Studying Public Policy: From 1976 to 2013

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Since Richard Simeon's 1976 article "Studying Public Policy", scholars of the comparative public policy of advanced industrial democracies have largely shifted their focus toward effectively modelling the complex role of ideas in policy-making.[1] In particular, this has involved the study of the decision-making capabilities and processes of individuals and institutions, the character of rationality, and the complex relationships between different actors in the policy process. A rational model centred around self-interested individuals who employ a straightforward sort of power to drive desirable policy outcomes has evolved into a constellation of approaches that interrogate some of the assumptions behind that view. This focus has been accompanied by substantial changes in the global context of policy-making, and has taken place alongside — and in dialogue with — broader theoretical re-evaluations on the nature of individuals, groups, and institutions, as well as the character of policy change. This shift has been driven in part by global historical factors, but has also arisen in response to a widespread perception of inadequacy or at least incompleteness in past theories that emphasized power as an explanatory variable and rationality as the basis for individual motivation. Awareness of the shortcomings of rational actor models has also arisen as a consequence of interdisciplinary exposure, particularly to new research on cognitive psychology and behavioural economics.

Simeon's article sought to provide "a very general framework for the study of policy", using Anthony King's definition of policy as "a consciously chosen course of action (or of inaction) directed toward some end".[2] Updating this framework for 2013 requires examining the changing global context in which public policy is studied; summarizing theoretical developments pertaining to understanding individuals, groups, institutions, and policy processes; and examining the tension between empirical and normative work in the discipline. Simeon explains that: "Policy emerges from the play of economic, social, and

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[1] Simeon, "Studying Public Policy".
[2] Ibid., p. 579, 557.

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political forces, as manifested in and through institutions and processes".[3] In providing an account of the scholarship since then, it therefore makes sense to begin with a discussion of the context of policy-making, before moving on to examine work on individuals, groups, institutions, and policy processes. Simeon identifies the "broader political framework" in which decision-makers operate, "defined by such factors as prevailing ideologies, assumptions and values, structures of power and influence, patterns of conflict and division, and so on".[4] Some of the most substantial public policy work done since then has served to demarcate and explore this framework, as well as to devise and develop methodologies for making causal claims about what happens within it.

The global context of policy-making has shifted substantially in the past thirty years. These shifts include the major economic and political changes that accompanied the fall of the Soviet Union[5]; economic globalization and the huge expansion of global trade; and the economic, political, and military rise of countries like India, Brazil, and China. This has been accompanied by complex new forms of financial interdependence, including the substantial financing of American public debt through foreign sovereign purchases of treasury bonds and the increased exposure of international investors and sovereigns to risks associated with complex new financial instruments. There have also been substantial changes in the structure of global governance, as organizations like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund have sought to drive policy change through mechanisms like conditionality and shifted their organizational focus in response to changes in the dynamics between developed, developing, and least-developed states.[67] Global governance has also

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[3]Simeon, "Studying Public Policy", p. 550.

[4]Ibid., p. 549.

[5]This not only includes independence for the former vassal states of the USSR, but also the impact of the end of Cold War competition in Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East as well as the diminished viability of Marxist theories and predictions about the direction of global economic and political development.

[6]For a perceptive and engaging account, see: Woods, *The Globalizers: The IMF, the World Bank, And Their Borrowers*.

[7]See also: Dobbin, Simmons, and Garrett, "The Global Diffusion of Public Policies: Social Construction, Coercion, Competition, or Learning?"

developed as institutions like the World Trade Organization have risen in prominence and acquired quasi-judicial roles at the international level. At the same time, a global mass media has come into existence with complex impacts on the expectations of people everywhere about what sort of life is desirable and how their governments ought to function. These structural changes have been accompanied by policy-relevant shifts in culture and technology, including the tension between a widespread global desire for modernity and the sometimes-violent backlash against it, as well as the development of truly global issues such as pandemic disease, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and environmental degradation at the planetary level. All these factors help establish the context in which policy must be made and interpreted.

Contextual change has been accompanied by theoretical development within political science, including on the subjects of globalization and interdependence. As policy-making has been pushed to become more comparative internationally, the study of public policy has also embraced comparative and quantitative methods, along with new tools like formal modelling and intensive textual analysis.[8] The shift toward a comparative perspective is likely the most significant methodological development since Simeon wrote in 1976. The theoretical development of the public policy field has included new analysis of individuals, including in terms of belief-formation and models of rationality; new work on the nature of groups, including specialized forms like epistemic communities and political parties; updated analysis on the nature and functioning of political institutions ranging from formal courts and parliaments to informal interest groups and social movements; and study of the mechanisms of policy change, with different theoretical frameworks applying variable emphasis to various explanatory factors and incorporating insights like the importance of critical junctures (variously defined). While interest-based and rationalist accounts re-

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[8]Richard Simeon was personally involved in this development, including by serving as one editor of an influential volume on the turn toward comparative approaches in the study of Canadian politics. White et al., *The Comparative Turn in Canadian Political Science*.

main dominant in most sub-fields, constructivists and post-modernists have elaborated criticisms about the nature of structures long-assumed to be unproblematic.[9] For example, Helmke and Levistky have considered the importance of informal institutions shaped by discourse.[10] Assumptions about rationality have also been challenged, with differing accounts of bounded rationalities heavily influenced by heuristics and cognitive shortcuts, and new awareness of factors like framing that influence decision-making. Identity has also become a major focus of scholarly work, though perhaps more in fields like sociology than directly in public policy.

Theoretical development has taken place symbiotically with changes in methodology. Many of the methodological recommendations made by Simeon have been widely incorporated into the discipline, including the use of comparative cases, attempts to conduct longitudinal studies across long periods, efforts to make case studies comparable, much more work on "public choice", an emphasis on being clear about dependent and independent variables, and the broader use of survey and public opinion data. In part, these changes have reflected broader trends in social science research, particularly in the United States.[11] In some cases, they have also reflected technological developments, such as the diffusion of large datasets and the falling cost of computing power.

The degree to which the study of public policy ought to be normative remains a subject of contention. Simeon's article repeatedly stresses the view that political scientists should be engaged in the project of trying to *understand* politics, not explicitly trying to improve policy outcomes. He argues that the concern of scholars "should be primarily with describing and explaining, rather than recommending techniques and solutions to policy problems".[12] While the risk Simeon identifies is not trivial, he largely ignores the

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[9]See, for instance: Beland and Cox, *Ideas and Politics in Social Science Research*.

[10]Helmke and Levitsky, "Informal Institutions and Comparative Politics: A Research Agenda".

[11]This is not to imply that newly prominent quantitative methods are above criticism. See, for instance: Schrodt, *Seven Deadly Sins of Contemporary Quantitative Political Analysis*.

[12]Simeon, "Studying Public Policy", p. 580.

corresponding risk that not taking normative positions can have the effect of implicitly endorsing the *status quo*. Given the major importance public policy choices made in the coming decades will have, scholars of political science may not be able to maintain the luxury of complete objective detachment. Particularly in relation to climate change policy, humanity appears to have reached a key juncture and the success or failure of many important political projects may hinge upon our ability to shift public policy in a more sustainable direction. This problem may be of such importance that is justifies the substantial re-alignment of effort within the field, as past economic catastrophes have done within economics.

1   A changing global context

Structuring a discussion of the evolution of a scholarly discipline around the major historical events of recent decades carries the risk of being excessively descriptive, while failing to theorize. The "pressure to be politically and socially relevant" identified by Simeon may adversely affect research programs in some cases.[13] At the same time, the state of the comparative public policy literature in 2013 cannot be disentangled from fundamental recent developments like economic globalization and the apparent triumph of capitalist democracy as the dominant governing ideology within advanced industrial states. These changes affect the decisions states need to make, the degree to which states of different kinds maintain freedom of action, and the data sources and methods available to political scientists.

In 1976, the Vietnam War had been over for eight months; the Irish Republican Army was actively bombing London; Harold Wilson resigned as the Prime Minister of Great Britain; Apple Computer and Microsoft were founded; the CN Tower was built and Canada

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[13]Simeon, "Studying Public Policy", p. 553.

joined the G7; the Parti Quebecois was first elected in Quebec; Mao Zedong died; the first space shuttle was built; the Gang of Four were arrested in China; and Jimmy Carter was elected president. The OPEC oil crisis happened three years before along with the Yom Kippur War, and Margaret Thatcher wouldn't be elected for another three years, in the same year the Soviet Union would invade Afghanistan and the Iranian Revolution would take place. Since 1976, global gross domestic product (GDP) has increased from about US$15 trillion to over US$45 trillion and the global population has risen from four billion to over seven. Canada's GDP has risen from $202 billion to over $1.5 trillion and Canada's population rose from 23.5 mission to over 33.5 million. Urbanization, both in Canada and globally, has also been a substantial force of change. The Soviet Union has collapsed; China has transitioned from the chaos of the Cultural Revolution into a global export powerhouse with a state-directed economy; Germany has been re-united; and the European Community has grown into a European Union with 28 members had half a billion inhabitants. Pakistan, North Korea, and possibly South Africa and Israel have conducted tests of nuclear weapons. While less tangible, cultural changes may be equally significant, including declining religiosity in most developed industrial states, the general weakening of trade unions, and the "decline of deference" identified by Neil Nevitte.[14] Global environmental issues have also emerged and risen to political prominence, including global over-fishing, stratospheric ozone depletion, deforestation, persistent organic pollutants, and climate change. These drove a "third wave" of environmentalism, which may now be being supplanted by a fourth with a sharper focus on climate change.

Global changes have been accompanied by some notable developments connected with methodology. These include both the unparalleled capacity for inexpensive communication that has accompanied the spread of the internet (facilitating scholarly collaboration, survey research, the distribution of datasets, textual analysis, and other activities and tech-

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[14]Nevitte, *The Decline of Deference: Canadian Value Change in Cross National Perspective*.

niques) and the diffusion of substantial computing power into ubiquitous personal computers, facilitating sophisticated statistical analysis, formal models, and game theory analyses.

2   Theoretical developments

Major theoretical work has been done on the nature of individuals, groups, and institutions as well as on the mechanisms of policy change. Each of these fields of inquiry incorporates a vast body of work, far beyond the scope of what this paper can hope to summarize. Instead, it will seek to identify notable theoretical contributions and place them in the context of the overall development of the field. While it has been a major feature of recent scholarship, it should also be noted that the role of ideas is often difficult to point to definitively. As Barry Weingast explains, it is always possible to formulate an explanation for an outcome that excludes them, focusing entirely on interests or institutions. Nonetheless, it seems clear that much of the recent thrust of scholarship has been in the direction of more richly conceptualizing ideas. Approaches to doing so overlap in many ways, with different theoretical schools incorporating them at different levels of analysis and with different causal mechanisms. For instance, it may be that the most important way in which public policy conceptions of ideas must be strengthened is in terms of the mechanisms of individual preference formation; alternatively, they may be most important in terms of how they constitute shared meanings and belief systems which contribute to group cohesion.

2.1   Rationality, interests, identity — what drives individual behaviour?

The study of public policy has had to respond to the behavioural revolution in fields like economics and psychology, as well as rational and game-theoretical accounts of strategic

interaction such as those of economists Ronald Coase and Mancur Olson.[15][16] Theories of rationality have evolved to include the sort that is "bounded" ("thickly" or "thinly"), and that which incorporates the "logic of appropriateness". They have also come to acknowledge the importance of heuristics in decision-making — including those related to availability, representativeness, and anchoring — as well as analysis of the cognitive limitations within which decision-makers must operate.[17]

Rational actor accounts largely remain the standard against which alternative theories of decision-making are compared. Even in trying to model situations where rational actors are expected to have difficulty reaching accommodations with one another, incorporating relatively minor changes like modelling transaction costs can yield plausible results. Given the parsimony that accompanies the assumption that individuals have strictly-ordered preferences which they seek to satisfy, it is probably appropriate to ask what added value accompanies richer theories of decision-making. At the same time, major findings from cognitive psychology and behavioural economics show that people fail to make utility-maximizing choices even in areas of substantial personal importance to them, such as pension planning. At the same time, experiments show that the 'frame' in which a decision is presented affects the choices made by individuals, even to the extent of reversing previously-expressed preferences. Analysis of boundedly rational individuals by scholars such as Baumgartner and Jones has contributed to the development of public policy analysis in recent decades, including by highlighting factors like the disproportionate attention policy-makers pay (or fail to pay) to issues, the importance of agenda setting, and venue shopping as strategic behaviour.[18][19] Work by scholars including Druckman and Lupia has also highlighted the complex interaction between preference formation and an

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[15]See: Wilson, "The Contribution of Behavioural Economics to Political Science".
[16]Simon, "Human Nature in Politics: The Dialogue of Psychology with Political Science".
[17]See: Jacobs, *Governing for the Long Term: Democracy and the Politics of Investment*.
[18]See: Baumgartner and Jones, *The Politics of Attention: How Government Prioritizes Problems*.
[19]Baumgartner and Jones, *Agendas and Instability in American Politics, Second Edition*.

individual's environment. Rather than preferences existing prior to interaction, arising from some fundamental properties of the individual, they are affected by group-level phenomena "like parties, campaigns, and the need to act strategically".[20] As highlighted by Michael Atkinson, much work remains to be done on understanding the cognitive processes of decision-makers and crafting institutions and policy processes that take those insights into account.[21] Effective and rational policy-making increasingly requires recognition and accommodation of the degree to which people predictably fail to be rational.

Voting behaviour is a much-studied subset within the general field of decision-making, with scholars seeking to interpret what motivates ballot box decisions. This analysis is often highly quantitative and can overlap with the study of public opinion. As a sub-field, the study of voting behaviour also resides at the nexus between political theory and practice, given the avidity with which parties and candidates incorporate new information about how elections are decided into their platforms and campaign strategies. As a result, this is one field where the political ramifications of scholarship are especially relevant.

2.2   From epistemic communities to social movements — the dynamics of groups

Scholars of public policy have done a great deal to fill the gap between analysis of individuals and the study of formal rule-based political institutions. This work has included studies of public opinion, such as the work of Soroka and Wlezien, which describes a "thermostatic" model in which preferences and policy are mutually influential, mediated through political institutions.[22] 'Policy networks', which can be either cooperative or ad-

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[20]Druckman and Lupia, "Preference Formation", p.1.
[21]Atkinson, *Policy, Politics and Political Science*.
[22]Soroka and Wlezien, *Degrees of Democracy: Politics, Public Opinion, and Policy*.

versarial, have also been analyzed by scholars like Skogstad and Howlett.[23][24] Work on groups has also included analyses with a largely rational basis, such as Olsen's work on the costliness of group participation, the risk of free-riding, and the way in which that impedes group formation.[25] Scholarship in this area also involves analysis of more structured groups that are nonetheless not usually part of formal legal or governmental structures, such as political parties, activist coalitions, and epistemic communities of experts which possess an "authoritative claim to policy relevant knowledge within [any particular] domain or issue-area".[26] In policy-making areas characterized by high levels of technical complexity, epistemic communities are an essential complement to political decision-makers and bureaucratic experts. In health policy, financial and internet regulation, environmental management, and other fields, governments often lack the internal capacity to evaluate policy options and make recommendations. At times, input from expert communities may be transferred into the policy making sphere through those groups' own efforts; at other times, advocacy groups like environmentalist organizations may promote expert conclusions that support their agendas; finally, the work of epistemic communities may be explicitly incorporated into formal governing practices, such as through consultations or the use of expert committees.

One subsection of the literature, which initially emerged with a focus on environmental issues, is the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) of Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith.[27]

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[23]Skogstad, "Policy Networks and Policy Communities: Conceptualizing State-Societal Relationships in the Policy Process".

[24]Howlett, "Do Networks Matter? Linking Policy Network Structure to Policy Outcomes: Evidence from Four Canadian Policy Sectors 1990-2000".

[25]These observations seem especially pertinent when it comes to the environmental movement, which is perhaps the ultimate example of group effort on behalf of everyone, but where only an infinitesimal portion of the population is willing to make a substantial commitment of time, effort, or resources.

[26]Haas, "Introduction: epistemic communities and international policy coordination", p. 3.

[27]Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, *Policy Change and Learning: An Advocacy Coalition Approach*.

[28][29][30] The authors use the emergence of air pollution as a controversial issue during the Reagan administration as a jumping-off point for a theory about how multiple actors and levels of government formulate policy under conditions of complexity and long time horizons.[31] Changes in factors including socioeconomic conditions and technology, systemic governing coalitions, and policy decisions and impacts from other subsystems "constitute the principal dynamical elements affecting policy change".[32] The beliefs of actors are broken down into "core", "policy core", and "secondary aspects" components — ranked in increasing order of malleability. The level at which actors disagree affects the extent of conflict that is likely to take place. Policy-makers are also split up between subsystems focused on specific issues, which are often where conflict takes place. The distinction between major and minor policy changes is likewise linked to the level at which belief change is occurring. Learning is a core process within the framework, another demonstration of the degree to which the dynamics of changing ideas have become a central explanatory factor in understanding public policy processes and outcomes.[33] Often, the areas of policy-making being considered involve complex technical and scientific elements. These areas range beyond environmental policy to include cases like biotechnology, foreign policy, and intelligence.[34][35][36] While the ACF provides some useful guidance about the relation-

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[28] See also the special issue of the *Policy Studies Journal* focused on the ACF: `http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/psj.2011.39.issue-3/issuetoc`

[29] See also: Weible, "Expert-Based Information and Policy Subsystems: A Review and Synthesis".

[30] Weible, Sabatier, and McQueen, "Themes and Variations: Taking Stock of the Advocacy Coalition Framework".

[31] Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, *Policy Change and Learning: An Advocacy Coalition Approach*, p. 14.

[32] Ibid., p. 22.

[33] The dynamics of learning also bear a close relationship with the classic 'policy cycle' model of agenda-setting, policy formulation, legitimation, implementation, evaluation, and policy maintenance, succession, or termination.

[34] Montpetit, "Scientific Credibility, Disagreement, and Error Costs in 17 Biotechnology Policy Subsystems".

[35] Pierce, "Coalition Stability and Belief Change: Advocacy Coalitions in U.S. Foreign Policy and the Creation of Israel, 1922–44".

[36] Nohrstedt, "Shifting Resources and Venues Producing Policy Change in Contested Subsystems: A Case Study of Swedish Signals Intelligence Policy".

ship between beliefs and forms of political change, it arguably fails to fully incorporate issues of timing — for instance, patterns of incrementalism and punctuation which seem to exist in political systems.

The study of groups also relates to analysis of political culture and engagement. One common response to the Nevitte hypothesis of declining deference and political participation is that, rather than disappearing, political participation has shifted into new forms and venues. In recent years, there has been much conjecture and some analysis on the political role and importance of online social networking — with conclusions ranging from it being an impotent substitute for meaningful political engagement to it being a key mobilizing mechanism for atypical political groups like the Tea Party in the United States and for candidates seeking to mobilize young voters. While political culture can be challenging to isolate and devise predictions from, there does seem to be a strong basis for the view that the preferences, modes of reasoning, and forms of self-identification adopted by individuals are tightly linked to the cultural context in which they live and that cultural development has ramifications on politics and policy-making.

2.3   Re-evaluating institutions

Thelen describes a number of broad perspectives through which political institutions can be analyzed.[37] Functional/utilitarian accounts compete with power/distributional and cultural/sociological ones, with each perspective better suited to illuminating different features of institutional function and organization. Alternatively, there is a broad typology of institutions that focuses largely on what decision-making style is seen as dominant. Institutionalism has evolved to include a number of distinct-yet-overlapping streams, including rational, historical, sociological, and discursive. In a sense, these related schools of thought can be imagined on a spectrum, sorted according to where they see the primary source of

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[37]Thelen, "How Institutions Evolve".

causal variation residing.

While constructivist ideas and empirical challenges to assumptions about rationality are now a major feature of the public policy literature, there remains a substantial body of analysis focused on the treatment of institutions as rational entities. Terry Moe summarizes this research problem as: "How can individuals who are self-interested and opportunistic overcome their collective action problems to cooperate for mutual gain?"[38] This focus on collective action problems is well-suited to issues like addressing economic externalities, providing public goods, and controlling self-interested behaviour with adverse social consequences. Within this framework, veto players emerge as an important variable which can be used to analyze outcomes and make predictions about how policy-making will take place under set conditions.[39] Rational institutionalism developed to a significant degree from analysis of the U.S. Congress, and arguably remains best suited to the analysis of institutions of that type. This form of analysis also integrates with the classification of types of goods that has been developed by economists, with different dynamics operating depending on their excludability and exhaustibility. The centralization or decentralization of institutions can also have an important effect on outcomes.[40] Where transaction costs are manageable, the benefits of cooperation are sufficient, interaction is iterated, and behaviour can be observed, rational accounts can provide fairly comprehensive explanations for cooperative behaviour, including in the provision of public goods and the prevention of over-exploitation in common pool resources.[41] The framework is less applicable in cases where its underlying assumptions are not satisfied, as with problems that are not easily modelled as efforts at producing collective action. Within a rational framework, principal-agent problem can also be a key prism for analysis, whether the actors

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[38] Moe, "Power and Political Institutions", p. 216.

[39] See: Tsebelis, "Decision Making in Political Systems: Veto Players in Presidentialism, Parliamentarism, Multicameralism and Multipartyism".

[40] Busemeyer, "The Impact of Fiscal Decentralization on Education and Other Types of Spending".

[41] See: Ostrum, "Coping With Tragedies of the Commons".

in question are voters and their elected representatives or politicians and the bureaucrats who implement their policies.[42]

In contrast to rational institutionalism, historical institutionalism is more open to considering the evolving character of political bodies. They may feature organizational structures and decision-making styles that were driven by past issues and concerns, rather than by rational responses to present conditions. Sociological and discursive institutionalism move farther from the assumption of rationality, incorporating more constructivist insights into institutions as forms of shared understanding in which narrative and discourse play important causal roles. The stories that institutions use to explain and justify themselves in turn affect their operation and evolution.

This very brief discussion of the scholarship on institutions hasn't even touched upon all the significant branches of public policy work on the subject. That being said, it has hopefully illuminated a few of the areas in which significant development has taken place since Simeon's survey of the field. Trying to separate out scholarship that is specifically about institutions is in some ways deeply artificial. The puzzles about institutions that engage scholars and the types of theoretical constructs employed to explain them connect deeply with the scholarship on the mechanisms of policy change.

2.4 The mechanisms of policy change

Simeon describes "process" as "a bridge on which we move forward from what we know about institutions, ideology, power, etc., to policy outcomes; and on which we work backwards from variations in policy outcomes to seek explanations".[43] Much of the theoretical development of the past thirty years has concentrated on the mechanisms of policy change, factors that enable or constrain it, and methods for developing testable predictions about

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[42]See also: Miller, "The Political Evolution of Principal-Agent Models".
[43]Simeon, "Studying Public Policy", p. 576.

it.

One central discussion in the policy literature concerns the relationship between timing and policy development. Variously categorized as "critical junctures", "focusing events", open "policy windows", and moments of "punctuated equilibrium", there are times in which the forces sustaining policy stability seem to weaken, permitting relatively rapid and substantial change.[44][45] The tension between long-term and short-term incentives is also important in terms of phenomena like maintaining national pension systems and controlling climate change.[46] When it comes to policies where far-sighted planning is necessary and short-term obstacles may prevent suitable policy-making, Jacobs highlights the importance of the enabling conditions of limited electoral risk, an ability to cope with complexity, and appropriate institutional capacity. The absence of these enabling conditions may do much to explain the lack of effective action on climate change so far.

The role of timing in theoretical development has also been considered: notably, in terms of how the accumulation of contradictions and anomalies within a theory can drive the transition to a new paradigm.[47] For instance, contradictions between the predictions of classical economic theory and the experience of the Great Depression arguably drove the emergence and popularization of Keynesianism, just as subsequent developments prompted the monetarist critique. Certainly, the collapse of the Soviet Union created a significant number of contradictions within some theories of global politics, prompting substantial re-evaluation.

Another evolutionary metaphor with a notable role in the policy literature is the con-

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[44]On 'policy windows' see: Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, p. 175–95.

[45]For analysis of the Great Depression as one such opportunity, see: Blyth, "Powering, Puzzling, or Persuading? The Mechanisms of Building Institutional Orders".

[46]See: Jacobs, *Governing for the Long Term: Democracy and the Politics of Investment*.

[47]This perspective draws heavily on: Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 3rd Edition*.

cept of punctuated equilibrium as an alternative to incrementalism.[48][49][50][51] Whereas it might be expected that policy change will occur at a broadly constant rate, there are instances where much more innovation and development can take place than during less energetic times. These critical moments are recognized in many strains of the policy literature — sometimes characterized in terms of 'policy windows' that allow for ideas to be implemented. The notion that these 'windows' emerge periodically, allowing for the possibility of rapid policy change, seems to have affected the thinking of both lobby groups and bureaucrats who are in favour of policy reform. Such strategic actors have internalized the idea that they must be prepared for an unexpected opportunity to put their idea forward as a solution to a problem that seems novel and which has caught the attention of decision-makers.

The recognition that policy 'feedbacks' occur has also been highlighted in recent work, though the basic mechanism was identified by E.E. Schattschneider as early as 1935. Andrea Louise Campbell describes a system in which the outcomes of policy formulation become inputs into the next round of decision-making.[52] As Thelen explains: "politics, like technology, involves some elements of chance (agency, choice) but that once a path is taken, once-viable alternatives become increasingly remote, as all the relevant actors adjust their strategies to accommodate the prevailing pattern".[53] Such feedbacks may affect the form and degree of political participation by members of the mass public, the emergence of interest groups, and the interests and identifies of individual actors.[54] These feedbacks can be 'positive' in the sense of reinforcing change in a particular direction.[55] For instance,

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[48] On incrementalism, see: Lindblom, "The Science of 'Muddling Through'".

[49] Lindblom, "Still Muddling, Not Yet Through".

[50] Simeon, "Studying Public Policy", p. 577.

[51] On punctuated equilibrium, see: Krasner, "Sovereignty: An Institutional Perspective".

[52] Campbell, "Policy Makes Mass Politics", p. 333.

[53] Thelen, "How Institutions Evolve", p. 219.

[54] See: Patashnik, "After the Public Interest Prevails: The Political Sustainability of Policy Reform", p. 212.

[55] See: Pierson, "When Effect Becomes Cause: Policy Feedback and Political Change".

the creation of Social Security for American seniors created a powerful lobby group that subsequently fought for the protection and expansion of these benefits.[56][57] Feedbacks can also be 'negative' in that the public and elite response to a policy change may tend toward dampening change in that direction. Arguably something of the sort can be observed in the recent monetary and banking policy of the European Union, in which subsequent rounds of effort to address structural economic problems in states like Greece have led to a decreased willingness among elites and ordinary voters to support such policies in the future. Another sort of negative feedback could be how the disenfranchisement of felons in the United States helps prevent the emergence of a politically-influential constituency calling for criminal justice reform.[58] In at least some cases, scholars have argued that political parties explicitly attempted to use feedback effects as a means of improving their electoral chances, though in the case of efforts of the Democratic Party in the U.S. to do so via welfare reform it is hard to conclude that they succeeded.[59]

Arguably, the idea of policy feedbacks is linked closely with the concept of path dependency, wherein once policy has been set off in one direction there are incentives that encourage it to continue in the same way and disincentives for changing course.[60][61] In both cases, an explanation is provided, at least in part, for why so much policy momentum tends to be observed and how even rather unwieldy and inefficient constructions like the employer-provided healthcare system in the United States have often proven enduring. Both feedbacks and path dependency provide a way to incorporate time into policy analysis, avoiding the limitations associated with a view that considers only a single moment.[62] Methodologically, either theory can be challenging to apply, since it is rarely the case that

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[56] Campbell, "Policy Makes Mass Politics", p. 336.

[57] Campbell, *How Policies Make Citizens: Senior Political Activism and the American Welfare State*.

[58] See: Weaver and Lerman, "Political Consequences of the Carceral State".

[59] Soss and Schram, "A Public Transformed? Welfare Reform as Policy Feedback".

[60] See: Mahoney, "Path Dependence in Historical Sociology".

[61] Pierson, "Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics".

[62] Callander, "Searching for Good Policies", p. 644.

single policy variables are changed at a time. These problems are especially acute if the effect of feedbacks cannot be isolated in the short span of time immediately after a policy change is introduced, but only after a longer period in which other changes will inevitably have also taken place.

Thelen has built substantially upon the literature on path dependency and policy feedbacks. Not all institutional change consists of breakdown in response to an exogenous shock.[63] At the same time, the concept of punctuated equilibrium fails to account for how much continuity is maintained in institutions, even when such external shocks do occur.[64] Also, crises or turning points for institutions can arise through the culmination of purely internal processes.[65] Addressing these theoretical anomalies, Thelen seeks to provide "a specification of some common modes of institutional change".[66] These modes include 'layering' — "the partial renegotiating of some elements of a given set of institutions while leaving others in place".[67] This mode may apply particularly to institutions that have operated in a relatively continuous way, such as the U.S. Congress. It also applies in cases such as pension systems where new private systems are 'layered' over top of existing public ones. Thelen theorizes that layering may occur most often when new challenges emerge but when the same actors retain power.[68] In addition, Thelen describes 'conversion' — when "existing institutions are redirected to new purposes, driving changes in the role they perform and/or the functions they serve".[69] An especially important example of this may be when previously marginalized groups gain power and choose to turn existing institutions to serve new purposes.

From the outset, Thelen explicitly acknowledged that these two mechanisms were sim-

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[63]Thelen, "How Institutions Evolve", p. 209.
[64]Ibid., p. 211, 220.
[65]Ibid., p. 213.
[66]Ibid., p. 225.
[67]Ibid., p. 225.
[68]Ibid., p. 232.
[69]Ibid., p. 226.

ply examples and that other modes of change were out there to be identified. In later work, Thelen expanded upon this typology. Thelen later added a conception of 'drift', in which formal rules are intentionally kept unchanged despite substantial shifts in the surrounding environment. 'Displacement' is another example, in which rules are changed so frequently that they produce a constantly unsettled arrangement, for instance in states that engage in very frequent and wide-ranging constitutional amendment.[70] Thelen sees this possibility as especially likely when there are few veto possibilities and there is little discretion in the interpretation or enforcement of rules. This complex perspective incorporates insights from many other streams of thought, pertaining to the dynamics that function within institutions and how they respond to various types of change in their environment and to the results of endogenous development that has reached a critical threshold.

Scholars have also drawn upon the analogy of biological evolution to analyze public policy-making.[71] Notably, this includes Sven Steinmo's comparative study of the United States, Sweden, and Japan.[72] The evolutionary perspective offers a reasonably functional means of implementing human agency into analysis — as one of the sources of variation that feeds into an evolutionary process of policy and institutional development. The biological analogy is suitable for a number of reasons: both politics and biology involve complex dynamic systems characterized by non-linear relationships between inputs and outputs, as well as the presence of emergent characteristics that cannot easily be predicted from the underlying rules of the system. In both biology and politics, there are mechanisms through which variation emerges (for instance, in the platforms of parties and candidates) and through which these mutations either replicate themselves successfully or decline in relative frequency within a given population. Thelen's "modes of institutional change" also have parallels in biology. Initially evolved for warmth, feathers evolves a role in controlling

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[70]Mahoney and Thelen, "A Theory of Gradual Institutional Change".
[71]See: Cairney, "What is evolutionary theory and how does it inform policy studies?"
[72]Steinmo, *The Evolution of Modern States: Sweden, Japan, and the United States.*

movement and eventually in enabling flight. This process bears similarities to Thelen's notion of conversion. Anatomical structures once employed exclusively for movement might evolve to be used for communication as well, as with the legs of insects like grasshoppers, partially approximating Thelen's notion of layering.

Another broad literature to which I will only briefly point here concerns the diffusion, convergence, and transfer of policy between jurisdictions.[73] In an era of globalization where governments are acutely concerned about international competition and naturally look to one another's policies for guidance and comparison, it is clear that there are mechanisms through which policies adopted in one state influence those adopted in others. These mechanisms operate not only through governments but, as Boushey identifies, also through interest groups which serve as 'vectors' for policy diffusion.[74] It is notable that these dynamics are again largely connected with the role of ideas in policy-making. While there are cases in which states or international organizations drive policy convergence through coercion, it seems more often the case that the flow of policies between jurisdictions is mediated through ideas. Mechanisms through which this occurs include 'emulation', where states experiencing similar problems examine and implement solutions that seem to have proven effective elsewhere, and 'mimicry', in which the desire to implement a particular policy solution drives the search for a 'problem' that would justify doing so.

3 Public policy as a normative or an empirical undertaking

The idea that understanding something is separable from making recommendations about it or reaching normative conclusions about it is problematic in the realm of policy-making.

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[73]See: Marsh and Sharman, "Policy Diffusion and Policy Transfer".
[74]Boushey, *Policy Diffusion Dynamics in America*.

Scholarship is a political act: the questions asked, the methodologies employed, the types of conclusions reached, and the ways in which they are communicated are all non-neutral from a normative perspective. The published work and public statements of academics affect political discourse within elites and the mass public, serving to legitimize some policy proposals and undermine others.

Climate change may be the area in which normative awareness may be most critical, when it comes to studying and evaluating public policy in 2013. The world's scientists are in agreement that simply continuing with today's level of fossil fuel use will rapidly commit the planet to a degree of warming politicians from all major governments have accepted as "dangerous".[75] Indeed, the risk is likely greater than suggested by this analysis, given the likelihood that warming from deliberate fossil fuel use will be compounded by induced emissions from natural carbon sinks as rainforests dry out and burn and melting arctic tundra releases vast amounts of highly potent methane into the atmosphere. At the present rate of increase, it will only be decades before the level of carbon dioxide (CO_2) in the atmosphere crosses the threshold at which the West Antarctic and Greenland ice sheets formed — likely committing the world to 14 metres of eventual sea-level rise, the endangerment of entire countries like the Netherlands and Bangladesh, massive challenges to the world's coastal cities, and the destruction of much of what human civilization has created over thousands of years. Alongside this, there is the danger of abrupt or runaway climate change on par with what has been experienced in some of the Earth's major extinction events. At the same time, no major government has proposed emission reductions sufficiently deep and rapid to prevent the predictable worsening of climate change to a "dangerous" level. Instead, governments have shown remarkable enthusiasm for the continued exploitation of the world's conventional reserves of coal, oil, and gas, as well as the development of unconventional reserves like those under the very deep ocean, in the

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[75]See: Hansen et al., *Target Atmospheric CO$_2$: Where Should Humanity Aim?*

arctic, or in Canada's bituminous sands.

In his 1976 article, Simeon uses a a five-part framework and the example of anti-poverty policies as a means of sketching out the various areas of consideration that are important for understanding public policy.[76] In the context of climate change, 'environmental' factors influencing policy include humanity's enormous degree of fossil fuel dependence for electricity production, transport, agriculture, and other key features of industrial civilization. Multiple 'power dimensions' are also at play: the close relationship between energy use and the GDP, economic strength, and military power of states; the unlimited power of decision-makers today to impose climate change on unrepresented and defenceless members of future generations; the close connection between the economic and political emergence of states like India and China and rising fossil fuel use; and the extensive influence of fossil fuel corporations on governments of both democratic states like the U.S. and authoritarian ones like Russia and China. Ideologically, few politicians have incorporated climate change impacts into their political theories. Conservatism and neoconservatism, in particular, have not generally recognized ethical implications arising from the impact of today's political choices on members of future generations. Across the ideological spectrum, politicians and political parties in most states have maintained an intensive focus on GDP growth as a measure of success and contributor to re-election. The institutional dimensions of the climate problem have received the largest amount of attention from political scientists: including the tension between state sovereignty and the need to control collective global outcomes, the insufficient influence of global governance bodies to coordinate and coerce reductions in greenhouse gas (GHG) pollution, and possible institutional designs for controlling the problem. The last of these institutional questions connects with analyses of processes in the climate context, including deliberation by domestic legislatures, the production of advice and implementation of policies by civil servants, and the

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[76]Simeon, "Studying Public Policy", p. 578–9.

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efforts of both corporations and non-profit interest groups to influence political outcomes through means like lobbying and protest.

Unless the scientific consensus on climate change is badly wrong — or some unexpected exogenous factor drives aggressive reductions in global CO_2 output — the latter decades of the 21st century are likely to be categorized by massive global disruption "on a scale similar to those associated with the great wars and the economic depression of the first half of the 20th century".[77] The obsession of both politicians and the mass public with sustaining continuous increases in GDP in the short- and medium-term risks imposing unprecedented instability and impoverishment upon humanity as a whole, while also running the risks associated with the breakdown in cooperation between states that may accompany a rapidly deteriorating climatic situation.

Compared with Simeon's position, the 2013 address to the Canadian Political Science Association delivered by Michael Atkinson develops a much more normatively-aware conception of the task scholars of public policy ought to be undertaking.[78] Atkinson argues that "we need to set aside the idea that the study of public policy must be divorced from the need to improve the policy process" and that "we require… an appreciation for the frailties of decision making and a commitment to improving public policy consistent with the demands of politics in the political process".[79] He stresses the need to incorporate insights about decision-making from psychology and alter policy processes to constrain the impact of cognitive shortcomings. Even within this perspective, however, major obstacles to sufficient climate action endure. Stephen Gardiner describes climate change as a "perfect moral storm", with international, intergenerational, and theoretical dimensions that exceed the capacity of today's systems of governance.[80] Moral philosopher Henry Shue

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[77]Stern, *Stern Review: The Economics of Climate Change*, p. ii.
[78]Atkinson, *Policy, Politics and Political Science*.
[79]Ibid., p. 5.
[80]Gardiner, *A Perfect Moral Storm: The Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change*.

highlights how choosing not to curtail climate change constitutes imposing "damage or the risk of damage on the innocent and defenseless".[81] In addition to being a normative problem, this is a problem of political institutions and democratic theory. Atkinson defines "integrity" as "a willingness to act in ways that are consistent with the sovereign people's interests, regardless of whether doing so endangers a leader's political or personal interests".[82] Achieving this becomes dramatically more challenging if the interests of future generations are to be taken into account. In this case, democratic competition may fail dramatically as a legitimacy mechanism, as voters reject policies that would constrain the satisfaction of their immediate preferences in order to improve the fairness of outcomes for members of future generations. Democratic competition may indeed be one of the key factors worsening the problem, as there will always be a temptation for opposition parties to promise the repeal of restrictive climate policies that are unpopular in the short term as a route to electoral success, as the recent decision to repeal Australia's carbon tax demonstrates.[83]

4   Conclusions and looking ahead

Simeon's 1976 article begins with a series of criticisms of the public policy discipline. These include the assertion that political scientists have failed to properly specific dependent and independent variables, leading to a discipline which is "confused and unproductive".[84] They also include a criticism of the temptation to be overly normative in the analysis of politics, the failure to be adequately comparative, and the perpetuation of methodolog-

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[81]Shue, "Deadly Delays, Saving Opportunities".

[82]Atkinson, *Policy, Politics and Political Science*, p. 9.

[83]As an aside, the widespread conservative opposition to carbon taxes is notably hypocritical. Parties that profess faith in the power of markets to innovate and produce efficient outcomes also tend to reject the climate change mitigation mechanism that depends on these mechanisms and which requires the least bureaucratic interference in the economy.

[84]Simeon, "Studying Public Policy", p. 552.

ical weaknesses like the use of incompatible case studies. To a large extent, subsequent work has progressed toward responding to these objections — particularly in terms of the shift toward comparative analysis.

On the question of how normative the study of public policy must be, it is possible that scholars must navigate between the Scylla of a normatively tone-deaf determination to focus on understanding over trying to influence policy and the Charybdis of becoming so normatively driven that they cannot accurately assess the political prospects of different choices. On the one hand, the discipline risks perpetuating the unjust and unsustainable *status quo*, while on the other it risks losing the degree of objectivity necessary to make a meaningful contribution. Climate change creates an unprecedented need to coordinate policy between states, as well as to hold firm for decades in the implementation of policies to control GHG pollution. Failure on this front will cascade into failure in other policy areas, undermining sincere and energetic efforts at promoting international development, long-term infrastructure planning, and perhaps the maintenance of international peace and security. By failing to act with the speed and decisiveness required, political leaders around the world are sleepwalking into catastrophe, and the efforts of scholars have so far been inadequate to wake them.

As with many areas of social science, the study of public policy can focus on advancing either of two fairly different agendas: the empirical project of improving understanding of how the world functions or the normative project of establishing more effective processes of governance. The material from the first project feeds into the efforts of the second, and the scholarship since 1976 represents a substantial contribution to both projects. Looking ahead, it is clear that unresolved puzzles remain, including within the main areas of focus for scholars since 1976. The backdrop of policy-making has also changed substantially, as the many components of globalization have affected the global policy context; states like India, China, and Brazil have developed enormously in policy capacity while

experiencing changes in what sorts of policies need to be formulated; and as the demise of communism virtually everywhere has altered the world's geopolitical and ideological landscape. The seriousness of climate change as a threat to global security and prosperity is just beginning to be understood by political elites and populations at large, despite a rapidly closing window for cutting global emissions sufficiently to keep warming below the 2°C "dangerous" threshold accepted by the world's governments. This crisis may be on a sufficient scale to justify the substantial re-direction of effort within the study of public policy, particularly the development of a greater willingness to be activist in encouraging particular policy choices, with an eye to developing effective responses before calamitous global consequences have been locked in.

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