Journal of European Public Policy

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjpp20

# The politics of policy analysis: theoretical insights on real world problems

Paul Cairney

**To cite this article:** Paul Cairney (2023) The politics of policy analysis: theoretical insights on real world problems, Journal of European Public Policy, 30:9, 1820-1838, DOI: 10.1080/13501763.2023.2221282

**To link to this article:** https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2023.2221282

Published online: 14 Jun 2023.

JOURNAL OF EUROPEAN PUBLIC POLICY
2023, VOL. 30, NO. 9, 1820–1838
https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2023.2221282

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

INTRODUCTION



# The politics of policy analysis: theoretical insights on real world problems

Paul Cairney

Politics and Public Policy, Division of History, Heritage, and Politics, University of Stirling, Stirling, UK

**ABSTRACT**

How can policy process research help to address policy and policymaking problems? This special edition of the *Journal of European Public Policy* seeks to address that question by examining the theory and practice of policy analysis. The call for papers sought state of the art articles that conceptualise the politics of policy analysis, and empirical studies that use theoretical insights to analyse and address real world problems. Contributions could draw on mainstream policy theories to explain how policymaking works, and/or critical approaches that identify and challenge inequalities of power. This introduction shows why such perspectives matter, and how they contribute to a full examination of policy analysis.

**ARTICLE HISTORY** Received 15 May 2023; Accepted 27 May 2023

**KEYWORDS** Policy analysis; policy process research; critical policy analysis; ambiguity; politics; evidence-based policy

## Introduction: the political role of policy analysis

This Special Issue seeks to use insights from 'mainstream' policy process research, and critical policy studies, to inform the theory and practice of policy analysis. Mainstream and critical approaches emerged from different traditions, and often ask different questions. However, they have overlapping interests, such as to interrogate the political role of analysts and analysis (Cairney, 2021a; Durnová & Weible, 2020). In both approaches, we can identify three general reference points or assumptions.

First, policy analysis is not a disinterested, objective search for truth and an optimal policy solution (often described as a 'rationalist' project). It is not a technocratic process that can be separated from politics. Techniques such as cost–benefit analysis require technical skills, but are not a substitute for

**CONTACT** Paul Cairney p.a.cairney@stir.ac.uk Division of History, Heritage, and Politics, University of Stirling, Stirling, FK94LA, UK

political debate. Therefore, phrases like 'evidence based' do not describe policymaking well.

Second, policy analysis is not part of a simple, orderly policy process. It does not contribute to a tightly managed policy cycle consisting of linear and clearly defined technical stages. Policymaking is a highly contested but unequal process. Many policymakers, analysts, and influencers cooperate or compete to use information selectively to define problems, and select policy solutions with inevitable winners and losers, in processes over which no actor has full understanding or control.

Third, optimal policy and linear policymaking are not good ideals anyway. The language of optimality depoliticises policy analysis and reduces attention to policy's winners and losers. Simple images of policymaking suggest that policy problems are amenable to technical policy solutions. They downplay power and contestation. Ignoring or denying the politics of policy analysis is either *naïve*, based on insufficient knowledge of policymaking, or *strategic*, to exploit the benefits of portraying issues as technical and solutions as generally beneficial (such as with reference to Pareto-efficiency).

This portrayal is relatively prominent in critical policy analysis. However, it is also a substantive feature of policy process research. Mainstream scholars identify how policy actors frame problems and processes to gain advantage. For example, the strategy of portraying issues as technical has long been a feature of research on policy *monopolies* or *communities*: actors describe the problem as solved (with only the details to manage), to exclude most others as no longer relevant to deliberations (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009; Richardson & Jordan, 1979). Further, mainstream accounts show that policy analysts do not simply generate new evidence to reduce policymaker *uncertainty*. Rather, political action is about reducing or exploiting policy *ambiguity* (the possibility to interpret the same problem in many competing ways). They exercise power to win disputes, drawing on material resources and argumentation, or manipulating the rules used to make choices (Jones *et al*., 2014; Majone, 1989; Pagliarello, 2022; Riker, 1986; Zahariadis, 2003; compare with Rein & Schön, 2013; Schön & Rein, 1994).

## *What is the payoff to this approach?*

It may seem to JEPP readers that this kind of argument – about simple policymaking images versus complex and contested reality – has been won many times in policy research. If so, these references to 'rationalist' policymaking may seem to be part of a needless 'strawman' argument to boost new approaches.

However, while this language may have fallen out of favour in *policy process research*, it has been reinvigorated by scientists and policymakers, using modern references to 'evidence-based policymaking' or 'following

the science' (Botterill & Hindmoor, 2012; Cairney, 2016, 2021b). Outside of our subfield, it is still common to describe 'scientism' as a dominant and damaging approach to policy analysis (Greenhalgh & Engebretsen, 2022). Further, inequalities researchers – across fields including health, education, gender, and climate change – highlight the routine use of technocratic language to close off political debate (Cairney *et al*., 2022a, 2023).

Therefore, as long as this language remains important, there is great value in the advancement of theoretical and critical approaches to challenge it. In that context, the Special Issue encourages new research that speaks not only to an expert research audience, but also a much wider scientific and practitioner audience interested in direct engagement with policy and policymaking.

## *Informing policy analysis with policy process research*

There are well-established textbooks on how to do policy analysis (Bardach & Patashnik, 2020; Dunn, 2017; Meltzer & Schwartz, 2019; Mintrom, 2012; Weimer & Vining, 2017). Further, they recognise the politics of – and practical limits to – policy analysis. If so, what is the added value of the Special Issue?

First, it fosters the well-established but largely unfulfilled commitment to treat policy analysis and policy process research as mutually beneficial elements of the policy sciences (Cairney & Weible, 2017; Lasswell, 1951, 1956, 1971). The starting point is that:

- Policy analysis is research-informed advice to clients. Some is *ex ante* policy analysis, focusing on identifying problems, generating solutions, comparing their likely effects, and making recommendations. Some is *ex post*, focusing on the monitoring or evaluation of policy. Both are applied analysis, focusing on what *is* and *ought to be*. Analysis is usually performed by individuals or organisations commissioned by policymakers. Most texts help analysts to develop the skills and strategies to maximise their influence on policy and policymakers.
- Policy process research focuses on the wider context in which policy actors engage, and the political issues that they navigate during that engagement. Mainstream research is descriptive or explanatory, while critical policy analysis incorporates normative assessments of policy and policymaking. Both are generally performed by academics. While there are methodological and other divides between mainstream and critical work, there is some hope that multi-disciplinary cooperation could be fruitful (Durnová & Weible, 2020; Fischer, 2003, pp. 4–6).

Second, it fosters the more systematic integration of analysis and research. Current practices are rather patchy: some policy analysts build some

policymaking research into their expectations, and some academics engage explicitly with normative questions about policy and policymaking. The general argument for combining policy analysis and policymaking research has not been won. This problem results from its unclear value to researchers, who are often incentivised to focus only on basic research, and practitioners, who may be put off by the jargon of policy process research. If so, we need a greater and more sustained focus on how to combine conceptual, empirical, and normative elements, and establish the value of integrated analysis.

In that context, two general approaches help to inform and reflect on policy analysis in theory and practice.

## *Critical policy analysis: challenge rationalism, surface contestation, and use research for emancipation*

Critical approaches combine research and analysis to perform several roles. First, to critique rationalist or technocratic approaches (built on 'positivist' scientific methods), then seek alternative approaches to policy analysis and design. For example Dryzek (1983; Bobrow & Dryzek, 1987) and Fischer (2003, 2007) describe the inevitably interpretive nature of policy analysis, and the search for more deliberative and participatory processes to generate and use policy relevant knowledge. If the production of knowledge is a social and political act, encourage diversity in its production and challenge attempts to monopolise its supply.

Second, to challenge depoliticisation, which closes off debate on how to understand policy analysis and situate it within a wider political context. For example, Stone (2012, pp. 2–4) shows that policy problems defy simple technical analysis because they are inescapably ambiguous. The same actor can draw on different criteria to juggle very different – and possibly contradictory – ways to define problems. Equally, the same population can cycle between contradictory conclusions when asked different questions. This ambiguity extends to the values and goals used to compare solutions, such as to define equity or efficiency and compare their trade-offs (2012, pp. 39–84). The act of analysis is inescapably political, involving a series of choices about which criteria to use, and which questions to ask, when conducting research. While analysts may possess technical tools to help them reach conclusions, they are also social actors and part of the community that draws on beliefs and emotions to understand their world. They tell stories, combining appeals to reason and emotion to persuade their audience about the urgency and importance of a problem, the responsibility of the state to solve it, and which target populations should benefit from the outcomes.

Third, to identify and challenge the policies and processes that marginalise some social groups. For example, Bacchi (2009, pp. 30–31) distinguishes between 'problem' and 'problematisation' to challenge the idea that a

problem's nature is 'fixed and identifiable' or 'self-evident'. Rather, policy actors create policy problems as they define them Bacchi's (2009, pp. 1–24). 'What's the problem represented to be?' (WPR) approach uses six questions to identify the dominant way to define a problem (including its alleged cause, whose fault it is, whose responsibility it is to act, and why it is urgent or important), the unequal impact of this definition, and how it could be challenged (see also Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 20). As such, critical policy analysis seeks to identify who wins and loses from policy and analysis and to take 'the side of those who are harmed' (Bacchi, 2009, p. 44; compare with Schneider and Ingram, 1997, 2005).

It is possible to adopt only one element of this challenge, such as to focus on the failure of 'neopositivist' methods and the value of 'postpositivist' approaches (Fischer, 1998; compare with Sabatier's response in Dudley *et al*., 2000). However, critical policy analysis is better understood as a package deal. The challenge to a narrow scientific view of knowledge creation, and to the actors who exercise power to maintain that view's dominance, is linked inextricably to an emancipatory project. It rejects the strategy of treating the results of technical analysis as 'natural' rather than contested, which would close off debate for long periods of time. It shows that rationalist forms of policy analysis contribute to the marginalisation of social groups by:

(1) Placing narrow limits on participation, by prioritising small groups of experts over large groups of affected citizens.
(2) Valuing scientific evidence and devaluing other forms of policy relevant knowledge.
(3) Prioritising evidence over values, and reason over emotion.
(4) Prioritising some values (e.g., efficiency) over others (e.g., equity).

This description of the politics of policy analysis opens up a range of possibilities for multi-method or multi-disciplinary approaches. For example, a focus on rationalism or scientism connects to wider discussions of colonisation: the direct exercise of power to subjugate populations is supported by a language of enlightenment, arguing that scientific methods produce high quality policy-relevant evidence and dismissing the value of Indigenous knowledge (Smith, 2012). This marginalisation of community knowledge reinforces policies that blame Indigenous populations for their own marginalisation (2012, pp. 4–12). Similarly, Doucet's (2019, p. 1) work on critical race theory notes that rationalist approaches have been used to 'maintain power hierarchies and accept social inequity as a given. Indeed, research has been historically and contemporaneously (mis)used to justify a range of social harms' (2019, p. 2). In that context, the alternative is to:

(1) Reject the idea that scientific research should be treated as apolitical.
(2) Give proper respect to 'experiential knowledge' as part of a larger commitment to 'transdiciplinary approaches'
(3) Make an explicit commitment to use research analysis to 'eliminate oppressions and to emancipate and empower marginalized groups'.
(4) 'Center race' in that commitment (2019, pp. 5–22).

The example of education equity policy shows how scholars use these ideas to analyse and critique dominant approaches to policymaking (Cairney & Kippin, 2022). In particular, they highlight the negative impact of 'neoliberal' approaches that: relate inequalities to individual opportunities and motivation rather than 'out of school' factors such as income inequality; portray market solutions as natural, and state intervention as interference; and, maintain routines that subjected minoritized students to further marginalisation (e.g., Alexiadou, 2019; Felix & Trinidad, 2020; Thorius & Maxcy, 2015; Turner & Spain, 2020).

This critical function is continuous and never complete. A key aim is to surface contestation, to keep issues such as inequity high on academic and policy agendas. Researchers also warn against the co-option of these critical insights. The example of the 'coproduction' of research and policy is illuminating. Mainstream and critical ideas have informed co-production initiatives to the extent that such exercises would now be treated as fairly routine parts of policy analysis (Mintrom, 2012). However, co-production has also become a buzzword or activity to legitimise more traditional analytical practices. For example, Smith (2012, pp. 228–232, 13) describes a profound gulf between the perspectives of different participants, regarding (1) the understandings of the policy problem that they bring to discussion, and (2) their expectations for policy processes. In particular, marginalised groups describe their (well founded) expectation of cosmetic consultation and box-ticking to legitimise choices already made. Therefore, certain initiatives might be welcome in principle, such as to 'encourage inclusive ways to generate knowledge and multiple perspectives to inform the definition of, and solution, to problems' (Cairney, 2021a, p. 150). However, they do not settle the matter. Rather, a continuous focus on problematization and politicisation is essential to maintain attention to the winners and losers from these activities.

### *Policy process theories: take bounded rationality and complexity seriously, and produce realistic expectations*

Policy process theories perform a different role, to situate analysis in the policymaking environment that constrains or facilitates action. Theories compare their understandings of real-world policymaking with ideal-types of comprehensive rationality, simple images of policy cycles, and popular images of

political systems built on their formal rules. They also inform studies of policy analysts which contrast (1) post war hopes for a technical approach to analysing and solving policy problems with (2) new stories of contestation and policymaking complexity (Brans *et al*., 2017; Radin, 2019; Thissen & Walker, 2013). Instead of a uniform professional approach to translating science into policy to find an 'optimal' solution, we find a competition to frame issues and promote different solutions (Enserink *et al*., 2013, pp. 17–34; Radin, 2019). Instead of a centralised process informed by policy analytical elites, we find a far more open, contested, and messy process including many policymakers and influencers spread across and outside of government.

It would be tempting to associate this argument about 'polycentric' governance with the complex policy and multi-level policymaking of the US or EU (Hurka *et al*., 2022; Ostrom *et al*., 1961; Richardson & Mazey, 2015). However, research on 'multi-centric' policymaking shows that, even in relatively centralised democratic systems (such as those designed with Westminster models), there is not a single authoritative centre of power in government overseeing an orderly policy process (Cairney *et al*., 2019). Rather, the responsibility to make and deliver policy is spread across many different centres.

Crucially, while multi-centric or decentralised policymaking results partly from constitutional design and the *choice* to share responsibilities, it also results from *necessity* (2019, p. 3). Policy theories relate necessity to two central concepts:

(1) *Bounded rationality*. Policy actors do not have the ability to pay attention to all issues or process all policy relevant information. Individuals use cognitive shortcuts, and organisations rely on standard operating procedures, to manage their attention well enough to key choices (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009; Simon, 1976).
(2) *Policymaking complexity*. Policymakers do not fully understand, and cannot control their policymaking environments. There are many policymakers (and influencers) spread across many venues of authoritative choice. Each venue has its own rules, networks, ways of thinking, and responses to socioeconomic factors and events (Ostrom, 2007).

Policy theories engage in different ways with these concepts, but to tell variations of the same basic story: it might look like there is a small group of powerful actors making all key choices at the heart of political systems, but this level of centralisation is not possible. Instead, there is a tendency for policy to be processed in many different centres (or venues or subsystems) across many levels of government.

For example, the classic 'policy communities' argument was built originally on analysis of the UK, but became a way to identify similar elements in very

different European political systems (Richardson, 1982; Richardson & Jordan, 1979). The following narrative helps to sum up contemporary accounts of decentralised policymaking. First, the size and scope of the state is so large that it is always in danger of becoming unmanageable. The same can be said of the crowded political environment in which huge numbers of actors seek policy influence. Consequently, the state's component parts are broken down into policy sectors and sub-sectors, with the responsibility to process policy spread across government. Second, elected policymakers can only pay attention to – and therefore manage or influence – a tiny proportion of issues for which they are responsible. Consequently, they delegate policymaking responsibility to other actors such as bureaucrats, often at low levels of government. Third, at this level of government and specialisation, bureaucrats rely on specialist organisations for information and advice. Those organisations trade that information/advice and other resources for access to, and influence within, government (Maloney *et al*., 1994). Therefore, most public policy is conducted primarily through small and specialist policy communities that process issues at a level of government not particularly visible to the public, and with low senior policymaker involvement. A core executive can have a profound impact on policy, but there is inevitably a large gap between its stated aims and actual policy outcomes.

Further, modern or comparative accounts of policymaking highlight additional factors that accentuate this story of decentralisation:

- Trends towards the formulation or delivery of policy by quasi-governmental or non-governmental actors have contributed to a complex public sector landscape that is out of the control or full understanding of central governments.
- A series of constitutional or administrative changes, to accommodate territorial or sectoral demands, have produced asymmetric multi-level policymaking arrangements (Cairney *et al*., 2022b).

This choice to share responsibilities does not result from careful central planning to ensure coherent policy design. Rather, new arrangements are based on demands for territorial autonomy or turf wars between policy sectors or organisations. These ad hoc changes exacerbate rather complex and unwieldy arrangements, to the extent that they are difficult to track, far less coordinate.

### *Why do these insights matter?*

This gap, between simple images of policy analysis and real world policymaking, highlights profound consequences for the analysis of contemporary policy problems. They go far beyond the argument that analysis need new skills to manage policy processes to produce coherent policy designs

(Brans *et al*., 2017; Radin, 2019). Key barriers to that design process cannot simply be overcome by the energy and tenacity of skilled analysts. We reflect on how to conceptualise policy analysis when the policymaking context is out of the full understanding of analysts or control of policymakers.

### *What might these policy process insights prompt us to do when analysing policy problems?*

First, note the yawning gap between what policy actors require and possess. Policy analysts may identify what they need to get their job done or produce the outcomes they seek. Policy process researchers identify the major, inevitable, gaps between those requirements and actual policy processes. For example, researchers may (sensibly) begin with the evidence of a policy problem, but it may be less dispiriting to begin with what governments can – or will – actually do (Salamon, 1981, p. 256, 2002).

Second, recognise and incorporate the 'strong rationale for seemingly suboptimal policymaking arrangements' (Cairney, 2021c, p. 7). In other words, we should treat with caution any buzzwords that signal unrealistic or misleading expectations about policy processes. Examples include the search for (1) *optimal* policy outcomes, (2) *coherent* policy mixes, (3) and *holistic*, *whole-of-government, integrated,* or *joined-up* approaches to policymaking. Governments are not really in the problem solving or policymaking coordination business (even when they have no 'hidden agenda' – McConnell, 2018). They inherit policies – and policymaking systems – that help to address some problems and create or exacerbate others, and benefit some groups and marginalise others. Or, governments simply describe problems as too difficult to solve (see McConnell & 't Hart, 2019 on inaction).

Third, recognise the political nature of any attempt to address allegedly suboptimal or incoherent practices. Think of dilemmas regarding inescapable trade-offs between aims, rather than clear-cut solutions. Examples include the desire to centralise policymaking to foster coordination *and* decentralise to foster local autonomy, or to seek 'evidence based' policymaking involving an exclusive group of experts *and* 'co-produced' policymaking involving as many citizens and stakeholders as possible (Cairney, 2021c, p. 7).

### *How do they relate to global challenges?*

These conclusions matter because they highlight a continuous gap between hopes for, and expectations of, the policy changes that we require to ward off major global crises. It is understandable to relate the highest profile and most pressing problems – such as global public health and climate change – to what we *require* to solve them (the functional requirements of policy actors). For example, these problems transcend multiple levels of government (local, regional, national, and supranational), policy sectors (such as health, economic, environmental, and social policy), and the boundaries between

public and private decision-making. As such, policymakers *require* a meaningful amount of cooperation across many levels of government, and inside and outside of government. Further, overlapping issues of justice and equity *need* to be mainstreamed into everything that governments do, to ensure that they are not marginalised or overshadowed by more salient policy agendas and routine government business. Yet, policy studies identify a major gap between functional requirements and actual policy practices, and highlight the tendency for equity aims to be marginalised or receive low and fleeting attention (Cairney *et al*., 2022b). In that context, the continuous restatement of policymaking requirements does not help to address policy problems.

## The problem of seeking new approaches to policy analysis

This real world description of policymaking complexity presents a conundrum. On the one hand, we need to depart from simple, traditional policy analysis texts. There exist many five-step guides to analysis, accompanied by simple stage-based descriptions of policy processes, but they describe what policy actors would need or like to happen rather than policymaking reality. On the other hand, there is no clear alternative to those approaches to policy analysis. Policy theory-informed studies are essential to explanation, but not yet essential reading for policy analysts. Policy theorists may be able to describe policy processes more accurately than simple guides, but do not offer a clear way to guide action. Practitioner audiences are receptive to accurate descriptions of policymaking reality, but also want a take-home message that they can pick up and use (Mercer *et al*., 2021).

Further, these problems may be exacerbated by a lack of agreement or coherence within policy research. This issue is both practical and philosophical. The practical problem relates to the inability of non-specialists to navigate a large and unwieldy literature that is not designed to be read easily or provide clear take home messages for policy analysis.

The philosophical problem is that, while there are overlapping concerns between mainstream and critical research, there are also high barriers to regular dialogue, reflected in the routine separation of work across different journals and conferences. There is also a tendency for sporadic dialogue to produce unproductive debates in which the authors talk at cross purposes even when making a sincere effort to engage (for example, compare Jones & Radaelli, 2016 and Dodge, 2015 on 'positivist' versus 'postpositivist' approaches). These debates are not simply a 'tempest in a teapot' (Durnová & Weible, 2020). Rather, they reflect a fundamentally different position on what research:

- can and cannot do, such as provide a general 'truth' about reality (from knowledge based on narrowly defined scientific methods) or many different perspectives.

- should or should not do, such as seek scientific objectivity or embrace the inevitability of researcher influence on the research question, method, and interpretation of results.

These practical and philosophical issues help to understand some unresolved tensions regarding the purpose and possibilities of policy analysis. First, for example, does policy process research produce generalisable results with wide applications to policy analysis? Or, does it produce specific case studies whose lessons may be context specific? Second, when producing research for the Special Issue, should we aim primarily to satisfy academic reviewers (to prioritise theoretical, empirical, and methodological novelty), or the users and beneficiaries of policy research (to prioritise research synthesis and argumentation)?

## How does the special issue address these issues?

We see this Special Issue as not only the source of five new articles but also the spark for a longer term discussion in JEPP about how to engage head-on with this theory-practice conundrum. In this more general project, we seek new research that can perform a dual purpose, to:

(1) improve policy theories and generate new empirical insights, and
(2) provide practical lessons to non-specialist audiences, many of whom would otherwise use too-simple models of policymaking to guide their understanding (Weible & Cairney, 2021).

The following section describes the process to encourage new work. It introduced the initial insights generated during workshop discussions (among the authors of twelve draft papers who also acted as discussants for each paper), which help to contextualise the included articles.

Initially, we encouraged articles that use theories, concepts and frameworks that draw from the policy studies mainstream or critical studies. Some might present state of the art articles that use insights from policy theories and/ or critical policy analysis to guide the study and practice of policy analysis. Some might situate the analysis of contemporary policy problems within a wider policymaking context, to replace wishful thinking with more feasible (but equally ambitious) analysis. Some may engage critically with contemporary themes in policy analysis and design, such as how to encourage 'entrepreneurial' policy analysis, foster 'co-production' during policy analysis and design, or engage in 'systems thinking' (e.g., Durose *et al*., 2022; Mintrom, 2019; Nguyen *et al*., 2023). Or, they may interrogate unrealistic but important ideas – such as 'evidence-based policymaking' – to produce more feasible and less technocratic images of evidence-informed

policymaking. Then, we generated the following Special Issue subthemes exemplified by each article.

### *Can policy analysis become more like the rationalist ideal?*

Newman and Mintrom (2023) help to encourage continuous reflection on the nature of policy analysis. For example, can it ever be a scientific endeavour that can be improved with new technology, or does that aspiration distract from the need to continuously surface politics, values, and contestation? Is there some way to reconcile those ideas or positions? As things stand, it seems that the answer is no. For example, critical narratives are often built on a critique of post-war optimism, contrasting (1) the sense that greater data gathering and processing capabilities would help governments solve policy problems with science, with (2) the assessment that these hopes were naively rationalistic, with the dangerous potential to depoliticise issues without exposing the political choices that entrench inequalities.

In that context, Newman and Mintrom (2023) explore the role of artificial intelligence (AI) as a new technology that may encourage old ideas about policy analysis. The ability to use AI, in tandem with 'big data', to process huge amounts of policy relevant information, raises (again) the prospect that key parts of decision-making can be routinised and removed from politics. Yet, applications so far show that each aspect of that process contains – or hides – a multitude of political decisions that should be surfaced to allow proper debate and routine accountability.

### *How should analysts engage with policy ambiguity and policymaking complexity?*

Radaelli (2023) draws on the case of the regulatory reform agenda of international organisations to identify the strategic use of ambiguity. Ambiguity is politically useful to begin with, since it helps to generate widespread agreement before actors engage in the detailed and more contested issues. If so, what is its subsequent role? Analysts could seek to minimise ambiguity to prioritise the generation of a detailed and workable policy programme. Or, they could prioritise the political value of continuous contestation to maintain attention to the policy problem and avoid the sense that it has been solved. There is also an equivalent dilemma when engaging with policymaking complexity. Analysts may seek integration or coherence to help deliver policy commitments (joining-up policymaking functions). Or, they could value decentralised policymaking, in which there is continuous scope for contestation across multiple venues (with spillover effects on the interest groups trying to influence policy).

These dilemmas relate strongly to the pursuit of, or challenge to, depoliticisation. For example, some actors may identify and challenge the language

that others use to describe practices or ambitions as common sense or natural. Others highlight the role of relatively powerful actors who co-opt language, such as to signal a rhetorical commitment to a policy agenda in theory while actually changing the meaning of that agenda to minimise its impact in practice. Examples include efforts to manage organisational 'equality and diversity' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 90) or mainstream health equity in routine government business (Godziewski, 2020, 2021). Can we generate insights to research and challenge such political strategies?

In that context, Radaelli (2023) highlights the concept of 'Better Regulation', used by policymakers to describe policy activities as self-evident and common sense (who would not want regulation to be better?). This approach is clearly a form of depoliticisation to reduce contestation and insulate current agendas from further debate. Such cases studies highlight the need for policy actors to compete to 'occupy the semantic space'.

## *What should be the political role of policy analysis in relation to profound or urgent crises?*

Mavrot *et al*. (2023) engage head-on with the politics of policy analysis. Policy analysis texts emphasise the importance of fitting your analysis to your client's beliefs, with limited scope to widen their horizons. Yet, researchers routinely identify the need for rapid and radical policy change to address urgent problems. If so, should analysts incorporate that challenge into their analysis, and what would help politicians to widen their range of possible responses? This question comes with a perennial warning to distinguish between requirements and reality: a common answer is that we *need* policy actors to reconsider how they frame policy issues, which is very different from our ability to encourage that shift.

Mavrot *et al*. (2023) explore such issues in relation to contentious debates, such as regarding the legal use of cannabis. In such cases, depoliticisation may actually be the – valuable – role provided by academics, dealing with salient issues that divide actors, to the extent that there is insufficient trust to foster coproduction. An academic focus on the wider policymaking context can encourage policy actors to seek greater cooperation rather than fixate on their points of difference. Further, assigning some empirical authority to researchers can reduce the tendency for each actor to pursue their own interpretation of the current evidence.

## *How can we translate academic concepts into policymaking practices (or vice versa)?*

Hornung's research (2023) shows that academics may serve a useful technical role, to translate conceptual advances into new avenues of research for

analysts. Hornung (2023) explores this potential in relation to the live issue of energy transitions. In this case, the aim is to go further than simply encouraging an 'evidence informed' process, which is the usual – ineffective – refrain of scientists. Rather, try to understand why policymaking bottlenecks have arisen. Entrenched positions may reflect the 'dominant identities' of key participants, which have developed in relation to context-specific events, choices, and debates, prompting social groups (or political parties) to fiercely protect their stances in each context, and indeed for similar parties to protect different stances in each country (such as Green party differences in France and Germany). The implications for policy analysis are profound, since these stances may be impervious to the use of evidence and argumentation to update or challenge beliefs. Rather, support for policy change may require a change to 'social group identity'. If we can identify these bottlenecks, and their cause, can we help to reduce a tendency to close off necessary debate?

### *How directly engaged with policymakers should researchers seek to be?*

Lynggaard and Triantafillou (2023) take inspiration from the fact that, in studies of policy analysis, it is almost taken for granted that analysts are political actors seeking to influence policy with research and argumentation. This starting point can be used to provoke debate on how far analysts should go to seek influence, perhaps in relation to professional standards or science advice principles. For example, in a 'ladder of ethical engagement' (informed by policy theory insights) there are various options for researchers, such as to: to tell policy stories and await windows of opportunity for change; share information only within sympathetic coalitions; seek ways to exploit and reinforce limited external attention to an issue; or frame your case to be consistent with the questionable beliefs of your client (Cairney, 2021a, pp. 142–143).

In academia, there is some reluctance to cross a notional line between research and practice, but often for very different reasons. For some scientists, it is based on the prioritisation of professional credibility via science advice principles that emphasise 'transparency, visibility, responsibility, integrity, independence, and accountability' and can contribute to limited influence (Cairney, 2021b, p. 6). For critical policy analysts, it may be based on the need for critical detachment from government, or the sense that other strategies – such as protest – are appropriate for most governments.

Lynggaard and Triantafillou (2023) argue that discourse analysts show how policy processes are structured by broader discourses, but from a critical distance, skeptical of the idea of giving policy advice. However, it is possible to draw on the critical tradition and ethos of discourse analysis in a way that (1)

allows space for agency, and (2) shows that discourses can be used by policy actors as part of their strategic repertoire. Lynggaard and Triantafillou (2023) compare three strategies to underpin policy advice: to *manoeuvre* within a dominant 'discursive framework', *navigate* between different and conflicting discourses, or seek to *transform* existing discourse.

Combined, these themes and articles foster research-informed approaches to policy analysis, but also a series of cautionary tales. Some highlight the potential to inform and influence the policy processes that they study. However, they do so in the context of policymaking complexity that precludes a full understanding of problems and defies simple ways to control or coordinate responses. Useful accounts may explore how to set manageable expectations to inform and influence, rather than assume that if we state the need to change policy it will prompt policy change.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

*Paul Cairney* is Professor of Politics and Public Policy, University of Stirling, UK.

## ORCID

*Paul Cairney* http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9956-832X

## References

Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a feminist life*. Duke University Press.

Alexiadou, N. (2019). Framing education policies and transitions of Roma students in Europe. *Comparative Education*, *55*(3), 422–442. https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2019.1619334

Bacchi, C. (2009). *Analysing policy: What's the problem represented to be?* Pearson.

Bacchi, C., & Goodwin, S. (2016). *Poststructural policy analysis: A guide to practice*. Palgrave Pivot.

Bardach, E., & Patashnik, E. (2020). *A practical guide for policy analysis* (6th ed.) (international student edition). Sage.

Baumgartner, F., & Jones, B. (2009). *Agendas and instability in American politics* (2nd ed.). University of Chicago Press.

Bobrow, D., & Dryzek, J. (1987). *Policy analysis by design*. University of Pittsburgh Press.

Botterill, L., & Hindmoor, A. (2012). Turtles all the way down: Bounded rationality in an evidence-based age. *Policy Studies*, *33*(5), 367–379. https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2011.626315

Brans, M., Geva-May, I., & Howlett, M. (2017). Policy analysis in comparative perspective: An introduction. In M. Brans, I. Geva-May, & M. Howlett (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of comparative policy analysis* (pp. 1–24). Routledge.

Cairney, P. (2016). *The politics of evidence based policy making*. Palgrave.
Cairney, P. (2021a). *The politics of policy analysis*. Palgrave.
Cairney, P. (2021b). The UK government's COVID-19 policy: What does 'guided by the science' mean in practice? *Frontiers in Political Science*, *3*, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2021.624068
Cairney, P. (2021c). The politics of policy design. *EURO Journal on Decision Processes*, *9*, 1–8. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejdp.2021.100002
Cairney, P., Heikkila, T., & Wood, M. (2019). *Making policy in a complex world*. Cambridge University Press.
Cairney, P., Keating, M., Kippin, S., & St. Denny, E. (2022b). *Public policy to reduce inequalities across Europe*. Oxford University Press.
Cairney, P., & Kippin, S. (2022). The future of education equity policy in a COVID-19 world: A qualitative systematic review of lessons from education policymaking [version 2; peer review: 2 approved]. *Open Research Europe*, *1*(78), 1–44. https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.13834.2
Cairney, P., St. Denny, E., Kippin, S., & Mitchell, H. (2022a). Lessons from policy theories for the pursuit of equity in health, education, and gender policy. *Policy and Politics*, *50*(3), 362–383. https://doi.org/10.1332/030557321X16487239616498
Cairney, P., Timonina, I., & Stephan, H. (2023). How can policy and policymaking foster climate justice? A qualitative systematic review [version 1; peer review: 1 approved with reservations]. *Open Research Europe*, *3*, 51. https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.15719.1
Cairney, P., & Weible, C. (2017). The new policy sciences: Combining the cognitive science of choice, multiple theories of context, and basic and applied analysis. *Policy Sciences*, *50*(4), 619–627. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11077-017-9304-2
Dodge, J. (2015). Indication and inference: Reflections on the challenge of mixing paradigms in the narrative policy framework. *Critical Policy Studies*, *9*(3), 361–367. https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2015.1075735
Dryzek, J. (1983). Don't toss coins in garbage cans: A prologue to policy design. *Journal of Public Policy*, *3*(4), 345–367. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0143814X00007510
Doucet, F. (2019). *Centering the margins: (Re)defining useful research evidence through critical perspectives*. New York: William T. Grant Foundation.
Dudley, G., Parsons, W., Radaelli, C., & Sabatier, P. (2000). Symposium: Theories of the policy process. *Journal of European Public Policy*, *7*(1), 122–140. https://doi.org/10.1080/135017600343304
Dunn, W. (2017). *Public policy analysis* (6th ed.) Routledge.
Durnová, A., & Weible, C. (2020). Tempest in a teapot? Toward new collaborations between mainstream policy process studies and interpretive policy studies. *Policy Sciences*, *53*(3), 571–588. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11077-020-09387-y
Durose, C., Perry, B., & Richardson, L. (2022). Is co-production a 'good' concept? Three responses. *Futures*, *142*, 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2022.102999
Enserink, B., Koppenjan, J., & Mayer, I. (2013). A policy sciences view on policy analysis. In W. Thissen, & W. Walker (Eds.), *Public policy analysis: New developments* (pp. 11–40). Springer.
Felix, E. R., & Trinidad, A. (2020). The decentralization of race: Tracing the dilution of racial equity in educational policy. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *33*(4), 465–490. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2019.1681538
Fischer, F. (1998). Beyond empiricism: Policy inquiry in postpositivist perspective. *Policy Studies Journal*, *26*(1), 129–146. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1541-0072.1998.tb01929.x

Fischer, F. (2003). *Reframing public policy*. Oxford University Press.
Fischer, F. (2007). Deliberative policy analysis as practical reason: Integrating empirical and normative arguments. In F. Fischer, G. Miller, & M. Sidney (Eds.), *Handbook of public policy analysis* (pp. 223–36). CRC Press.
Godziewski, C. (2020). Evidence and power in EU governance of health promotion: Discursive obstacles to a "health in All policies" approach. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, *58*(5), 1307–1324. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13042
Godziewski, C. (2021). Is 'health in All policies' everybody's responsibility? Discourses of multistakeholderism and the lifestyle drift phenomenon. *Critical Policy Studies*, *15* (2), 229–246. https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2020.1795699
Greenhalgh, T., & Engebretsen, E. (2022). The science-policy relationship in times of crisis: An urgent call for a pragmatist turn. *Social Science and Medicine*, *306*, 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2022.115140
Hornung, J. (2023). Social identities and deadlocked debates on nuclear energy policy. *Journal of European Public Policy*. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2023.2215495
Hurka, S., Haag, M., & Kaplaner, C. (2022). Policy complexity in the European union, 1993-today: Introducing the EUPLEX dataset. *Journal of European Public Policy*, *29* (9), 1512–1527. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2021.1938174
Jones, M., & Radaelli, C. (2016). The narrative policy framework's call for interpretivists. *Critical Policy Studies*, *10*(1), 117–120. https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2015.1111156
Jones, M., Shanahan, E., & McBeth, M. (Eds.) (2014). *The science of stories: Applications of the narrative policy framework in public policy analysis*. Palgrave.
Lasswell, H. (1951). The policy orientation. In D. Lerner, & H. Lasswell (Eds.), *The policy sciences* (pp. 104–23). Stanford University Press.
Lasswell, H. (1956). The political science of science: An inquiry into the possible reconciliation of mastery and freedom. *American Political Science Review*, *50*(4), 961–979. https://doi.org/10.2307/1951330
Lasswell, H. (1971). *A pre-view of the policy sciences*. American Elsevier Publishing.
Lynggaard, K., & Triantafillou, P. (2023). Discourse analysis and strategic policy advice: manoeuvring, navigating, and transforming policy. *Journal of European Public Policy*. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2023.2217846
Majone, G. (1989). *Evidence, argument and persuasion in the policy process*. Yale University Press.
Maloney, W., Jordan, G., & McLaughlin, A. (1994). Interest groups and public policy: The insider/outsider model revisited. *Journal of Public Policy*, *14*(1), 17–38. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0143814X00001239
Mavrot, C., Hadorn, S., & Sager, F. (2023). Blood, sweat, and cannabis: Real-world policy evaluation of controversial issues. *Journal of European Public Policy*. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2023.2222141
McConnell, A. (2018). Hidden agendas: Shining a light on the dark side of public policy. *Journal of European Public Policy*, *25*(12), 1739–1758. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2017.1382555
McConnell, A., & 't Hart, P. (2019). Inaction and public policy: Understanding why policymakers 'do nothing'. *Policy Sciences*, *52*(4), 645–661. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11077-019-09362-2
Meltzer, R., & Schwartz, A. (2019). *Policy analysis as problem solving*. Routledge.
Mercer, T., Head, B., & Wanna, J. (2021). *Learning policy, doing policy: How do theories about policymaking influence practice?* ANU Press.
Mintrom, M. (2012). *Contemporary policy analysis*. Oxford University Press.

Mintrom, M. (2019). So you want to be a policy entrepreneur? *Policy Design and Practice*, *2*(4), 307–323. https://doi.org/10.1080/25741292.2019.1675989
Newman, J., & Mintrom, M. (2023). Mapping the discourse on evidence-based policy, artificial intelligence, and the ethical practice of policy analysis. *Journal of European Public Policy*. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2023.2193223
Nguyen, L. K. N., Kumar, C., Jiang, B., & Zimmermann, N. (2023). Implementation of systems thinking in public policy: A systematic review. *Systems*, *11*(2), 64. https://doi.org/10.3390/systems11020064
Ostrom, E. (2007). Institutional rational choice. In P. Sabatier (Ed.), *Theories of the policy process 2* (pp. 21–64). Westview Press.
Ostrom, V., Tiebout, C. M., & Warren, R. (1961). The organization of government in metropolitan areas: Theoretical inquiry. *American Political Science Review*, *55*(4), 831–842. https://doi.org/10.2307/1952530
Pagliarello, M. C. (2022). Unpacking ambiguity in ideational change: The polysemy of the 'Europe of knowledge'. *West European Politics*, *45*(4), 884–905. https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2021.1918429
Radaelli, C. M. (2023). Occupy the semantic space! Opening up the language of better regulation. *Journal of European Public Policy*. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2023.2181852
Radin, B. (2019). *Policy analysis in the twenty-first century*. Routledge).
Rein, M., & Schön, D. (2013). Reframing policy discourse. In F. Fischer, & J. Forester (Eds.), *The argumentative turn in policy analysis and planning* (pp. 145–66). UCL Press.
Richardson, J. J. (1982b). *Policy styles in Western Europe*. Allen & Unwin.
Richardson, J. J., & Jordan, G. (1979). *Governing under pressure: The policy process in a post-parliamentary democracy*. Robertson.
Richardson, J. J., & Mazey, S. (2015). *European union: Power and policy-making* (4th ed). Routledge.
Riker, W. (1986). *The Art of political manipulation*. Yale University Press.
Salamon, L. (1981). Rethinking public management: Third-party government and the changing forms of government action. *Public Policy*, *29*(3), 255–275.
Salamon, L. (2002). *The tools of government: A guide to the New governance*. Oxford University Press.
Schneider, A., & Ingram, H. (1997). *Policy design for democracy*. Kansas: University of Kansas Press.
Schneider, A., & Ingram, H. (Eds.) (2005). *Deserving and entitled: Social construction and public policy*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
Schön, D., & Rein, M. (1994). *Frame reflection: Toward the resolution of intractable policy controversies*. Basic Books).
Simon, H. (1976). *Administrative behavior* (3rd ed). Macmillan.
Smith, L. T. (2012). *Decolonizing methodologies* (2nd ed). London: Zed Books.
Stone, D. (2012). *Policy paradox: The art of political decision making* (3rd ed). Norton.
Thissen, W., & Walker, W. (Eds.) (2013). *Public policy analysis: New developments*. Springer).
Thorius, K. A., & Maxcy, B. D. (2015). Critical practice analysis of special education policy: An RTI example. *Remedial and Special Education*, *36*(2), 116–124. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741932514550812
Turner, E. O., & Spain, A. K. (2020). The multiple meanings of (In)Equity: Remaking school district tracking policy in an Era of budget cuts and accountability. *Urban Education*, *55*(5), 783–812. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085916674060

Weible, C., & Cairney, P. (2021). *Practical lessons from policy theories*. Bristol University Press.
Weimer, D., & Vining, A. (2017). *Policy analysis: Concepts and practice* (6th ed.). Routledge.
Zahariadis, N. (2003). *Ambiguity and choice in public policy*. Georgetown University Press.