

Policy process II – feedback effects: Critical Reading Response

Milan Ilnyckyj

2013-11-05

The basic claim of the policy feedback literature is that the implementation and operation of public policy affects the general public in ways that influence the conditions for future policy-making.¹ As Andrea Louise Campbell describes: “existing policies feed back into the political system, shaping subsequent policy outcomes”.² These effects take the form of increases or decreases in overall levels of political participation, shifts in the form of participation undertaken, and the formation and strategic behaviour of new interest groups both inside and outside of government. These effects can also function by “shaping the identities, interests, and incentives of key social actors”.³ Changes in old-age income policy (Social Security) in the United States and the substantial growth in the degree of political participation by the elderly are a key example of such dynamics at work.⁴⁵ Other policy areas that yield usable case studies include incarceration, tax reform, airline deregulation, reform of agricultural subsidies, and welfare reform. One theoretical question raised by the literature is how the ‘feedback’ account varies from the idea of ‘path dependency’, or from the evolutionary conception of institutional change elaborated by Sven Steinmo and others.⁶⁷⁸ As with these sections of the literature, analysis of feedback effects focuses on integrating time into policy analysis to avoid the “distorted view” that

¹As early as 1935, E.E. Schattschneider remarked that “new politics create a new politics”. Soss and Schram, “A Public Transformed? Welfare Reform as Policy Feedback”, p. 111.

²Campbell, “Policy Makes Mass Politics”, p. 333.

³Patashnik, “After the Public Interest Prevails: The Political Sustainability of Policy Reform”, p. 212.

⁴Campbell, “Policy Makes Mass Politics”, p. 336.

⁵Campbell, *How Policies Make Citizens: Senior Political Activism and the American Welfare State*, p. 1–2, 6.

⁶On path dependency, see for instance: Pierson, “Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics”, p. 251–67.

⁷Mahoney, “Path Dependence in Historical Sociology”, p. 507–48.

⁸Steinmo, *The Evolution of Modern States: Sweden, Japan, and the United States*.

a “snapshot” can provide.⁹ Methodologically, a number of obstacles complicate the task of isolating feedback effects and determining their importance. These limitations may reduce the scope of the feedback theory’s applicability, except in fortuitous cases where natural experiments and similar circumstances are present.

One of the more basic feedback dynamics is the possibility that a policy will create a defensive constituency for itself upon implementation. Arguably, the expectation that this occurs partly explains the stridency of Republican efforts to repeal or defund the 2010 Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) in the U.S.. Just as Democrats are hopeful that once citizens gain experience with Obamacare they will come to support it, Republicans are fearful that experience with the policy will lead to its entrenchment. Some Democrats point to the increased popularity of Medicare following its implementation as evidence to support this view. The creation of a defensive constituency occurs through several mechanisms, including the additional time and resources recipients can devote to political engagement, effects on the perceptions of government within the general public, and influences on mobilization by interest groups and policy entrepreneurs.¹⁰¹¹ Eric Patashnik highlights how those seeking to establish sustainable policy reforms must undertake “the successful reworking of political institutions and... the generation of positive policy-feedback effects, especially the empowerment of social groups with a stake in the reform’s maintenance”.¹² In some cases, defensive constituencies can become extremely powerful. In 2003 American seniors received 40% of all discretionary spending through Social Security and Medicare, partly as a result of being a “constituency to be reckoned with”, “primed to participate at high rates, capable of defeating objectionable policy change.”¹³ Campbell’s account of the emergence of powerful lobby groups for seniors in the U.S. demonstrates how policy change created new organized constituencies, which then drove policy change further in favour of their members starting around 1950, later allowing them to see off a “period of threat” in the 1980s.¹⁴

Particularly when policies benefit a small group at the expense of society at large, there is a danger that pol-

⁹See: Callander, “Searching for Good Policies”, p. 644.

¹⁰Campbell, “Policy Makes Mass Politics”, p. 336.

¹¹See also: Pierson, “When Effect Becomes Cause: Policy Feedback and Political Change”, p. 595–628.

¹²Patashnik, “After the Public Interest Prevails: The Political Sustainability of Policy Reform”, p. 203.

¹³Campbell, *How Policies Make Citizens: Senior Political Activism and the American Welfare State*, p. 3, 11, 65–94.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 75–79, 84–5, 90.

icy feedbacks will fuel rent-seeking behaviour. Agricultural subsidies are frequently referenced as an example of this phenomenon.¹⁵ Agricultural lobbies are able to extract concessions from policy-makers because they are organized and have a great deal to lose or gain. At the same time, those benefits are extracted (with less than perfect efficiency) from a general public too ignorant or disorganized to respond. Indeed, the apparent strength of this mechanism creates the puzzle examined by Patashnik about why “general-interest reforms” do sometimes take place and, in particular, how they can be made to endure.¹⁶ Patashnik argues that such policies can be adopted when reform is linked to a salient public issue, debate is framed to encourage responsiveness to diffuse interests (a discursive or ideational explanation), and opposition is neutralized (for instance, through transition mechanisms or compensation schemes).¹⁷ To keep policy in place, reform government to make change difficult and create an interest group capable of making change politically unattractive.¹⁸ The political sustainability of a reform can be undermined either through outright reversal of the policy change or through the ‘corruption’ of the policy to the point that the original objectives are no longer served, a process in which principal-agent problems can play an important role.¹⁹ Failure to change the institutional structures and interests affecting policy-making can lead to the rollback of policy reforms, such as the attempted simplification of the U.S. tax code through the 1997 *Tax Relief Act*.²⁰ By contrast, reforms that include major changes in political infrastructure, such as when the U.S. deregulated the domestic air travel industry in the 1970s and 80s, can prove enduring, especially if they constrain the scope of rent-seeking behaviour.²¹

Democratic participation is one of the most important ways in which policy feedbacks can manifest themselves, affecting the “distance of citizens from government”.²² If policy design and implementation can have the effect of drawing groups into participating more extensively in politics, or alternatively of driving them out, this has theoretical, practical, and normative importance. The basic claim to legitimacy expressed by the gov-

¹⁵Patashnik, “After the Public Interest Prevails: The Political Sustainability of Policy Reform”, p. 217.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 204.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 205.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 205, 211, 214.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 207, 209.

²⁰Ibid., p. 213–7.

²¹Ibid., p. 221–6.

²²Campbell, “Policy Makes Mass Politics”, p. 333.

ernments of democratic states is that they rule on the basis of a popular mandate and consent. If policy choices shift people into and out of the set of politically active citizens, they therefore impact the legitimacy of governments themselves. Such responses also have considerable practical importance for political parties (which may seek to boost democratic participation by supporters and potentially suppress it among opponents), interest groups with policy preferences, and policy entrepreneurs.

Policies can spur increased democratic participation through various mechanisms, including changes in the perception of the political system in the general public (for instance, fostering a belief that it is responsive and fair), by granting additional resources and time which can be devoted to political action, and by encouraging the formation of effective coalitions of citizens. Campbell explains that: “mass participation influences political outcomes” with “the politically active... more likely to achieve their policy goals... at the expense of the politically quiescent” and that public policies affect political participation, often in ways that “exacerbate rather than ameliorate existing participatory inequalities”.²³ Perhaps the most important historical examples of enlarged political participation in democratic societies have resulted from policies to expand the democratic franchise to those in previously-excluded ethnic groups, women, and those without property. These enlargements of the political franchise had permanent political effects, bringing whole new groups into politics that policy-makers and political platforms were then driven to court. Reforms can also increase political participation for groups that were not entirely excluded previously, notably when the U.S. Social Security program “stimulated a high level of political mobilization among senior citizens”.²⁴

When policy serves to stigmatize individuals — as criminal justice policy sometimes does deliberately — it may both directly discourage political participation by barring activities like voting and indirectly increase distance between citizens and government through the perception that government has treated them harshly or capriciously.²⁵ The many stigmatizing and alienating effects present in the criminal justice system make it especially objectionable from a normative perspective when strictly private interests are able to manipulate

²³ Campbell, *How Policies Make Citizens: Senior Political Activism and the American Welfare State*, p. 1.

²⁴ Patashnik, “After the Public Interest Prevails: The Political Sustainability of Policy Reform”, p. 212.

²⁵ Weaver and Lerman note that five million U.S. citizens can no longer vote because of criminal records. In most states, felons are also banned from serving on juries or holding public office. Weaver and Lerman, “Political Consequences of the Carceral State”, p. 820.

political institutions in their favour, at the expense of those in contact with the justice system and society at large. For instance, the commercial prison industry in the U.S. lobbies for changes to criminal justice policies such as strict ‘three strikes’ sentencing guidelines which promise to increase their profits. Similarly, police forces that can bolster their budgets through ‘civil forfeiture’ face incentives that can easily deviate from those of the general public and the principles of good governance.²⁶ Such policies may be durable in part because of how those who suffer from them (whether justifiably or not) are formally or informally disenfranchised as well. As Vesla Weaver and Amy Lerman identify, some convicts in the U.S. are deprived of the right to vote, and many more are subjected to material deprivations like loss of “welfare, food stamps, and federal financial aid for college”.²⁷ Insofar as resources of time and money enable political participation, these material impacts have political as well as personal effects. Furthermore, those who have experienced “punitive interventions” are much less likely to be involved with civil society groups and that punitive contact is likely to have consequences at the community level.²⁸ Weaver and Lerman also highlight how carceral contact is “spatially and racially concentrated”, with highly disproportionate effects on black Americans.²⁹ Relations between citizens and the carceral state are “characterized by involuntary, intrusive, absolute power over citizens”, “inform[ing] citizens’ understanding of the goals and nature of government.”³⁰ Welfare policy may also contribute to social marginalization and decreased trust in government institutions, particularly if perceptions of unfair or arbitrary treatment are widespread, sending negative messages about recipients’ “worth as citizens” at odds with the positive messages sent to Social Security beneficiaries.³¹

Joe Soss and Sanford Schram consider explicit attempts by the Democratic Party in the U.S. to change public perceptions and improve their electoral success through welfare reform.³² Here, the focus is on a deliberate effort to influence the political perceptions and preferences of the mass public. In particular, the hope was the reform could shift public opinion of welfare recipients from “welfare cheats” to “workers” and

²⁶ See: The Economist, *The grabbing hand of the law*.

²⁷ Weaver and Lerman, “Political Consequences of the Carceral State”, p. 820.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 824, 831.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 817.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 818–9.

³¹ Campbell, *How Policies Make Citizens: Senior Political Activism and the American Welfare State*, p. 6, 12.

³² Soss and Schram, “A Public Transformed? Welfare Reform as Policy Feedback”, p. 111-27.

reclaim support for the Democrats among working class whites.³³ These hopes were explicitly grounded upon a conception of feedback effects from policy.³⁴ The authors expect a number of factors, including the degree of media coverage, to make these welfare reforms a useful test case for theories about mass feedbacks. They find, however, little support for the claim that welfare reform transformed public views on welfare or the poor.³⁵ Similarly, the effort to increase support for the Democratic Party produced at best mixed results.³⁶ Among other things, this analysis suggests that awareness of possible feedback effects among political elites is not always sufficient to allow their use in shifting public opinion. The authors conclude that policy reforms that do not directly impact the mass public will likely do little to shift their views, that the mass-public uses their opinions on policies that are both distant and visible as a way of affirming their identities, that ‘symbols’ are an intervening variable affecting whether policy changes will change attitudes of the mass public, and that forces like the media mediate the process through which awareness of policy changes feeds through into changes in opinion.³⁷

There are several methodological challenges associated with the study of policy feedbacks — notably, the reality that citizens are subject to many different policies at the same time; the challenge of converting correlational claims into defensible hypotheses about causation; and the need to overcome problems in the application of statistical tools, such as when there is insufficient overlap between groups affected by different policies to permit multiple regression analysis, or when groups differ in undetected ways even before changes in policy are applied.³⁸ Even in cases where isolating the marginal effect of feedbacks is challenging, there is value in being open to the possibility of their existence. As Patashnik suggests, public policy scholars should not assume that the immediate institutional shift associated with a new policy is the sole worthwhile object of study, but rather that some consideration for the evolving dynamic after a policy change can be revealing.³⁹ If such analysis is necessary for understanding the successes and failures of policy evolution, methodological

³³Soss and Schram, “A Public Transformed? Welfare Reform as Policy Feedback”, p. 113.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 113.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 115, 120.

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 118, 120.

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 122–5.

³⁸Campbell, “Policy Makes Mass Politics”, p. 344.

³⁹Patashnik, “After the Public Interest Prevails: The Political Sustainability of Policy Reform”, p. 226–7.

challenges associated with multiple uncontrolled simultaneous effects may sharply limit the confidence with which particular outcomes can be linked with particular choices. Soss and Schram highlight some additional methodological issues linked to feedback effects on mass opinion — specifically, the challenges associated with testing predictions about mass opinion change and the lack of explicit analytic frameworks that can specify when mass feedbacks will occur.⁴⁰ When tracking the salience of issues like welfare, there is a danger that exogenous events like wars will draw public attention, producing an apparent decrease in interest not motivated by feedback effects.⁴¹ False negatives are also possible, in that attempts at manipulating public opinion through feedbacks may create a “window of opportunity” for policy reform that policy-makers then fail to use.⁴²

In a related set of complications, Steven Callander considers the question of whether democratic systems can distinguish between good and bad policies.⁴³ Callander describes how even when policy-makers have a clear sense of a problem and unity of purpose in wishing to address it, they must often experiment with various policy options in hopes of identifying one that is effective.⁴⁴ This process carries a danger of bad policies becoming ‘stuck’ — a theme that accords with Patashnik’s insight that neither the influence of special interest groups or the welfare of the general public can single-handedly explain the resilient or fleeting character of policy changes. Callander focuses on the role of institutions in this process, arguing that they influence the scale of policy experiments, the direction and extent of ‘policy search’, the role of ideology, and the dynamics of coalitions.⁴⁵ With so many variables at work, it may be unsurprising that the ability of democratic systems of government to distinguish between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ policies may not always be as great as citizens would desire.

Campbell highlights the capacity for the feedback perspective to bridge methodological divides in the study of public policy, specifically by linking historical institutionalism with the study of political behaviour.⁴⁶ Paul

⁴⁰Soss and Schram, “A Public Transformed? Welfare Reform as Policy Feedback”, p. 114.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 116.

⁴²Ibid., p. 120.

⁴³Callander, “Searching for Good Policies”, p. 643–58.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 643.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 644, 656–8.

⁴⁶Campbell, “Policy Makes Mass Politics”, p. 334.

Pierson explains path dependence as “a social process grounded in a dynamic of increasing returns”.⁴⁷ Some of the feedback mechanisms discussed above can be understood as mechanisms for producing such returns. Likewise, Pierson’s emphasis on the importance of timing accords with analyses that highlight the risks of policy reversal or corruption and the means through which such risks can be minimized. James Mahoney argues that: “path dependence characterizes specifically those historical sequences in which contingent events set into motion institutional patterns or event chains that have deterministic properties”.⁴⁸ Again, this conceptualization seems closely linked to the mechanisms discussed in the feedbacks literature. Similarly, Sven Steinmo’s emphasis on how policy development is non-teleological, unpredictable, and influenced by chance events is compatible with the notion that policy feedback shifts the terrain in which future political activity and policy change takes place.⁴⁹ Steinmo’s view of human agency as one source of variation in an evolutionary process can likewise be linked to Patashnik’s insights about political sustainability and the mechanisms like ‘creativity’ in the interpretation of rules that bolster or undermine it.⁵⁰

The core claim that exposure to changes in policy generates politically-relevant change in the population at large is credible and intuitive. Further, the feedback dynamics considered here contribute to the project of integrating time into theoretical models of policy-making, engaging with some of the same processes and consequences as the literature on path dependence and evolutionary perspectives on politics. At the same time, methodological problems in isolating the feedbacks associated with specific policies restrict the certainty with which they can be identified. Nonetheless, policy-makers and policy entrepreneurs advocating challenging policy changes should bear in mind considerations like how a defensive coalition might be established, and in what ways the policy is likely to affect the target population, including in terms of democratic participation. In particular, the many special normative issues identified by Weaver and Lerman deserve greater consideration in the design and implementation of criminal justice policy.

⁴⁷Pierson, “Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics”, p. 252.

⁴⁸Mahoney, “Path Dependence in Historical Sociology”, p. 507.

⁴⁹Steinmo, *The Evolution of Modern States: Sweden, Japan, and the United States*.

⁵⁰Ibid.

References

- Callander, Steven. "Searching for Good Policies". In: *American Political Science Review* 105.4 (2011). URL: http://faculty-gsb.stanford.edu/callander/documents/Callander_APSR2011.pdf.
- Campbell, Andrea Louise. *How Policies Make Citizens: Senior Political Activism and the American Welfare State*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. URL: <http://www.hks.harvard.edu/inequality/Seminar/Papers/Campbell.pdf>.
- "Policy Makes Mass Politics". In: *Annual Review of Political Science* 15 (2012). URL: <http://www.annualreviews.org/doi/abs/10.1146/annurev-polisci-012610-135202>.
- Mahoney, James. "Path Dependence in Historical Sociology". In: *Theory and Society* 29.4 (2000). URL: http://www.resalliance.org/file.php?id=4813&name=1202765739_mahoney_2000_path_dependence.pdf.
- Patashnik, Eric. "After the Public Interest Prevails: The Political Sustainability of Policy Reform". In: *Governance* 15.2 (2003). URL: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-0491.00214/abstract>.
- Pierson, Paul. "Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics". In: *American Political Science Review* 94.2 (2000). URL: http://www.uazuay.edu.ec/estudios/com_exterior/tamara/Pierson-Path_Dependency.pdf.
- "When Effect Becomes Cause: Policy Feedback and Political Change". In: *World Politics* 45 (4 1993). URL: <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=7625044>.
- Soss, Joe and Sanford F. Schram. "A Public Transformed? Welfare Reform as Policy Feedback". In: *American Political Science Review* 101.1 (2007). URL: http://journals.cambridge.org/download.php?file=%2FPSR%2FPSR101_01%2FS0003055407070049a.pdf&code=4276b178a10d34a30e528452fc6608c
- Steinmo, Sven. *The Evolution of Modern States: Sweden, Japan, and the United States*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- The Economist. *The grabbing hand of the law*. 2013. URL: <http://www.economist.com/news/united-states/21588915-how-prosecutors-seize-assets-innocent-grabbing-hand-law>.
- Weaver, Vesla and Amy Lerman. "Political Consequences of the Carceral State". In: *American Political Science Review* 104.4 (2010). URL: http://www.ebonterr.com/site_editor/assets/EBONTERR_69.pdf.