



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/eist](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/eist)

Original Research Paper

## Harnessing theories of the policy process for analysing the politics of sustainability transitions: A critical survey

Florian Kern<sup>a,\*</sup>, Karoline S. Rogge<sup>a,b</sup><sup>a</sup> Science Policy Research Unit (SPRU), University of Sussex, Brighton, UK<sup>b</sup> Fraunhofer Institute for Systems and Innovation Research (ISI), Karlsruhe, Germany

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Policy processes  
Sustainability transitions  
Politics  
Policy mix  
Policy outcomes  
Policy studies

### ABSTRACT

This paper provides a survey of policy process theories and their usefulness in transitions research. Some research has already used such theories, but often in an ad hoc and relatively cursory way and with little attention to potential alternatives. However, it has been argued that transition scholars need to pay more attention to the politics of policy processes. We argue that a critical stocktaking of policy process theories is a prerequisite for future transition studies that more systematically respond to these challenges. Therefore, we review five prominent policy process theories and their applicability in transition studies. We point to two weaknesses of empirical applications of these approaches that are of particular relevance for transitions research: their focus on single instruments or policy packages, and their neglect of policy outcomes. We conclude by suggesting avenues for research on the linkages between policy processes, policy mixes, and socio-technical change.

### 1. Introduction

Over the past decades, research on how policies can promote environmental innovation and societal transitions has generated a large body of insights which can be drawn upon for driving transitions towards environmental sustainability (del Río González, 2009; van den Bergh, 2016). However, the long-term, dynamic and politically contested nature of change processes associated with sustainability transitions calls for a much more explicit consideration of policy processes in addition to the content of policies (Markard et al., 2012; Weber and Rohracher, 2012). Building on this suggestion, we argue that transition studies should be cross-fertilized by the field of policy studies that has developed a variety of analytical approaches to analyse policy processes and their outputs<sup>1</sup> (Howlett et al., 2009; Sabatier and Weible, 2014). Transition scholars have so far made relatively limited use of these theories in studies of the politics of transitions (Grin et al., 2011; Meadowcroft, 2011; Scrase and Smith, 2009), even though it is a commonplace to point to the importance of supportive policy instruments (Jacobsson and Bergek, 2011; Wiczorek and Hekkert, 2012) or the necessity of institutional changes (Fuenfschilling and Truffer, 2014). Exceptions include Markard et al. (2016), Geels and Penna (2015), Normann (2015, 2017), Edmondson et al. (2017) or Smith and Kern (2009).

We argue that this is regrettable since including policy processes in the analysis of links between policy and socio-technical change is an important avenue of future research for three main reasons: First, policy processes do not only shape policy strategies and instruments, but can also have direct impacts on innovation which too often has been neglected in past analyses (Rogge and

\* Corresponding author at: Jubilee building, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton, BN1 9SL, UK.

E-mail address: [f.kern@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:f.kern@sussex.ac.uk) (F. Kern).

<sup>1</sup> Scholars in this literature refer to new instruments, new laws, etc which have been adopted by government as policy outputs and try to explain the decision making processes leading to these policy outputs.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eist.2017.11.001>

Received 2 June 2017; Received in revised form 6 October 2017; Accepted 1 November 2017

2210-4224/© 2017 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

Reichardt, 2016; Reichardt et al., 2017). Second, including policymaking and implementation processes into research on the co-evolution of policy and socio-technical change promises to improve our understanding of the dynamic nature and causal links between the two (Hoppmann et al., 2014; Reichardt et al., 2016). Finally, opening up the black box of policy processes may assist in developing policy recommendations that are better informed about the politics of policymaking and implementation and therefore potentially stand a better chance at being adopted and sustained (Rogge and Reichardt, 2016; Edmondson et al., 2017).

Given the promising prospects of a more detailed consideration of policy processes in the analysis of sustainability transitions, the aim of this paper is twofold: first, to provide a critical review of different theories of the policy process and their suitability for utilising them in transition studies; and second, to provide *meta*-reflections on these approaches in the context of the need for a broader understanding of policy in the context of sustainability transitions. To achieve our aims we have chosen five of the most prominent approaches in the field of policy studies for our critical review as these are theoretically mature and have been empirically validated in many different policy fields and regions. Several publications within the sustainability transitions field already loosely draw on these frameworks, but typically without justifying their choice vis a vis alternatives. They also often rely on the ‘classic’ version of these analytical frameworks, neglecting more recent debates and further conceptual developments. Therefore, in this paper we provide a critical review of these theories of the policy process in which we present the origin, key concepts, empirical applications, recent theoretical advances and most important criticisms. We also offer reflections on their suitability for answering research questions of interest to scholars in the field of transition studies.

Based on this review we argue that there is much potential for cross-fertilisation of ideas across transition and policy studies. However, in the context of sustainability transitions there are two shortcomings: First, these theories are often applied to the study of individual policy instruments, rather than to policy mixes, which are important in transitions as we will argue below. Second, analyses often stop short at the output of policy processes and do not study policy outcomes, which are of course very important for scholars interested in sustainability transitions. Therefore, we conclude that the reviewed theories of the policy process can be of great value in studying the politics of sustainability transitions, but to be able to answer crucial research questions in the field of transitions studies they would ideally be extended in scope and/or applied within broader interdisciplinary analytical frameworks.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the five selected theories of the policy process. Section 3 discusses two shortcomings of the policy studies literature in the context of research on sustainability transitions. Section 4 concludes with an outlook on future research on the dynamic links between policy mixes and socio-technical change.

## 2. Sustainability transitions and theories of the policy process: a critical survey

Explaining policy processes and their outputs in the form of specific policy instruments has long been the domain of the field of policy studies,<sup>2</sup> which is considered a subfield of the wider discipline of political science (Cairney, 2013; Cairney and Heikkilä, 2014; Nowlin, 2011; Schlager and Weible, 2013; Weimer, 2008). Academics in this field analyse the processes of policymaking and policy change and try to explain why certain policies come into being rather than others. To make the complexity of policy processes manageable, the focus of the analysis is often on a subset of key actors regularly involved in policy formulation in a given policy field such as innovation policy or environmental policy. In many of the frameworks, the focus is on coalitions of actors which are competing for influence over policy, but theories differ in the way they conceptualise the ‘glue’ which holds these coalitions together (e.g. common interests, resource interdependencies, shared beliefs or discourses). They also differ in the way they conceptualise power (e.g. whether power is based on the resources actors have at their disposal, or on their ability to shape discourses and develop the ‘best story’, as Fischer (2003) put it), but generally share an interest in which actors get access to policymaking processes and are therefore able to influence policy outputs (i.e. the politics of policymaking).

Many of the key frameworks in the field stem from the 1980s or 1990s and have been utilised and refined over the last decades through extensive empirical work (Cairney and Heikkilä, 2014). Key journals in which debates take place include the *Policy Studies Journal*, *Journal of Public Policy*, *Policy Sciences*, or *Policy & Politics*. Several publications within the sustainability transitions field (e.g. Geels and Penna, 2015; Markard et al., 2016; Normann, 2015; Smith and Kern, 2009), have already drawn on frameworks such as Sabatier’s advocacy coalitions, Kingdon’s multiple streams, Baumgartner’s punctuated equilibrium, or Hajer’s discourse coalitions approach.

However, a critical review of the state of the art of these frameworks and a reflection on their usefulness in the context of sustainability transitions has not been attempted yet. It is exactly such a review and critical understanding of the potential contribution of these approaches that we see as a prerequisite for paying greater attention to policy processes in transitions research. The following sub-sections will therefore review some of the key analytical frameworks in the policy studies field to explain their origin, core concepts, empirical application and methodologies used, recent theoretical advances and most important criticisms as well as their applicability in the field of transitions. The review covers: Sabatier’s advocacy coalition framework, Kingdon’s multiple streams approach, Baumgartner’s punctuated equilibrium theory, Hajer’s discourse coalitions framework, and Pierson’s policy feedback approach. These frameworks have been selected as they are amongst the most prominent approaches in the field of policy studies, are theoretically mature and have been empirically validated in many different policy fields and regions of the world. Such a review is hoped to help sustainability transitions scholars to initially orient themselves in the vast field of policy studies and may inform their choice of policy process frameworks.

<sup>2</sup> The field is sometimes also called public policy or policy sciences.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6559131>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6559131>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)