A Quarter Century of the Advocacy Coalition Framework: An Introduction to the Special Issue

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About two decades ago, Paul Sabatier (1991) urged scholars to develop better theories and empirics for understanding policy processes. Sabatier’s proposition, in collaboration with Hank Jenkins-Smith, became the advocacy coalition framework (ACF) (Jenkins-Smith, 1990; Sabatier, 1988; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993). The original version of the ACF sought to make important contributions to the policy process literature by responding to several perceived “needs”: a need to take longer-term time perspectives to understand policy change; a need for a more complex view of subsystems to include both researchers and intergovernmental relations; a need for more attention to the role of science and policy analysis in public policy; and a need for a more realistic model of the individual rooted more deeply in psychology rather than microeconomics.

The ACF has since become a foundation for guiding theoretically driven inquiry into some of the questions that lie at the core of policy process research: How do people mobilize, maintain, and act in advocacy coalitions? To what extent do people learn, especially from allies and from opponents? What is the role of scientists and scientific and technical information in policymaking? What factors influence both minor and major policy change? Since its inception, these questions have been explored in a variety of contexts from around the world (Weible, Sabatier, & McQueen, 2009).

With applications and recognition come criticisms. One criticism came from Edella Schlager (1995), who challenged ACF researchers to develop an explanation for collective action, particularly to support the existence of coalitions not only by shared beliefs but also by shared patterns of coordination. More than 15 years later, researchers have responded with an increasing number of applications that identify coalitions by both shared beliefs and coordination patterns (Henry, Lubell, & McCoy, 2010; Weible & Sabatier, 2005). Another criticism centered on the applicability of the ACF to subsystems outside of the United States (Sabatier, 1998). In response, dozens of researchers, such as Kübler (2001) and Hirschi and Widmer (2010), have applied
the ACF in different national contexts, and efforts are now shifting toward developing effective strategies for applying the ACF as a foundation for comparative public policy research and for understanding its limitations of applicability in different political systems.

Of course, challenges in ACF-directed inquiry remain and readers will find in this issue of the Policy Studies Journal (PSJ) a collection of eight ACF applications that continue to test and develop the theories within the framework. Six of the eight applications in this special issue sprung from an international workshop on the ACF at the University of California-Davis in September 2010. The workshop brought together scholars from around the world to discuss the genesis of the framework, current theoretical and methodological challenges, and current and new lines of inquiry. Two additional articles were submitted to PSJ by the authors independent of the workshop organizers. Each article in this collection was subjected to, and survived, the same peer-review process as all other PSJ publications. This collection of eight articles illustrates some of the strengths and weaknesses of current ACF scholarship and point to next steps for scholars interested in advancing the understanding and explanation about policy process. This introduction does not provide a thorough overview of the ACF as done in Sabatier (1988), Jenkins-Smith (1990), Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993, 1999) and Sabatier and Weible (2007), among others. Readers are also directed to the articles themselves for more detailed descriptions of the ACF.

An Overview of the Advocacy Coalition Framework Compilation

The compilation and origin of authors typifies current ACF applications and developments (see Table 1). Participating authors come from Canada, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States. Substantively, three focus on subsystems in the United States, three on subsystems in Europe, and one on 17 subsystems across Canada, Europe, and the United States. The breadth of this compilation range from Albright’s article on policy change in Hungary’s flood management to Pierce’s

| Table 1. The International, Geographic, and Substantive Scope of the Compilation |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------|
| University/Country         | Policy Subsystem Description    |                  |
| Henry (2011)                     | West Virginia University/United States | Transportation policy, California, United States |
| Matti and Sandström (2011)     | Luleå University of Technology/Sweden | Carnivore management, Sweden |
| Pierce (2011)                   | University of Colorado Denver/United States | Foreign policy on Israel, United States |
| Ingold (2011)                   | University of Bern/Switzerland | Climate policy, Switzerland |
| Nöhrstedt (2011)                | Uppsala University/Sweden | Intelligence policy, Sweden |
| Albright (2011)                 | Loyola University Chicago/United States | Flood management policy, Hungary |
| Montpetit (2011)                | Montreal University/Canada | Biotechnology policy, Europe, and United States |
| Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth (2011) | Montana State University, Harvard University, Idaho State University/United States | Not an empirical application but devoted to theory development |
historical analysis of coalitions involved in United States policy on the creation of Israel. One application by Shanahan et al. (2011) posits several hypotheses that explore the intersections of the role of policy narratives in the ACF.

The global scope of applications in this issue of *PSJ* may pose challenges for readers seeking to make sense of the current trend in ACF research and how these trends fit into the past. To assist in the cognitive digestion of this collection and to put this collection into the ACF research program, we have asked the authors to position their article and findings into the broader ACF research program. Thus, the reader will get a sense of past ACF scholarship from each article in this collection.

We also find it useful to make sense of this collection by interpreting the ACF as an actual “framework” that supports multiple theoretical areas of emphasis. Drawing from Laudan’s (1978) epistemology of research traditions and the institutional analysis and development (IAD) framework (Ostrom, 2005; Schlager, 2007), a framework provides a foundation for descriptive and prescriptive inquiry by establishing a set of assumptions, scope, and general classifications and relations among key concepts. As a framework, the ACF’s assumptions have been clearly established since its conception: the policy subsystem remains the primary unit of analysis; a long-term time perspective is needed for understanding subsystem affairs; the expansive set of actors involved in policy systems may be aggregated into coalitions; and policy designs are interpreted as translations of coalition beliefs (Sabatier, 1988). These assumptions guide researchers toward a better understanding and explanation of a range of topics including the formation and maintenance of coalitions, learning, and policy change. In addition, the flow diagram (adapted from Sabatier & Weible, 2007) specifies some of the key concepts and their relations in the overall process depicted by the ACF (see Figure 1).

Six of the eight articles in this compilation emphasize three major theoretical lines of inquiry within the ACF (see Table 2). The first involves a theoretical emphasis on coalitions where questions focus on why coalitions form, their structure, and their stability over time. Henry (2011) uses an egocentric network correlation method to compare the influence of power and beliefs in structuring coalitions. Matti and Sandström (2011) use Quadratic Assignment Procedure to relate coordination and beliefs within coalitions in a Swedish carnivore management policy subsystem. Ingold (2011) uses block models to identify coalitions on Swiss climate policy. Pierce (2011) examines coalition stability through Tabu clustering of organizations from coded legislative testimonies in his study of U.S. foreign policy on Israel.

Whereas this compilation of articles highlights innovations in analyzing coalitions, the same cannot be said about the study of policy-oriented learning, the second theoretical line. Only Albright (2011) discusses learning and even she is cautious in her claims that learning contributed to policy change in the contexts of flood management in Hungary.

Nohrstedt (2011) and Albright (2011) share a major emphasis on the third theoretical line of inquiry, policy change. The outcome they seek to understand is not coalition membership, structure, or stability, but rather the role and behavior of coalitions in policy change. In both applications, the analysis of policy change is more qualitative than quantitative, with an emphasis on understanding causal
mechanisms by tracing the steps from stimuli to change; that is, how did the coalitions respond to external events that led to policy change. More the exception is Ingold (2011), who not only uses sophisticated methods to model coalitions, but also examines the role of brokers in helping two coalitions reach a negotiated agreement on Swiss climate policy.

Table 2 shows only six of the eight contributions to the special issue. The remaining two focus on less well-established theoretical emphases within the framework. One is about the role of science in policy—an area that the ACF was initially designed to study but few authors have taken on the task. This compilation exhibits one of the few with a contribution by Montpetit (2011), who examines the role of scientists in
Montpetit’s propositions challenge the ACF on its depiction of the role of science in policy subsystems and helps clarify future directions in this area. His main argument is that the level of policy subsystem conflict affects the participants’ perception of the credibility in science and that scientists may be more divided than other subsystem participants. Similar to arguments by Heintz and Jenkins-Smith (1988) and Jenkins-Smith (1990), Montpetit represents recent scholarship that essentially reverses the causal direction by saying that controversy generates scientific uncertainty rather than the other way around. Readers should also recognize that Montpetit’s ACF application does not include the measurement of coalitions, learning, or policy change; that is, he emphasizes different theoretical terrain within the framework compared with the rest of the articles in this compilation.

The last contribution is by Shanahan et al. (2011) on policy narratives. These scholars work from a narrative policy framework (NPF) that provides an approach for studying text, dialogue, or discourse with an eye toward how such policy stories influence policy processes and outcomes. From the narrative policy frameworks, the authors bring policy narratives to the ACF, specifically at the subsystem or meso level of analysis. The focus centers on how policy narratives can help to either measure or explain various ACF concepts, i.e., belief systems, policy learning, public opinion, and strategy. Thus, the NPF offers a new method of inquiry that can be transparent and systematic in analysis and that widens the ACF by marrying bounded rationality and belief systems with an interpretation of social construction in assessing how coalitions engage in strategic framing.

Examining the compilation of articles makes clear that the authors’ research questions lead to different theoretical foci. There is also a strikingly similar pattern for methods of data collection and analysis (see Table 3). In studying coalition structure, for example, Henry (2011) and Matti and Sandström (2011) use survey data

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<td>What is the structure of advocacy coalitions?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Matti and Sandström</td>
<td>What is the structure of advocacy coalitions?</td>
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with a time perspective of 1 year or less. Ingold (2011) also relies on survey data to analyze coalition structure but does take a longer-term perspective of 10 years to understand coalition stability. Similarly, Pierce’s historical inquiry into coalition stability is based on the coding of legislative hearings using a time perspective that spans more than two decades. Nohrstedt (10 years) and Albright (200 years) both take long-term time perspectives to understand policy change. Montpetit’s perspective is short term and comparative across 17 policy subsystems to investigate the role of science and scientists using questionnaire data. Recall that one of the ACF’s assumptions is that researchers should take a time perspective of 10 years or more to understand subsystem affairs. Given this assumption, then, how can we reconcile the patterns found in Table 3? First, the ACF assumption that scholars should take a time perspective of 10 years or more remains useful advice, but is more applicable to some research questions than to others. Second, the 10-year recommendation is more of a “vintage test” for subsystems—hypotheses of network structure, for example, may be tested using cross-sectional data; however, in order for the ACF hypotheses to be valid, the subsystem has to have some degree of maturity (~10 years). And third, studies of shorter duration should be seen in the context of the longer-term dynamics within the subsystem. Regardless of the interpretation, this compilation underscores the methodological pluralism that has characterized ACF scholarship, especially in the last decade.

**Where Do We Go Next?**

The ACF has established itself as a valid research program within the field of policy process research. This special issue highlights the emerging strengths within ACF scholarship including nuanced empirics and theory development about coalitions and policy change as well as new theoretical directions in understanding science in policy and policy narratives. Where do we go from there?

**Focus on Theory Testing and Development within the Advocacy Coalition Framework**

Table 2 shows that the set of scholars in this collection focus on theoretical categories within the framework. Take, for example, the articles by Henry (2011) and Nohrstedt (2011). Henry seeks to understand coalition structure without a focus on policy change or learning. Alternatively, Nohrstedt seeks to understand policy change with relatively little attention to coalition structure. The different foci by Henry and Nohrstedt reflect their respective research agenda, but also the limits of their attention; that is, parallel attention to all three theoretical categories within the ACF is generally arduous and, thus, it is often more cost-effective to focus on one at a time.

Despite their different emphases and foci, the articles by Henry, Nohrstedt, and the others in this special issue fall within the scope of the ACF. As a single framework, the ACF provides a general depiction of the policy process (see Figure 1). This depiction usually involves the emergence and interaction among coalitions,
learning within and between coalitions, and major and minor policy change. As a general process, the ACF is invaluable because it provides an international community of scholars a common language of important concepts, basic relations among concepts, and a shared scope of inquiry. Even more important, the ACF provides a means for numerous scholars to contribute toward shared and improved knowledge over the important puzzles of the policy process. In this respect, the best level of abstraction for understanding and utilizing the ACF is as a framework that provides the basis for establishing a research program among an international group of scholars, and that provides direction for adjacent but distinct theoretically focused inquiry.

Beyond its role in fostering an international research program, the ACF also provides a rich foundation for theoretical development. Making progress in understanding coalitions, learning, and policy change requires theoretical, empirical, and methodological specialization. Drawing on past experience, progress has been made in response to Schlager’s criticism about collective action in coalitions, in part, through the specialized empirical efforts by multiple scholars on developing theory about coalition stability and structure as the outcome variables. Similar efforts are needed for learning and policy change. In this respect, we find that theories provide the best analytical approach for developing and testing hypotheses within the ACF.

The three theories in Table 1 are clearly interdependent. But, if we take Albright (2011) and Nohrstedt (2011) as examples, their contributions are less about coalition structure and stability, but more about explaining change by understanding changes in coalition resources and strategies following major events. Coalitions for Albright and Nohrstedt represent a means to an end. In contrast, coalitions are the end for Henry, Pierce, and Matti and Sandström. Only Ingold integrates both. While the same scholar should strive toward scientific rigor in understanding and interrelating coalitions, learning, and policy change, achieving such rigor is a nontrivial achievement for experienced and nascent scholar alike.

One of the strengths of thinking of developing theories within the ACF is that it allows for the emergence of new areas of inquiry, such as the development and testing of a theory related to science in policy as shown by Montpetit (2011) and the role of policy narratives in policy processes by Shanahan et al. (2011). Scholars have the opportunity to carve out theoretical niches and to explore and develop these niches over time. Such developments need and should not be limited to those shown in this special issue. One may interpret the ACF as supporting a micro theory of cognition (i.e., hierarchical beliefs, biased assimilation, and “devil shift”) that is a powerful driver of theoretical development in all these other higher-level theories. Others may disagree and, instead, view the ACF as borrowing assumptions from micro-cognition theories belonging more in the domain of psychology or social psychology. Putting differences in interpretations aside, we leave it to future scholar-ship to delineate what is important and what is not in a research program supported by the ACF. Among the next steps are to identify and develop both new and old theories within the ACF and to provide guidelines for relating theories and advice about how to bring theories into research practices.
Using the Advocacy Coalition Framework for Comparative Public Policy Research

The internationalization of the ACF is making the framework a viable approach for comparative public policy research. To make this happen, the ACF theories need to be contextualized by the subsystem within the broader governing system. This involves a clearer articulation of the properties of policy subsystems as a means for comparisons and of the interdependence of policy subsystems to broader governing systems. To make this happen, one clear step is to apply the ACF in different governing systems, especially South America, Africa, and Asia. Additionally, important issues related to its applicability in the European context still remain. There is also a need for subsystem comparisons within the same governing system, such as education, social, welfare, economic, and foreign policy, as well as across national, regional, and local governmental levels within federal and unitary systems. In all of these efforts, the best strategy is to practice diligence toward transparency in methods and analysis to permit comparisons across case studies conducted by different researchers.

Revisiting Policy-Oriented Learning

A traditional strength of the ACF has been its focus on policy-oriented learning. Only Albright’s (2011) piece touches learning in her empirical analysis in this compilation. The challenges in studying policy-oriented learning involve theoretical and methodological issues. First off, how can we define learning theoretically and operationally? What are instances of nonlearning? Can we claim belief change is an indication of learning or is learning best seen through changes in institutions? Does not reinforcement of beliefs, which would reduce uncertainty in the world, also represent an indication of learning? What time spans are appropriate for the study of changing beliefs? How can “learning” that serves chiefly to undermine scientific consensus (Orestes & Conway, 2010) be accommodated in theories of policy-oriented learning? How can the kinds of “motivated reasoning” and belief-system defenses (see, e.g., Kahan, Jenkins-Smith, & Braman, 2011) posited in the ACF’s conception of the individual be reconciled with learning? If there were an area within ACF deserving of innovations in theory and methods, it would be policy-oriented learning.

Developing the Role of Coalition Resources

Sabatier and Weible (2007, pp. 201–2) identify six categories of coalition resources: formal legal authority to make policy decisions, public opinion, information, mobilizable troops, financial resources, and skillful leadership. Building from this categorization, contributions in this special issue by Albright (2011), Nohrstedt (2011), and Ingold (2011) continue to advance the literature in this area by exploring how changes in the distribution of coalition resources contribute to policy change. But these applications also raise challenges and questions. Both Nohrstedt and
Ingold, for example, measure resources differently. Moreover, Nohrstedt makes the theoretical argument that resources can be hierarchically arranged with regards to their usefulness to coalitions in generating policy change. Some questions to answer involve issues of context and timing. Are some resources more important in corporatist systems compared with pluralist systems or in parliamentary systems compared with presidential systems? Are some resources more important in maintaining coalition members compared with fostering cross-coalition learning? What is the relationship between events and the redistribution of resources in generating policy change or stasis (Nohrstedt & Weible, 2010)? How and to what extent do coalitions capitalize on new resources to achieve greater influence in policy subsystems? Clearly, the contributions in this special issue do not answer these questions but they continue the effort toward developing better empirical approaches and an understanding of the role of resources in policy processes, an effort that we hope continues.

Investigating the Largely Unexplored

This special issue highlights some of the major components of the ACF from coalitions to policy change, but other components of the ACF were addressed minimally or not at all. Researchers are encouraged to investigate rarely explored areas within the ACF including coalition defection (Jenkins-Smith, St. Clair, & Woods, 1991), the devil shift (Sabatier, Hunter, & McLaughlin, 1987), negotiated agreements (Sabatier & Weible, 2007), political opportunity structures (Kübler, 2001), self-interest (Nohrstedt, 2008), multiple events rather than a single event for policy change (Smith, 2000), public opinion (Herron & Jenkins-Smith, 2006; Jordan & Greenaway, 1998), and using the ACF as a policy analysis tool (Weible, 2007).

Relating the Advocacy Coalition Framework to Other Frameworks and Theories

For decades, scholars have provided multiple frameworks and theories for understanding policy processes. By mentioning the distinction between frameworks and theories, questions may arise about the relationship between the ACF and other theories and frameworks. Take the IAD framework as an example. The relationship between the ACF and the IAD framework is too complicated to discuss fully in this essay and is open to multiple interpretations. Nonetheless, we view both frameworks as complementary perspectives of different aspects of policy processes. The most striking difference is the unit of analysis: ACF focuses on policy subsystems and the IAD framework focuses on action situations. Whereas an action situation can be interpreted as a policy subsystem, the descriptive and explanatory power of institutions within the IAD framework weakens considerably at the policy subsystem level, something recent scholars within the IAD framework are grappling with (Ostrom, 2009; Poteete, Janssen, & Ostrom, 2010). In contrast, the ACF is best applied at the subsystem level and less within specific action situations (e.g., decision making in a partnership). While subsystems are certainly shaped by various institutional configurations, the specifics of these arrangements become most apparent in
the venues (interpreted as a type of action situation) in which coalitions seek to influence subsystem behavior partly through institutional change or stasis. We quote Sabatier (1987, p. 684): “A logical extension of this [IAD framework] is to view policy change as partially the product of attempts by various actors to structure action situations—chiefly institutional rules regarding the range and authority of participants—so as to produce the desired operational decisions.” Most importantly, the main point in comparing the ACF and the IAD framework is not to answer all the comparative questions, but to recognize that both frameworks represent different research programs marked by different research cultures, assumptions, scopes, and emphases on major concepts.

Finally, this compilation is the second special issue published in *PSJ* devoted exclusively to a particular framework in policy process research: The first compilation was devoted exclusively to the IAD framework and published in *PSJ* issue 39.1 (see Ostrom, 2011, among others). A forthcoming special issue will feature a compilation of the punctuated equilibrium theory with guest editors Bryan Jones and Frank Baumgartner. We hope readers agree that these compilations represent significant milestones in the continued maturation of *PSJ* as the premier outlet for policy process research.

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Note

1. The theoretical categories in Table 2 match Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith’s (1993, 1999) demarcation of the ACF’s hypotheses by coalitions, learning, and policy change.

References


