowded political system and focuses on policy change over ‘a decade or more’ to reflect the importance of policy actors spread across many levels and types of government. The ACF also represents an attempt to show how actors mediate socio-economic factors within subsystems. The idea is that, within a subsystem, these advocacy coalitions are not only jostling for position but also learning from past policy and revising their strategic positions based on new evidence and the need to react to external events. While many of these external factors - such as global recession, environmental crises and demographic changes – may be universally recognised as important, coalitions influence how policymakers understand, interpret and respond to them. They adapt to events by drawing on their beliefs and promote their understanding of events within the subsystem.

**Complex policymaking environments limit policymaker control**

When we seek to understand policy change, do we assign responsibility to the individuals that make policy decisions or the environment in which they operate (which includes the policy conditions and socio-economic pressures that they face)? Of course, the answer is both, but that answer does not take us far! In analytical terms, we can separate and describe the separate effects of structure and agency (chapter 6; Hay, 2002: 89). We may focus primarily on agency and attribute the exercise of power only to individuals
because socio-economic and institutional structures do not act and therefore cannot exercise power. This appears to make things simpler, but it just raises another question: how else can we describe convincingly the importance of institutions and structures?

| **Policy conditions** – the nature or structure of the policy environment and hence the specific problems that policymakers face. Contextual factors include a political system’s size, demographic structure, economy and mass behaviour (chapter 6) |
| **Structure** – a set of parts put together in a particular way to form a whole. The implications are: (a) that a structure is relatively fixed and difficult but not impossible to break down; and (b) it influences the decisions that actors make. |
| **Agency** – refers to the ability of an actor to deliberate and act to realise its goals. The implication is that this is intentional action based on an actor’s thought process and ability to choose (rather than determined by the structure of the decision-making environment) |

In practice, structure and agency are difficult to separate: policymakers act in accordance with rules and their action depends partly on the nature of the problem they face. Yet, these concepts still have an analytical value. They help us simplify and make sense of complex processes, and therefore help us draw generalisations and develop theories to explain other events and processes. Further, although we may agree that policy change results from a wide range of factors, most policy theories try to relate policymaker choice to an environment which can be summed up by a small number of statements:

1. There are many policymakers spread across many policymaking venues.
2. Each venue contains its own ‘institutions’, or formal and informal rules.
3. Each venue can produce its own networks of policy makers and influencers.
4. Participants in each venue make reference to a dominant set of ‘ideas’ or beliefs about the nature of policy problems and the acceptable range of solutions.
5. Social and economic conditions, and events, help set their policy agenda and limit their ability to address and solve policy problems.

Different chapters describe these dynamics in different, but generally complementary, ways. The rationality approach, explored in Chapters 5 and 7, focuses on the characteristics of actors such as policymakers. Some studies outline a set of assumptions about how individuals think and behave, to gauge how much this approach explains. Others explore what happens if these assumptions prove unrealistic. Broadly speaking, rational choice theory employs ‘methodological individualism’ or a commitment to explain socio-political outcomes as the aggregation of the decisions of individuals. The basic aim is to establish how many, or what proportion of, political outcomes one can explain with reference to the choices of individuals under particular conditions. Perhaps the biggest contrast is with complexity theory, which states that a policymaking system
is greater than the sum of its parts, and that we cannot simply reduce outcomes to the choices of individuals (chapter 6).

Rationality approaches also compare with accounts that consider the nature of the policymaking environment and how it impacts on the policy process. ‘New institutionalism’ (chapter 5) treats institutions as sets of rules, norms, established practices and relationships that produce regular patterns of policymaking behaviour. Rules can be formal, such as when set out in the constitutions of political systems. Or, they can be informal, such as the norms, understandings and expectations that people share when they interact regularly with other people. In studies of ‘institutional rational choice’, we combine this focus on choice and institutions. For example, the Institutional Analysis and Development Framework (IAD) goes beyond an abstract discussion of choice to consider the most effective ways in which people can produce rules to cooperate with each other (chapter 7).

The premise of more structural accounts is that powerful external forces determine, or influence, the way that individuals or governments make policy decisions. As chapter 6 suggests, there is a long list of arguments from which to choose, including: the socioeconomic background of countries or regions may affect the size and scope of their welfare policies; there may be a strong imperative for governments to support the capitalist system and therefore the interests of the classes that benefit most from that system; ‘globalisation’ describes an imperative for governments to compete with each other to protect their economy and secure foreign direct investment, by reducing regulations, corporation taxes and public spending; and, policymakers are part of a large complex system over which they have limited control. Chapter 6 also explores the idea that policy represents ‘its own cause’: governments inherit massive commitments which constrain their ability to change policy beyond the margins; it is relatively difficult to introduce new policies and terminate others.

A combination of individualist and structural approaches suggests that we need to recognise the importance of structures and rules without saying that they determine behaviour. Contemporary theories of public policy address this issue by examining how policymakers and pressure participants adapt to their policy environment by, for example, interpreting socioeconomic shifts to set the agenda, and ‘learning’ and adapting their beliefs to reflect those shifts.

**Ideas matter**

Almost all policy theories refer to the role of ‘ideas’ – or shared beliefs - to sum up this relationship between the bounded rationality of policy actors and the constraints posed by complex policymaking environments. They define ideas and describe this dynamic in different ways, focusing on the potential *solution* to a policy problem (‘I have an idea’), the narrative designed to persuade, or a fundamental set of beliefs or understandings which seem to provide structure to policy debate (Cairney and Weible, 2015). For
example, ideas may be the shared beliefs that give people a common aim (Chapter 10). They can represent the accumulation of knowledge within a political system. Ideas may be embedded in the institutions guiding action (Chapter 5), the paradigms taken for granted and acted upon with little further thought (Hall, 1993), or the ‘monopolies’ on the way that we understand policy issues (Chapter 9). Ideas represent standards of behaviour that are considered to be normal, or ideologies used as the basis for policy action. In each case, people exercise power in a context in which only certain beliefs or norms of behaviour may be considered acceptable (see Chapter 3 on power).

Chapter 11 shows how different discussions try to describe this dynamic. Ideas can be compared to ‘viruses’ to identify their ability to spread, subject to the crucial role of the ‘host’, or ability of policymaker audiences, with ingrained beliefs, to resist ‘infection’. Norms of behaviour have a strong influence but only when people enforce them. Paradigms represent established beliefs about the nature of the policy problem and how to solve it, but crises also prompt policymakers to revisit, and often reject, those beliefs. Chapter 11 then describes multiple streams analysis (MSA) which suggests that the adoption of a new policy solution requires the coming together of three factors at the same time: a problem is high on the agenda and ‘framed’ in a particular way, a technically and politically feasible solution already exists, and policymakers have the motive and opportunity to adopt that solution and translate it into policy.

Chapter 12 focuses on policy learning and the potential transfer of ideas. The literature on learning describes it as a political strategy. People learn by listening to experts, engaging in wider dialogue, engaging in trial-and-error to get what they want, and identifying the limits to ‘top-down’ policymaking (Dunlop and Radaelli, 2018). The literature on policy transfer refers to the evidence for, and causes of, similarities in policy across political systems. It can relate to the transfer of ideologies and wholesale programmes, broad ideas, minor administrative changes and even negative lessons (when one country learns not to follow another country). Our discussion of ideas suggests that the scale and likelihood of transfer depends partly on the beliefs already held within the importing country. To take an extreme example, a capitalist and a socialist country may not find much to learn from each other about how to balance the public and private sectors or pursue economic growth. In less extreme examples, we may focus on more technical reasons for the likelihood of transfer: if the borrowing country has an incentive to learn from another (for example, if they share a common problem and have a similar political system); if the policy is simple and easy to adopt; if the values of borrower and lender coincide; and, if their administrative arrangements are similar. Some countries may also become pressured to follow the lead of another. Chapter 12 explores the role of coercion, from the direct pressure of another country or supranational institution, to the feeling among an importing country that it should keep up with international trends. Overall, the study of transfer gives us the ability to explain not only why policy changes, but also the extent to which change relates to the widespread sharing of ideas.
How to analyse policy and policymaking
We focus so much on definitions and measurement because policy theories exist primarily to explain continuity and change in public policy. We need to know what policy is to be able to measure it. We need to measure it – and identify minor or major change - to know what we seek to explain. We need to explain the policymaking process to understand the role of key elements, such as evidence or participation, and to make an informed analysis of how good or bad policymaking tends to be.

In particular, a central aim of policy theories is to explain why policymaking seems to involve stable relationships and policy continuity at one point, but instability and policy change at another. There is a discussion of policy continuity and change in almost every chapter. Policy cycle models identify decision points at which policy will change, but also that decisions made in the past constrain present options. Theories of power highlight the ways in which the powerful create or reinforce barriers to change, but also that they can be overcome. New institutionalism may focus on the constraints on policy change, often caused by events and decisions in the past, but also the extent to which rules and norms are challenged and reformed. Bounded rationality can produce both incremental and radical change. Structural factors are sources of constraint, but developments such as demographic change can put immense pressure on policymakers to change policy. Rational choice theory aims to identify points of equilibrium, in which there is no incentive for any individual to make a different choice, but much analysis seeks to explain its frequent absence. MLG identifies new sources of ‘veto points’ within political systems, but also new sources of policy innovation and diffusion. Punctuated equilibrium uses theories of bounded rationality and agenda setting to explain long periods of stasis but bursts of innovation. The ACF identifies the core beliefs of advocacy coalitions, and fundamental social structures, as sources of continuity, but policy learning and ‘shocks’ to the subsystem as drivers for change. Ideas can represent paradigms that represent stability and continuity, but also new policy proposals that can be used to encourage change. We may also consider if decision-makers seek lessons from elsewhere to pursue innovation or legitimise existing decisions.

In each case, the theories only tell us that policymaking can be stable or unstable; that policy can change or stay the same. We must also establish what happens, using theories to guide empirical studies. In other words, it is up to us to identify what policy is and the extent to which it has changed. It would be a mistake to skip the boring definition and measurement part (Chapter 2) to get to the exciting discussions of policy dynamics, because the latter make no sense without the former.

The Structure of the Book
The book is designed to introduce theories and concepts in a particular order. Chapters 2-4 introduce key concepts and background to the study of public policy:
• **Chapter 2.** We consider the meaning of public policy and describe the main ways to identify policy tools and instruments, to help us measure policy change. We then examine the role of models, theories and concepts of policymaking and examine the classic reference point: the policy cycle.

• **Chapter 3.** We explore power as a key concept that underpins discussion in all subsequent chapters. We derive insights from the ‘community power debate’ to consider how to define power and consider the methods to identify power within policymaking systems. Although ideas enjoys a separate discussion, chapter 3 shows how the inextricable relationship between the exercise of power and shared beliefs.

• **Chapter 4.** This focus on power and ideas allows to consider fully the second classic starting point: comprehensive rationality. We focus on policymakers at the heart of government and consider what conditions need to be met to ensure that they have the ability to research and articulate a series of consistent policy aims and then make sure that they are carried out. Our identification of ‘bounded rationality’ allows us to consider what happens when these conditions are not met. Approaches such as SCPD and the NPF show how policy actors exploit the ways in which policy actors address bounded rationality.

Chapters 5-7 explore the role of structure and agency in complex policymaking environments:

• **Chapter 5.** We consider how to define institutions and identify the study of ‘new institutionalism’. We explore the role of institutions as the sets of laws and rules that govern the operation of policymaking systems. These rules and laws vary by political system, but key concepts cut across them. For example, feminist institutionalism analyses the rules used to address gender and the ways in which they produce imbalances of power in all political systems.

• **Chapter 6.** We identify the role of factors that may be beyond the control of policymakers. Too many people assume that policy analysis should begin with a discussion of ‘rational’ policymakers rather than the environment in which they operate. We explore the key ‘structural’ causes of policy outcomes, the extent to which policymakers are influenced by economics, the idea that policymakers inherit policy commitments and the idea that they form one part of a large complex policymaking system.

• **Chapter 7.** We identify the ways in which actors might, or might not, engage in collective action. Key examples of ‘game theory’ – including the prisoner’s dilemma and ‘tragedy of the commons’ - identify ways in which individuals appear to undermine long term collective action by acting according to their own short term rewards. However, the Institutional Analysis and Development
framework (IAD) identifies the conditions under which people will decide to act collectively and produce rules to avert such tragedies.

Chapters 8-10 explore the relationships between policymakers and policy participants within policy networks or subsystems:

- **Chapter 8.** We identify multi-level governance, or the dispersal of power from national central government to other levels of government and non-governmental actors. We consider how to define governance and MLG, identify its origins in studies of the UK and EU, consider its applicability to other political systems, and identify the links between MLG and other theories studying subsystems.

- **Chapter 9.** We consider punctuated equilibrium theory, whose aim is to explain long periods of policy stability and continuity punctuated by short but intense periods of instability and change. Punctuated equilibrium theory is based on the study of bounded rationality, policy subsystems and the literature on agenda setting. We explore the ability of interest groups to ‘venue shop’, or seek sympathetic audiences elsewhere, when they are dissatisfied with the way that policymakers understand and seek to solve policy problems.

- **Chapter 10.** We consider the advocacy coalition framework. It focuses on the role of coalitions driven by their common beliefs. Coalitions compete with each other within subsystems. Some coalitions can dominate the way that policy problems are understood and solved for long periods, but are also subject to challenge when ‘shocks’ force them to reconsider the adequacy of their beliefs or provide new opportunities for their competitors to exploit.

Chapters 11 and 12 consider the role and transfer of ideas:

- **Chapter 11.** Our basic premise is that policymaking is not just about power. Instead, we must identify how power and ideas combine to explain policy processes and outcomes. We consider how to define and identify ideas, explore the ways in which theories of public policy conceptualise the relationship between power and ideas, and outline the importance of ‘multiple streams analysis’ to capture both the explanatory power of ideas and ways in which ideas are promoted and accepted within government.

- **Chapter 12.** We consider policy learning and the transfer of ideas from one policymaking system to another. In some cases, transfer follows research, when the knowledge of one system is used to inform policy in another. However, the transfer of ideas or policy programmes is also about power and the ability of some countries to oblige or encourage others to follow their lead. We consider what policy transfer is, who does it and why.
However, the chapters do not need to be read in strict chronological order. For example, chapters 3 and 11 can be usefully combined to consider the role of power and ideas. Chapters 3 and 9 consider power and agenda setting. Chapters 4 and 6 have a common focus on structure and agency. Chapters 6-8 describe multi-centric policymaking. The role of chapter 13 is to consider these multiple links in more detail and to consider how best to combine theories and concepts to address the big questions in public policy.

Conclusion
The most basic question we ask ourselves when studying public policy is: what do we want to know? The answer is that we want to know: what policy is; what policy measures exist; what measures have been taken; and how to best make sense of what has happened. Indeed, this book is mostly about policy making rather than specific examples of policy in specific countries. In particular, we want to know what the most useful theories of public policy are, what each of them tells us, and what the cumulative effect of their knowledge is.

We study theories of public policy because we want to ask why particular decisions are made, but recognise that there are many different answers to that question. The use of multiple theories allows us to examine the policy process, and build up a detailed narrative of events and decisions, using multiple perspectives. We focus on policymakers and seek to identify how they understand policy problems, how high the problem is on their agenda and to which arguments and solutions they are most receptive. We identify the political, social and economic pressures that they face when making decisions. We identify the main governing institutions and examine the rules they follow when they process issues. We identify policy networks and the relationships between interest groups and government. We also consider the extent to which policy is within the control of elected policymakers, and how much is devolved to other actors such as civil servants and groups, other types of government and non-governmental organisations.

Each chapter sets out a key theory or concern of public policy, identifies its value and explores the questions that each theory seeks to answer. It then considers, where appropriate, how each theory or concept has been applied empirically and how much it tells us about different political systems, policy areas and time periods. The role of chapter 13 is to consider how to best combine the insights of these public policy theories to answer real world questions, such as: can policymaking be ‘evidence based’?