



# Contemporary policy work in subnational governments and NGOs: Comparing evidence from Australia, Canada and the Czech Republic<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

This article introduces the special issue on policy work at the sub-national government level and non-governmental sector in three countries: Australia, Canada, and the Czech Republic. It consists of three parts. First, new public governance theory is presented as a general theoretical perspective that captures some of the important macro factors influencing the nature of current policy work. Second, an overview of empirical findings on policy work of subnational governments and NGOs is provided. This review discusses different possible interpretations of these findings. Third, main findings from each paper presented in this special issue are summarized.

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## 1. Introduction

The theme of this special issue is policy work at the sub-national government level and non-governmental sector in three countries: Australia, Canada, and the Czech Republic. Our focus is warranted for several basic reasons. First, analysis of the policy process has tended until recently to overlook the mid-level staff on the front-line of policy advisory systems. Second, the sub-national level of government is also largely overlooked in academic research despite being responsible for strategically important areas of public policy and delivery. And third, non-governmental organizations have become, to greater or lesser degrees, more engaged in the policy process.

The aim of this special issue is to present empirically-based, original research on these understudied topics from three different countries. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first forum where policy work in these sectors is explicitly studied in a comparative perspective. We believe that such a comparative view might shed new light on what are generalizable features of current subnational and NGO policy work, and what is idiosyncratic for each country

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<sup>☆</sup> The work of Arnošt Veselý was supported by the Czech Science Foundation Grant (P404/12/0725). The authors would like to thank two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions.

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presented. In so doing, we attempt to link the macro perspective (the changing global context of policy work) with the micro perspective (actually policy work practices).

This introductory article consists of three parts. First, we present the changing macro context in which policy work worldwide is conducted. Arguably, numerous macro factors have an impact upon the nature of policy work. Consequently, countless numbers of competing theories can serve as a starting point for analysing policy work in a comparative perspective. In this article, we focus only on theories related to new public governance (NPG). This theme is explicitly or implicitly present across all articles in this special issue, and it seems to be equally relevant for all countries included here. However, we are quite aware that such a theoretical framework is far from comprehensive, and other relevant theoretical approaches are considered as well. Indeed, as argued in several articles presented here, while new public governance theory leads to new insights, taken alone, it remains largely incomplete. Additional theories are thus employed in several of the articles. The second part of this introductory paper provides an overview of empirical findings on policy work in subnational government and NGOs. It also attempts to show how such findings might be interpreted against different “baselines”. And finally, the third part of this paper summarizes main findings from each paper presented in this special issue.

## 2. New public governance theory and its implications for policy work

Specifically, new public governance is a response to the dispersal effects of new public management (NPM) reforms which created a need for “collaborative governance through networks” (Davies, 2009). The politico-historical origins of this shift can be found with the accession to government of Tony Blair’s New Labour in 1997. Confronting the public administrative legacy of the Thatcher era, characterized by an ideological preference for market type solutions to public problems and a fragmented, disjointed state of public institutions and agencies, Blair’s government set out to improve horizontal co-ordination by making “joined up” government the administrative goal. Even earlier, in the United States, the Clinton presidency, elements of a similar post-New Right effort to modernize rather than minimize the role of the state had been put in place (Pollitt & Boukaert, 2000, p. 94). NPG theory is an extension of these developments which its proponents characterize as the “transformation of the public sector [involving] ‘less government’ (or less rowing) but ‘more governance’ (or more steering)” (Rhodes, 1996, p. 655). Extrapolating from this framing, these contributions, by examining government and non-government policy work and policy workers, explore the links between macro-level processes encompassing actually existing policy processes and assess these against NPG framings and micro-level processes and practices (how policy work both in the state and in NGOs is conducted). The macro–micro framing leads to specific questions including: what are the consequences of NPM in shaping the tasks and functions of policy workers located in subnational states? Does NPG provide accurate explanatory insight to these working relationships? Is networking now more prevalent in the policy process? Can negotiation and consultation with outside actors be considered as a distinct activity of policy work? Is there any indication that knowledge and information are more shared between subnational governments and NGOs? What has been the effect of competitive contracting regimes on NGO participation in the policy process? If there is more engagement between both state and non-state actors, how is this assessed in terms of genuine power sharing and/or enduring hierarchical control by government? In answering these questions this *Special Issue* illuminates the link between policy regime and policy practice/work.

How policy workers do their jobs and construct policy is largely unknown terrain (Page & Jenkins, 2005). Recent research about governance arrangements suggests that the policy advice system has opened to the point that a “new range of political practices has emerged between institutional layers of the state and between state institutions and societal organizations” (Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003, p. 1). Consequently the substantive contribution of non-governmental policy actors, their capacity to engage with government, and how they are ‘heard’ by government becomes a serious consideration. Thus, rather than a top-down, internalized to the state function, policy work comes to be seen as a “far more elongated and ramshackle than the words ‘decision-making’ seem to imply” (Page & Jenkins, 2005, p. 81).

Thus, the image is constructed of an interactive policy making process where the government engages with relevant non-governmental policy actors. NPG posits that non-state actors have a role in the production of advice and decisions for government (Government of New Zealand, 2010, pp. 1–2). Policy engagement, thus conceptualized, brings NGO actors into the day-to-day activities of government policy units (Rowe & Frewer, 2005, p. 253). Consequently, government policy analysts are now expected to “engage in greater consultation, consensus building and public

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