Understanding Education Policymaking and Policy Change in the American States: Learning from Contemporary Policy Theory

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Writing only a few short years ago, two of this chapter’s authors commented on the vast policy changes that seemed to have engulfed America’s K-12 and higher education sectors since the mid-1980s (McLendon & Cohen-Vogel, 2008). In K-12 education, we noted, states had adopted new curriculum standards, embarked on innovative teacher certification regimens, established new assessment and accountability regimes, experimented with incentives programs linking teacher compensation with student performance, litigated hundreds of school finance lawsuits, and witnessed the ascendancy and retreat – and re-ascendence – of countless other “reform” initiatives at the local, state and national levels.

In higher education, the evidence at the time seemed equally compelling that the period between 1980-2005 had been one of dramatic change on the state policy landscape. State governments had experimented with a raft of new financing schemes for postsecondary education, including college savings plans, prepaid tuition programs, and broad-based, merit-

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scholarship programs, such as the immensely popular HOPE scholarship program, begun in Georgia in the early 1980s and in operation today in 13 other states (Cohen-Vogel & Ingle, 2006; Doyle, 2006; Doyle, McLendon, & Hearn, 2005).

States also had experimented with newer governance and accountability regimes. During this period, for example, states witnessed the emergence of “charter colleges” and the adoption and spread of performance-funding mandates in higher education which, for the first time, tied relatively small amounts of public funding to the performance of colleges and universities (McLendon, Hearn, & Deaton 2006; Zumeta, 2001). Adding to the era’s volatility, state spending on higher education had begun to decline relative to student enrollments, per capita wealth, and the size of state budgets. Together, these and other developments had led some observers to surmise the arrival on the scene of a “privatization” movement in public higher education (Ehrenberg, 2006). In reflecting on the nature of these and other state policy trends in education, we declared: “Rarely have students of education policy lived in times more dynamic than the current one” (pp. 30).

Writing today, a mere five years later, we find the pace of state policy change in education, if anything, having accelerated, rather than slowed. To the list of noteworthy developments that seem to be reshaping the policy climate for K-12 and higher education in 2013, one can add the following: (1) implementation of the Common Core State Standards for Mathematics and English Language Arts, which promises to “transform instruction” by focusing teacher attention on “fewer, higher and deeper standards” for K-12 student learning (NGA/CCSSO, 2010); (2) ongoing activity – and controversy – stemming from waivers, exempting states from requirements of the No Child Left Behind legislation; (3) the embrace by at least 32 states of a college-completion agenda for higher education that pledges the states and
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their colleges to implement action plans through which they aim to achieve significant increases in graduation rates both at two-year and four-year campuses; and, (4) the arrival on the scene of “Performance Funding 2.0,” whereby some states (e.g., Tennessee) have redirected their entire appropriation for higher education to institutions on the basis of performance, rather than student enrollments, as had been the case since the rapid expansion of public higher education in the 1950s and 1960s.

Despite the clear importance of these and other recent fluctuations in state policy for education, scholarly understanding of the forces shaping educational policy change in the American states remains woefully underdeveloped. What factors propel states to undertake the policy reforms they do, when they do? Is it variation in the socio-demographic or economic development patterns of the states that accounts for across-state differences in state education policies? Or do “politics,” in the sense of institutional political actors, such as interest groups, legislative leadership and design, partisanship, and election cycles, more fully explain patterns in state policy change for education? To what extent does competition or emulation between and among states, rather than socio-political conditions within individual states, help drive these changes? How do problems gain attention, solutions emerge, and issue agendas take shape before state governments?

To what extent do beliefs, values, ideas, and interests matter in the determination of education policy outcomes? How, precisely, do education policies change? If rationalism and incrementalism have lost the paradigmatic power they once enjoyed, how can the vast policy changes in education of the past three decades best be explained? What are the implications for effective policy advocacy of these different ways in conceptualizing change? Scholarship traditionally has paid too little systematic attention to these kinds of questions.
Notably lagging in the research literature are efforts aimed toward building, elaborating, and testing theories of state policymaking and policy change for education.\(^2\) Conversely, however, the study of public policy formation in political science has undergone a renaissance over the past 30 years. A number of factors have spurred this disciplinary development, including (1) a recognition of the growing influence of the states as important policy actors in America’s federal system, (2) a growing awareness both of the limitations inherent in existing theories of policymaking and the need for better explanations,\(^3\) (3) a revival in the study of political institutions and of how they undergo institutional change, and (4) a resurgent interest in the study of public policy, in particular (March & Olsen, 1989; Olsen, 2001; Rockman, 1994; Sabatier, 1999-a,b).

Out of these distinct, yet reinforcing, developments emerged new theorizing about the processes of policy change and, equally important, renewed thinking about the nature of governmental institutions. Importantly, these developments also have produced a sizeable body of conceptual and empirical scholarship that researchers can use in helping address unanswered questions about state policy change in the K-12 and higher education arenas.

In the remainder of the chapter, we examine the suitability of four contemporary policy theories for helping organize and stimulate future research on state policymaking and policy

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\(^2\) Of course, there have been notable exceptions. Mazzoni’s (1991) and Fowler’s (1993) policy-arenas model of state education reform and Mawhinney’s (1993) application of advocacy-coalition theory in the context of Canadian education reform stand as ones such. As described in this chapter, the field’s understanding also has improved as a result of very recent scholarship.

\(^3\) One development in this vein was growing criticism of the so-called, “stages heuristic,” as a causal theory of the policy process. The stages model of policy making has been criticized as depicting the process as overly linear, when in fact the various “stages” are often compressed or skipped, and lacking in terms of identifying the mechanisms or actors that drive a policy idea from one stage to the next. Sabatier, in particular, has argued that the model tends to focus on processes within individual stages rather than across them and therefore has not developed an adequate causal theory of the policy process (Sabatier, 1986; Sabatier, 1991).
change in K-12 and higher education. We used several criteria for selection of the frameworks presented in the chapter. First, we sought theories that conceptualize policymaking at the systemic policy level, rather than at the micro-level of individual actors. Secondly, we searched for theories that explicitly address the problem of change in large policy systems.

Finally, we sought theories that have garnered widespread attention in non-education policy domains. These criteria led us to select the Multiple-Streams framework (Kingdon, 1984, 1995), the Punctuated-Equilibrium framework (Baumgartner & Jones, 1991, 1993; True, et al. 1999, 2006), the Advocacy Coalition framework (Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 1994; Sabatier, 1988; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993), and the Policy Innovation and Diffusion framework (Berry, 1998; Berry and Berry, 1990; Gray, 1994; Mintrom, 1997; Walker, 1969).

In the following section, we distill the central tenets and examine the conceptual and empirical traditions associated with each of the four theoretical frameworks. We also identify key works that have applied or elaborated each theory since its original formulation. In the concluding section of the chapter, we assess the prospects for each framework’s application in future research on educational policymaking and policy change.

Theories of Public Policy Change:

Multiple-Streams, Punctuated Equilibrium, Advocacy Coalition, and

Policy Innovation and Diffusion

Multiple-Streams (Revised Garbage Can) Framework

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4 In our discussion of three of the four frameworks (i.e., Multiple-Streams, Punctuated Equilibrium and Policy Innovation and Diffusion), we draw on several of our previously published writings on the topic, notably McLendon & Cohen-Vogel (2008), Cohen-Vogel & McLendon (2008), and McLendon (2003a,b,c).
Developed thirty years ago, John Kingdon’s (1984, 1994, 1995) Multiple-Streams model today remains both an influential and well-cited contemporary policy theory, if also one lacking systematic elaboration. The model seeks to explain change in the issue agenda of the U.S. national government – that is, how and why some issues gain prominence before policymakers, while other issues do not. In Kingdon’s own words: “How do subjects come to officials’ attention? How are the alternatives from which they choose generated? How is the governmental agenda set? Why does an idea’s time come when it does?” (p. vii).

Through the use of case studies and a panel design consisting of 247 interviews with policymakers over a four-year period in the domains of transportation and health, he developed a counter-conventional explanation for the rise of issues on the government’s agenda. Indeed, Kingdon’s explanation for policy change is distinctive in at least three respects: (1) its focus on the predecision processes of policy formation; (2) its reliance on perspectives from organization sciences and behavior as a basis for conceptualizing change in public policy; and (3) its portrayal of policy formation as being both preternaturally dynamic and idiosyncratic.

An initially distinctive feature of the Multiple Streams Model is its concern with the predecision processes of policymaking termed, agenda setting (i.e., how issues initially come to be issues), which can be viewed as distinct from policy choice (i.e., authoritative enactments) or from the carrying out of authoritative decisions (i.e., implementation). By the time Kingdon developed his framework, scholars had already observed that control of the policy agenda confers important advantages in shaping policy outcomes; Cobb and Elder’s (1983) work is

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5 Although, Kingdon initially termed his framework as that of the “revised garbage can” model, in homage to its conceptual origins in the literature on “garbage can” decision-making in organizations, subsequent analysts increasingly referred to Kingdon’s formulation as the “multiple-streams” framework. We follow this convention.
noteworthy in this regard. Yet Kingdon was among the first to theorize on the processes resulting in agenda change, rather than describe the factors contributing to agenda status, alone. The model’s second distinctive feature is its heavy reliance on theory and research in a then-emerging facet of organizational studies known as “garbage can decision making.” Scholars of Congress had long used a variety of organization-theoretic lenses in their study of the institution (e.g., Cooper, 1977; Polsby & Schickler, 2002), but Kingdon built explicitly on an emerging conception of complex organizations –garbage-can decision making – that emphasized the highly contingent nature of decision making in organizations beset by ambiguity.

Drawing on the garbage-can model of organizational choice popularized by Cohen, March, and Olsen (1972), Kingdon conceptualized the federal government as an “organized anarchy,” attributing to it many of the same organizational properties that Cohen et al. had first assigned to universities in their landmark study of decision making in those institutions. The key organizational properties included problematic preferences, unclear means, and fluid participation. Adapting these ideas to fit the conditions of the federal government (rather than the modern research university), Kingdon then portrayed agenda setting as a process wherein ambiguity runs rampant, problems and solutions remain only loosely tethered, and participants drift from one decision venue (e.g., a committee hearing or a floor vote) to another, often with little predictability.

Kingdon’s analogizing of the federal government to that of an organized anarchy enabled him to portray agenda setting as being highly dynamic, although not to such an extent that elements of order cannot also be seen. This tension between dynamism and order indeed constitutes the model’s third distinctive feature. The Multiple-Streams framework postulates a highly contingent set of processes and relationships whereby problems, ideas (potential
solutions), and politics flow independently through government, combining only occasionally with choice opportunities to propel issues onto the national policy agenda.

Multiple Streams retains much of the spirit of March et al.’s original garbage-can conceptualization, in that it characterizes agenda setting as being considerably fluid, capricious even. Yet Kingdon’s revised framework also differs from the original garbage can model in important ways, mainly as seen in its depiction of the role that order and structure can play in developments at the level of the individual streams of activity. Kingdon observed: “we…find our emphasis being placed more on the ‘organized’ than the ‘anarchy,’ as we discover structures and patterns in the processes [of agenda-setting]” (p. 86). Thus, the discussion that follows focuses on the model’s two main constituent components: a set of more-or-less organized, individual “streams” of policy activity and a set of more-or-less anarchic processes involving the convergence of those streams at the level of the macro-system.

The Multiple-Streams framework views the federal government as an arena through which three “streams” of separate, albeit concurrent, activity flows. The problem stream consists of certain conditions that policymakers have chosen to interpret as being problems. The policy stream consists of the ideas or, “solutions,” specialists have developed over time in various policy communities. Lastly, the political stream consists both of routine and unplanned changes occurring on the political landscape, such as public opinion, electoral turnover, and interest group politics. These three streams – of problems, policies, and politics – flow through the governmental system, Kingdon argues, largely independent of one another, and each in accordance with its own set of internal rules. As a consequence, change in any given stream may occur independently of change in the other streams.
With respect to the problem stream, the ways policymakers learn about certain social conditions or issues can help to determine when a condition becomes elevated to the status of a problem. There are three mechanisms that may lead officials to interpret a condition as a problem: indicators, focusing events or feedback. With respect to problem definition, officials tend to convert conditions into problems in three ways: conditions that violate important values may be transformed into problems; conditions become problems by comparison with relevant units; and, conditions become problems through their classification into one category rather than another. Policy advocates attend closely to the merits of their arguments, thus one finds at work here many aspects of the traditional problem-solving model of decision making, including the use of a variety of analytic techniques, such as benefit-cost calculations and modeling of different forms, in an effort by advocates to build a persuasive, rational case for the importance of a given problem.

Policies, or potential solutions to problems policy makers have chosen to acknowledge, develop in ways analogous to that of biological natural selection, Kingdon asserts. Specialists working in policy communities develop and experiment with ideas, which then “float” in and around government in a sort of “policy primeval soup,” bumping into one another over time to form combinations, re-combinations, and mutations. One finds incrementalism at work here, in the development of solutions within policy communities. One also finds some degree of rationalism, inasmuch as policymakers may use certain decision criteria (e.g., technical feasibility, value congruence, and anticipation of future constraints) when selecting some ideas for survival, and some others for extinction.

Thirdly, Kingdon describes the forces that can “soften-up” the political system for change, thus enabling issues to move onto the governmental agenda. Developments in this
stream can be either predictable or unforeseen. Predictable changes sometimes include the
cyclical turnover in office holding by elected officials that stems from regularized elections.
Unforeseen changes can result from political scandal, sudden shifts in public opinion, or
economic perturbations. Interest groups usually play a crucial role in mobilizing support for or
against certain policy ideas.

How, then, do agendas change, if, as the preceding discussion suggests, the identification
of problems, the generation of policy solutions, and the march of politics proceed largely
independently of one another? According to Kingdon’s formulation, an issue gains the serious
attention of policymakers only when the three separate streams of activity conjoin with a
decision opportunity. This “coupling” of the otherwise semi-autonomous streams represents the
single-most significant feature of the model.

Streams may converge when a window of opportunity opens and “policy entrepreneurs”
mobilize attention around their pet problems or push their pet solutions. Because problems and
solutions are only weakly tethered one to another in the governmental garbage can, much
variability exists in the ways entrepreneurs link *particular* problems, solutions, and political
conditions. According to Kingdon, entrepreneurs “lie in wait in and around government with
their solutions [already] in hand, waiting for problems to “float by to which they can attach their
solutions, waiting for a development in the political stream they can use to their advantage” (p.
165). What emerges on the national policy agenda, therefore, can be viewed as a product of the
mix of metaphorical “trash” that is already floating in the individual streams of the governmental
garbage can at the precise moment at which a policy entrepreneur successfully marries the
separate flows of activity. Some considerable degree of pattern can be found in the forces that
guide developments at the level of the individual streams, whereas arbitrariness and
unpredictability characterize the manner in which these streams converge, catapulting issues onto the government’s decision agenda.

In summarizing the complexity of the forces at work in his model, Kingdon (in a close paraphrase of Cohen, March & Olsen, 1972) characterized agenda setting at the U.S. national level as that of a collection of choices looking for issues, problems looking for decision situations in which they can be aired, solutions looking for problems to which they might credibly provide an answer, and politicians looking for pet problems or policies with which they may advance their careers.

This distinctive feature of the Multiple-Streams framework – an emphasis placed on contingency, rather than certainty; volatility, instead of stableness – broke with dominant conceptions about the nature of policy formation in the U.S. Whereas, the “muddling through” of policy incrementalism (Lindblom, 1965) comfortably rested on the bedrocks of gradualism and marginal adjustment, Kingdon’s model envisioned a policy climate preternaturally prone to rapid, sometimes unpredictable, changes.

Likewise, the Multiple-Streams framework also challenged the precepts of rationalism, by rejecting both the linearity and strict, means-end hierarchies of the rational-comprehensive approach to policy formation. After all, in the universe of the metaphorical garbage can, any problem, under the right conditions, can become “the right solution” for the issue at-hand – sometimes, solutions indeed may precede the problems to which they eventually will become attached (McLendon, 2003).

Since its publication, the Multiple-Streams framework has been lauded on a number of grounds. Some observers have praised Kingdon’s efforts as having helped upend the prominence of so-called “black-box” models of policy formation of the kind David Easton’s
(1965) work popularized. To these parties, Kingdon’s scholarship is noteworthy in the degree that it endeavors to explain the processes of policy conversion (e.g., Zahariadis, 1999), rather than merely describe the inputs and outputs of policy systems. Additionally, the Multiple Streams framework received acclaim for its use of an eclectic, rigorous set of research methods in pursuit of shedding light on a phenomenon (i.e., agenda setting) widely regarded as patently messy. King (1994), for example, extolled Kingdon for his having deployed an innovative research design of panel interviews, policy histories, and case studies, alongside a sophisticated system of content coding for data analysis.

Criticisms of the Multiple-Streams model likewise exist. For example, some observers have questioned whether the purportedly separate streams of problems, policies, and politics could operate more interdependently than independently, thus rendering the model conceptually unworkable (e.g., Robinson & Eller, 2010). Secondly, the lack of precision in explaining how “policy windows” open, operate and close leaves an essential component of the framework poorly articulated. Finally, some scholars argue that the framework is more a descriptive device than a predictive one, limiting its usefulness overall (e.g., Durant & Diehl, 1989; King, 1994; Mucciaroni, 1992; Sabatier, 2007; Zahariadis, 1999). In a series of subsequent writings, Kingdon (1994, 1995) responded to a number of these stated concerns.

Another problem, however, has long persisted. Although the Multiple Streams model remains one of the most widely cited policy theories in existence – indeed, it influenced the development of other contemporary theories, such as Punctuated Equilibrium and Advocacy-Coalition, discussed later in the chapter – too little research has systematically evaluated the model’s external validity. This incongruence, between the apparent popularity of Kingdon’s formulation and the frequency with which it has been systematically studied, could be
attributable to the model’s innate complexity or, as some critics contend, to its imprecision; Multiple Streams provides too few testable propositions, these observers claim.

A modest number of studies have examined the framework’s explanatory power at both the U.S. national and state levels. Analysts have applied the framework in the arenas of health care policy, environmental policy, and national-defense policy (e.g., Blaukenau, 2001; Durant & Diehl, 1989; Kamieniecki, 2000; Kawar, 1989; Lindquist et al., 2010; Oliver, 1991). The Multiple-Streams framework has also been studied systematically in research on policy development internationally, particularly in Western Europe and the European Union (e.g., Ackrill & Kay 2011; Peters, 1994; Pollack, 1997; Zahariadis & Allen, 1995).

Scholarly treatment of the Multiple-Streams framework in the fields of education and higher education has grown in recent years. McLendon (2000, 2003) first systematically evaluated the applicability of the framework (in tandem with other theories) for higher education with his comparative-state analysis of governance reforms for postsecondary education. A series of like analyses followed, each entailing interviews, document analysis and case studies of the formation of state-level policy change for higher education (e.g., Leslie & Berdahl, 2008; Leslie & Novak, 2003; Larson, 2004; Mills, 2007; Ness, 2005, 2008, 2009a,b; 2010; Protopsaltis, 2004; Tandberg & Anderson, 2012). Across the studies, of which many examined the formation of policy agendas to reorganize statewide governance of higher education, one finds discernible evidence of the Multiple Streams model’s explanatory power, even when competing explanations are rigorously considered.

Ness’ (2005, 2008, 2009a,b; 2010) research program stands as a particularly insightful undertaking. With large numbers of elite interviews, Ness applied the Multiple Streams model to cases of policy formation surrounding governments’ decisions to establish broad-based, merit aid
programs in a handful of (mainly Southern) states. His findings suggest the usefulness of the Multiple Streams approach in explaining the programs’ emergence; yet they also point to the need for further conceptual elaboration, principally around the operation of policy windows and the role of research and information in helping shape state policy behavior.

Several analysts of K-12 education policymaking also have found the framework capable of explaining state policy change in that sector (e.g., McDermott, 2005; Portz, 1996; Stout & Stevens 2000). McDermott’s (2005) analysis of the adoption in Massachusetts of policies providing for alternative certification and pay incentives for teachers is one such example.

Punctuated Equilibrium Framework

“Punctuated equilibrium” has become a widely recognized phrase in the years since paleontologists Niles Eldredge and Stephen Jay Gould coined it (1972). With it, Eldredge and Gould challenged the Darwinian model of phyletic gradualism that had dominated evolutionary theory throughout much of the 20th century. Rather, punctuated equilibrium – known hereafter as “PE” – portrays evolutionary change as taking place over long periods of “stasis,” in which species remain virtually unchanged, punctuated by relatively brief periods of intense change when new species are introduced, old ones die out, and existing ones undergo sudden transformations. In his massive text on evolutionary theory, Gould (2002) writes: “Punctuated equilibrium addresses the origin and deployment of species in geological time…. As a central proposition, [it] holds that the great majority of species… originate in geological moments (punctuations) and then persist in stasis throughout their long durations” (pp. 765–766).

In the 1990s, ideas similar to these emerged in political science as a way theorists and analysts sought to explain policy change in American governmental systems. Scholars had
grown increasingly dissatisfied with incrementalism, then the leading paradigm for understanding policymaking in democratic systems (Prindle, 2012). In the place of policy or budgetary incrementalism, some analysts turned instead to notions such as those found in PE, ones better suited, it seemed, to explain the simultaneous influence of stability and change in public policy formation in the U.S. (Kelly, 1984). Indeed, PE now stands as one of political science’s leading models of policy change, a development attributable largely to the pioneering work of Frank Baumgartner and Brian Jones (1991, 1993).

Baumgartner and Jones contend that many areas of U.S. policymaking exhibit long periods of “relative gridlock” interspersed by brief episodes of “dramatic change” (p. 1). Drawing on the case of civilian nuclear policy in the post-World War II era, they (1991, 1993) argue that public attention at any given moment tends to focus narrowly on one aspect of an issue to the exclusion of others; but that, over time, public attention can shift from “virtual euphoria” [over a particular policy image] to “an equally one-sided preoccupation with negative aspects of the same policy or industry” (Baumgartner & Jones, 1991, p. 1046). Their punctuated-equilibrium formulation seeks to account for this phenomenon, and for the manner in which it unfolds.

The PE model contends that policies tend to be processed quietly within “policy subsystems,” but occasionally attract considerable attention when struggles are played out on the “macropolitical” agenda. Periods of equilibrium in policymaking are those spans in time when issues become captured by a subsystem of policy actors and issue experts and “policy monopolies” take hold. Periods of disequilibrium, by contrast, occur when policy monopolies are challenged or overthrown and issues are thrust into the macropolitical arena. At the heart of
PE’s explanation of this process reside the twin notions of policy *venues* and *images*, and their intersection.

A policy monopoly consists of a “definable institutional structure,” a venue in which advocacy and conflict over the policy occurs, and a “powerful supporting image.” Venues exist in many forms and can include, for example, federal agencies, state and local authorities, interest groups, professional associations, the open market, and various other institutions. When a venue involves government, it is known as a policy subsystem. Policy subsystems tend to be closed, dominated by small groups of issue specialists in the government bureaucracy, congressional committees and subcommittees, and interest groups that operate away from the public eye. Over time, policy subsystems, when reinforced with a powerful supporting image, can evolve into policy monopolies. Such monopolies tend to induce only support among those involved, or indifference by those not involved. Once established, policy monopolies can endure for long periods of time, decades even.

Only when issues move from isolated policy subsystems arena into the macropolitical arena can large-scale policy change occur, write Baumgartner and Jones (1993). Precisely how does such change happen? The “venue shopping” efforts of strategically minded political actors play a crucial role.

Because the American political system is replete with policy venues, disadvantaged issue advocates may find multiple sites at which to attempt to gain (or regain) control of a policy. These advocates “shop” for new venues in which political actors and governmental institutions different than those that currently monopolize an issue can claim jurisdiction over the issue. Advocates do so by formulating new ways of understanding old problems. As policy images become redefined, new participants are drawn to the emerging debate, thus different venues
surface as legitimate arenas for issue deliberation. Soon, macropolitical institutions begin to intervene as national institutions “grapple with [the issue] and with each other in an effort to resolve the new ‘hot’ issue” (True, Jones, & Baumgartner, 1999, p. 102).

These processes also can become reinforcing: “as venues change, images may change as well; as the image of a policy changes, venue changes [also] become more likely” (Baumgartner & Jones, 1991, pp. 1046–1047). These shifts in policy image and policy venue result in the disintegration of an existing policy monopoly; policy ownership begins to change hands. Substantial bursts of new policy activity follow and, over time, the system returns to a steady state, as interests that had been marginalized become newly institutionalized, a development that can result in a policy’s re-monopolization.

Since the mid-1990s, researchers have applied PE to a variety of political phenomena across a number of substantive policy domains. For example, in an application of the theory to voting and elections, Kelly (1994) draws comparisons between the PE cycle and eras of divided government in the U.S. He reasons that the American political cycle, consisting of stasis that occasionally is interrupted by “compressed periods of rapid transformation” surrounding presidential elections, essentially adheres to the principles of PE. He describes several notable punctuations in American political history, ranging from the Jacksonian period (1824) to the New Deal era (1930–1932). Changes in the nature of divided government, Kelly concludes, occur very much in line with the principles of PE.

The domain in which punctuated equilibrium has been applied most frequently is that of public finance and budgeting. Policy scholars have studied many aspects of governmental budgeting using the PE framework (e.g., Breunig, Koski, & Mortensen, 2010; Ryu, 2009; True, Jones, & Baumgartner, 2007). One reason for this seems to be that scholars have access to high
quality data on budgeting at the national, state and local levels of American government (Breunig & Koski, 2012).

For instance, in an application of PE to public-sector economics, Jordan (2003) examined the model’s suitability for explaining variation in local government budget expenditures. She points to the many opportunities for nonincremental change that exist within local-government budgeting as evidence of “punctuations” in the arena. She further draws a connection between the observed rhythm of the budget process and the hypothesized nature of policy change as embodied in punctuated equilibrium, concluding that the model indeed affords a firm theoretical foundation for large budget shifts.

In a more recent application, Breunig and Koski (2012) extend PE to state-level spending, analyzing state expenditures across all 50 states in specific budgetary categories (e.g. education, highways, parks) from 1984 to 2009. The authors used the descriptive statistic, L-kurtosis, to assess the magnitude of “punctuations” in state budgets. The statistic is particularly well suited for this purpose, they claim, because it measures the extent to which distributions possess the “high peaks,” “narrow shoulders,” and “fat tails” indicative of patterns in which incremental budgetary changes occasionally undergo larger-than-expected increases – i.e., punctuations.6 The authors find significant variation in the degree of punctuation in state spending overall, as well as in spending by budgetary category. For instance, education spending exhibited the least amount of punctuation in state spending among the ten budget categories examined. Breunig and Koski argue that the observed fluctuations across budget categories may result from variation in the levels of attention policymakers pay to a given issue or issue domain. Expenditures for categories with a high level of perceived importance (and

6 For additional description of the statistical tools used to assess these budgetary data, see Breunig and Jones (2011).
which are, in some cases, federally mandated) are less likely to see fluctuations than budget categories with less universal support, the authors surmise.

In a recent flourish of research activity around PE, *Policy Studies Journal* in 2012 published a collection of papers examining the theory and its application to policy development both in the U.S. and internationally. Included in the collection are an event history analysis of the role of media attention on policy formation (Wolfe, 2012); a conceptual exploration of PE’s potential in accounting for the spread of policy innovations (Boushey, 2012); a historical analysis of presidential issue attention and presidential policy tools, using PE as an explanatory lens (Larsen-Price, 2012); a historical analysis of agricultural policy, examining media attention, pre-legislative activity, and committee hearings dealing with agriculture from 1930s to 2000, in an effort to explain the discriminatory practices of the USDA against African American farmers (Worhsham & Stores, 2012); a content analysis of shifts in the policy agenda of the European Council from 1975 to 2010 (Alexandrova, Carammia, & Timmermans, 2012); and, a historical analysis of policy punctuations in the United Kingdom (John & Bevan, 2012). Indeed, applications of PE to policymaking in non-U.S. policy settings, particularly in the European Union and in Western European nations, have grown in number over the past decade.

Research on PE’s application to educational policymaking, however, trails that in other policy domains, although a few such analyses exist. In a series of applications of PE to education policy formation, Miskel and colleagues (Sims & Miskel, 2001, 2003) find strong support for the PE framework in explaining the emergence of children and adult literacy policies at the U.S. national level. Using content analysis, these authors measured changes in the images of literacy conveyed by various national media, and tracked the introduction of major reading legislation across policy venues at the national level over a period of nearly 30 years. They
interpret their findings as lending support for one key tenet of PE: as policy images change, advocates attempt to find new policy venues that are more suitable to their desired ends, and the locus of policy activity within a given policy domain shifts accordingly.

Robinson (2004) utilized PE in analyzing instructional spending per pupil among schools of varying levels of bureaucratization. He found that more bureaucratized school systems do a better job in adjusting their expenditures to fiscal realities than do less bureaucratic ones, possibly because bureaucracy enhances the acquisition and processing of information. Additionally, he concluded that the cycle of expenditure management in schools bears a strong resemblance to the vicissitudes of the PE cycle.

In an application of PE to school-choice policy development, Lacireno-Paquet and Holyoke (2007) examined the evolution of charter school policies in Michigan and Washington, D.C. The authors argue that charter school policy is an instance of punctuated equilibrium because “it was a sign of new interest groups, such as the business community and conservative interests, emerging and achieving a powerful foothold in education policy,” as well as a new conception of public education (p. 189).

The authors seek to determine if policy reforms that result from punctuations endure or if there is evidence of resistance and reversion. The authors find that in Michigan, where there were two strong sides in the debate, the policy was limited in its scope and application. Conversely, in Washington, where there was substantially less resistance to the policy punctuation, the new policy became more encompassing, and flourishes.

Fewer applications of PE can be found in the research literature on higher education (e.g., McLendon, 2001; Orr-Bement, 2002). In one rigorous undertaking, Orr-Bement (2002) applied the Baumgartner and Jones framework in analyzing legislative decision making for higher
education in the state of Washington. She deployed content analysis in examining some 3,600 bills passed by the Washington state legislature between 1977 and 1998, of which 346 bills pertained to higher education. Her analysis of the trend data yielded strong support for the PE model: higher education legislation during the period exhibited patterns of stability, punctuated by brief bursts of change, as legislative attention shifted from higher education to other issues. Rigorous applications of PE to higher education policy formation, however, remain rare.

Advocacy Coalition Framework

The Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) is a model of the policy process that focuses on the interactions of competing advocacy coalitions within policy subsystems. Introduced by Paul Sabatier and Hank Jenkins-Smith in the late 1980s, the ACF is a framework for examining learning and change that occurs within a policy subsystem over a relatively long period of time, usually a decade or more (Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 1994; Sabatier, 1988; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993). In the years since its initial formulation, the ACF has undergone extensive modification and revision, and today includes several important additions to the original theory (Sabatier & Weible, 2007; Weible, Sabatier, & McQueen, 2009).

Three core elements of the ACF model are policy subsystems, a three-tiered belief system, and advocacy coalitions. First, policy subsystems, organized around particular policy problems, are the prime unit of analysis within the ACF model. The model assumes that policy actors must specialize within a policy subsystem in order to understand the complexities of a topic and produce change. The behavior of actors within subsystems are affected by two sets of external factors in the broader political environment: stable factors, such as fundamental values and constitutional structures, which influence the constraints and resources of subsystem actors;
and dynamic factors, such as public opinion and socio-economic conditions, which are susceptible to substantial change and therefore are important for bringing about policy change within a subsystem (Sabatier & Weible, 2007).

Second is an embedded assumption within the ACF that beliefs drive political behavior. Indeed, among major contemporary policy theories, the ACF places the heaviest emphasis on the values and belief structures of policymakers. The theory identifies a three-tiered hierarchical structure of beliefs: deep core beliefs, policy core beliefs, and secondary beliefs. At the highest level are deep core beliefs, which are the broadest and most stable in the system. Deep core beliefs involve “very general normative and ontological assumptions about human nature” (Sabatier & Weible, 2007, p. 194).

Next in the hierarchy are policy core beliefs, which are applications of deep core beliefs to a policy subsystem. The final level consists of secondary beliefs, which are narrower in scope than policy core beliefs and more susceptible to change than either deep core or policy core beliefs. According to ACF theorists, beliefs interact with information in important ways to create policy change. Specifically, policy actors’ beliefs serve as filters of received information. Information supporting actors’ beliefs is more readily incorporated into the body of knowledge held by members of a coalition than information contradicting those beliefs, which is resisted. In some few instances, information can also alter actors’ beliefs.

Finally, within a policy subsystem, policy actors attempt to achieve their policy objectives by seeking allies that have similar policy core beliefs. By creating networks and sharing resources with these allies, policy actors increase the likelihood of success in achieving their policy goals. When these policy actors engage in some degree of coordinated, collaborative work toward a policy objective, they are said to have formed an advocacy coalition.
Advocacy coalitions often comprise members from diverse stakeholder groups, including elected officials, interest group leaders, researchers, journalists, and others from governmental and private organizations (Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 1994). An advocacy coalition mobilizes resources and information to translate its beliefs into policy designs. A policy subsystem will usually consist of a dominant advocacy coalition and one or more minority coalitions.

In an analysis of after-school programming policies in urban school districts, for example, Brecher, Brazill, Weitzman, and Silver (2010) identified two advocacy coalitions within an after-school programming subsystem that formed based on different policy core beliefs about the goal of these programs: an academic coalition that believed in and advocated for programs emphasizing academic achievement and a developmental coalition that believed in and advocated for programs promoting holistic youth development.

According to the ACF, policy participants are influenced to form coalitions in response to “the devil shift,” a term used to describe policy participants’ tendency to perceive opponents as stronger and more threatening than they actually are. As a result of the devil shift, policy participants will perceive their adversaries as more influential in the policy subsystem and themselves as less influential, which leads to efforts to collaborate and pool resources with potential allies. The devil shift argument also hypothesizes that the amount of exaggeration of adversary influence is correlated with ideological distance. In other words, opponents with very different beliefs are likely to perceive adversaries as more “devilish,” than adversaries whose beliefs are not as far apart (Sabatier, Hunter, & McLaughlin, 1987). Policy change occurs within a policy subsystem when coalitions of actors with similar beliefs succeed in translating these beliefs into policies.
In addition to policy subsystems, the hierarchical belief system, and advocacy coalitions, the ACF model postulates four paths to belief and policy change. Two of these paths were described as part of the original theory: (1) policy-oriented learning and (2) shocks external to the policy subsystem (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993). Two more paths were added in a later theoretical revision: (3) shocks internal to the policy subsystem and (4) negotiated agreements (Sabatier & Weible, 2007). Theorists contend that these four paths vary in their ability to change beliefs. Policy-oriented learning, for example, is more likely to change secondary beliefs than deep core beliefs or policy core beliefs. External and internal shocks, on the other hand, may alter policy core beliefs.

The ACF was originally applied to environmental and energy policy in the U.S., and the majority of subsequent ACF applications have been focused in these areas. In a review of applications of the ACF, however, Weible, Sabatier, and McQueen (2009) observe that in the years since it was introduced, the ACF has been applied to social, economic, and health policy areas. As is the case with other theories we have surveyed, the theory has also gradually been applied to policy making outside the U.S., particularly in Europe.

The ACF is now firmly established as a valid research program. Analysts have applied the ACF to various policy domains, including drug policy, water policy, nuclear policy, forest policy, land use, and health care (Sabatier & Weible, 2007). As we noted, there have also been several theoretical revisions since the framework was first introduced (Jones & Jenkins-Smith, 2009; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999; Sabatier & Weible, 2007) and the framework remains a subject of considerable debate. Additionally, although one assumption of the ACF is that research on policy subsystems and policy change should take a long-term perspective of a decade
or more, the ACF has been applied to a range of time perspectives, from one year or less (Henry, 2011; Matti & Sandstrom, 2011) to 200 years (Albright, 2011).

Critics have argued that the ACF does not adequately address potentially conflicting individual interests within a coalition (Schlager & Blomquist, 1996); that the framework’s assumptions may not be applicable to political systems outside the U.S., including less democratic societies and developing countries (Sabatier & Weible, 2007); and that the framework does not provide sufficient evidence that policy participants with shared beliefs actually do form coalitions in which actors coordinate their behavior (Schlager, 1995). Sabatier and colleagues have responded to these criticisms in subsequent modifications to the framework.

ACF’s application to educational policymaking has been limited. One application of ACF to education policy studied the networks present in the school reform movement in Oakland, CA (Ansell, Reckhow, & Kelly, 2009). The authors interviewed school district stakeholders and employed social network analysis to identify challenges to building coalitions in urban education policy. They found that a highly centralized, cohesive group of actors in the district formed a strong advocacy coalition with shared beliefs about school reform.

Yet, this coalition did not include many key district stakeholders, whose beliefs did not fully align with the coalition, thus threatening the ability of the coalition to achieve and sustain policy change. They note that narrow coalitions, which are likely to have greater homogeneity in beliefs than broader coalitions, may not be broad enough to bring about policy change and argue that outreach and agenda expansion strategies may expand coalition support.

In another application of ACF to education policy, Mintrom and Vergari (1996) studied education policy change in Michigan. The authors examined the 1993 abolition of local property taxes as a source of school funding. Using the ACF model, the authors identified a dominant
coalition with the core belief that the established system of public education could adequately address existing problems in education and, therefore, sought to maintain the status quo.

Conversely, a minority coalition consisting of members of the business community and grassroots organizations had a core belief that the established system could not adequately address problems in education and that market-based reforms – notably, legislation enabling charter schools – were needed. The funding crisis, an external shock to the school reform policy subsystem, provided the minority coalition with a path to policy change. The authors conclude that the ACF is a useful framework for understanding the process of educational policy change.

In an application to higher education policymaking, Beverwijk, Goedegebuure, and Huisman (2008) studied policy change in the Mozambican higher education system. By analyzing policy developments over a ten-year period, the authors sought to determine the applicability of the ACF to developing countries. The authors used participant observations, interviews, and document analysis to study policy change between 1993 and 2003 and found that major policy change in the higher education subsystem occurred more frequently than is predicted by the ACF. The authors conclude that the ACF needs to be refined to adequately account for the process of policy change in developing countries. Detailed analyses of ACF, as applied to policy change for higher education in the U.S., are few.

**Policy Innovation and Diffusion Theory**

The Policy Innovation and Diffusion framework is the most widely studied, tested and elaborated of the four policy theories we survey. Indeed, today it stands as a leading framework for studying policy change across many substantive domains. Both the conceptual underpinnings and empirical applications of Policy Innovation and Diffusion (PID) have
improved with time, although questions – and criticisms – linger with respect to the model’s internal coherence. Unlike some of the other areas of contemporary policy theory, PID researchers have extensively applied the framework in the domain of education policy.

A convention long ago emerged in political science (and in numerous policy fields), defining a policy innovation as a policy that is new to the jurisdiction adopting it, without regard to the number of other states that may already have adopted the policy (Berry & Berry, 1990; Gray, 1994; Walker, 1969). In so doing, innovation is differentiated from invention, or the process through which original policy ideas are conceived. Innovation diffusion is the process by which a public policy or program (an innovation) spreads among the members of a social system, most frequently understood to mean the governments of the 50 American states (McLendon, 2003b), although a large volume of literature has arisen around the study of policy innovation and diffusion at other levels of U.S. government (e.g., Clarke, et al., 1999; Samuels & Glantz, 1991) and in across-national contexts (e.g., Collier & Messick, 1975; Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996).

Much of the theory and research that exists on policy innovation and diffusion has its origins in the fields of anthropology, rural sociology, and mass communications. Indeed, diffusion studies in those fields constitute the oldest of the diffusion research traditions. Beginning in the 1920s, scholars in these areas mainly used participant observation to study the transfer of technological innovations. The early work emphasized the importance of culture on the success and the rate of diffusion within and across adopting units. Since that time, diffusion research itself has spread to virtually every other discipline and field within the social sciences, and beyond. The distinguishing feature of much of the scholarship conducted in the political and policy sciences is the focus on governments as units of analysis and on sources of variation (both across space and time) in governments’ adoption of new policies and programs.
Since political scientist Jack Walker’s pioneering work in 1969, interest and research on state policy innovation have exploded, although certain methodological improvements of the past 20 years have vastly improved the empirical foundations of this line of scholarship. Historically, researchers pursued two distinct tracks of scholarship into state policy innovation and diffusion, one focusing on *intrastate* determinants of the phenomenon and a second explanation examining *interstate* determinants. Since the early 1990s, a third, synthetic approach, which combines elements of the earlier models, has emerged as paradigmatic.

The *internal determinants* explanation argues that state governments innovate when their political, economic, and social environments are favorable (Gray, 1994). Researchers have found that adoption is generally faster among (1) larger, wealthier states; (2) among states with more electoral competition, higher turnover in political office, and more professionalized legislatures; and, (3) among states with more urban and educated citizenries (Berry & Berry, 1990; Morgan & Watson, 1991; Walker, 1969). A critical assumption of this type of model is that states influence one another’s policy behaviors in negligible ways.

By contrast, interstate *diffusion* explanations view policy innovation as intrinsically intergovernmental in nature; policies arise because states emulate the policy behaviors of their neighbors or peers (McLendon, 2003b, p. 113). Most such models treat geographically proximate neighbors as ones being likely to exert the strongest influence on a neighbor’s policy behavior. In his landmark 1969 study, Walker documented regional patterns in policy adoption, characterizing state policymaking as a “system of emulation” (p. 898) of regional, bellwether states. In his factor analyses of the adoption of more than 100 policies over time, certain states in each region of the U.S. emerged as opinion leaders. Once these opinion leaders adopted a new policy or program, Walker contended, other states in the region follow suit. Indeed, some states
appeared to have copied, word for word, legislation adopted in a nearby state – typographical errors and all (Walker, 1969). Walker’s early work, particularly his account of the underlying forces he believed had prompted states to emulate one another’s policies, left a deep imprint on the direction of future research.

A third, synthetic approach arose largely from the work of William Berry and Frances Stokes Berry, whose studies in the early 1990s of the adoption and spread of new state lotteries and taxes (Berry & Berry, 1990, 1992, respectively) helped unite the two earlier, separate traditions. As pure models, Frances Stokes Berry (1994, p. 443) later observed, “internal determinants explanations and diffusion explanations are deficient,” because each model employed “single-explanation” methodologies shown to detect effects, when, in fact, none existed.

In their analyses of factors influencing state adoption of lotteries and new taxes Berry and Berry utilized a methodology newer to the social sciences – Event History Analysis (EHA), a regression-like technique applied to panel data. In studies using EHA, the dependent variable typically is dichotomous; in the context of the Berry’s research, for example, the outcome variable was whether or not a state adopted a new lottery or a new tax in a given year. The independent variables in EHA studies can include indicators of certain hypothesized influences, such a state’s socio-demographic (e.g., race/ethnicity, population distribution), economic (e.g., wealth, unemployment levels, etc.), and political (e.g., partisanship, electoral competition, ideology) composition. Crucially, the EHA can also include a variable indicating the past policy behavior of a state’s neighbors, thereby accounting for the pressures on a given state to adopt other states’ existing policies (i.e., diffusion).
The two early EHA studies by Berry and Berry netted a number of interesting findings, particularly with respect to the influence of state-to-state diffusion. In their study of state lotteries, Berry and Berry (1990) concluded that if the “fiscal health [of a state] remains moderate and it is an election year, the effect of previously adopting neighbors on the likelihood of adoption is stronger” (p. 420). Their analysis of tax innovations yielded similar evidence both of internal and diffusion influences on policy adoption (Berry & Berry, 1992). In that study, a tax hike was found to be more likely among states with longer periods between elections, among ones where there existed a fiscal crisis, and ones whose neighbors recently had increased taxes. Overall, these early studies seemed to suggest that the policy behaviors of bordering states, rather than non-contiguous ones, had exerted a stronger effect on the likelihood of a state innovating.

Why, precisely, policymakers in a given state might be influenced by the policy choices of those in other states remains a contested question. Several explanations exist. Two of the most common ones point to economic competition and policy learning (Berry & Baybeck, 2006; Boehmke & Witmer, 2004; Walker, 1969).

According to the first rationale, state policymakers make policy choices to gain an economic advantage or avoid a disadvantage over other states (Ingle, Cohen-Vogel & Hughes, 2007; Dye, 1990; Walker, 1969). During this process of competition, officials may “feel pressure to enact a policy that exists elsewhere because it affects their state's relative attractiveness” (Karch, 2007, p. 55). Specifically, states may compete for private investment because it promises to bring more jobs and tax revenue (Bailey & Rom, 2004; Berry & Baybeck, 2005; Saiz & Clarke 2013). Additionally, states may compete to repel “undesirables.” Peterson and Rom (1990), Berry, Fording and Hanson (2003), and Allard and Danziger (2000), for example, speak of a ‘race to the bottom’ in state welfare policymaking. According to Karch
“the logic here is straightforward: If a state has more generous welfare programs than its neighbor, it may attract welfare recipients from that neighbor. As a result, the adoption of more stringent welfare-related policies in one state can cause its neighbors to follow suit” (p. 62).

According to the second rationale, state officials take cues from one another in an attempt to simplify the range of alternatives from which they can choose. Such cue taking, what Mooney and Lee (1995) called “policy learning,” reduces political risk by turning to solutions that have proven successful somewhere else (Simon, 1997). Policy learning among the American states has been found to be facilitated by supra-state organizations (e.g., the Council of State Governments) and networks (Balla, 2001; Cohen-Vogel, Ingle, Albee, & Spence, 2008; Ingle, Cohen-Vogel & Hughes, 2007).

Indeed, a key component of the mission statements of various national organizations is the diffusion of information to policymakers, something these organizations do by publishing reports and hosting conferences that encourage the development and strengthening of professional networks (Karch, 2007; Rich, 2004). Policy entrepreneurs also serve as information conduits and facilitate the learning process (Mintrom & Vergari, 1996).

In the view of those who take a policy learning approach, very few states are willing to adopt a new policy in the first years of diffusion because they have not yet had the time to learn about the consequences of such a decision. How then do we explain cases of rapid diffusion? Recently, one study investigated instances where policies diffuse very rapidly rather than in the familiar S-shaped pattern that can easily be reconciled with a policy learning explanation. Nicholson-Crotty (2009) analyzed 57 policies, finding evidence that policy characteristics may help explain the likelihood of rapid diffusion. In particular, the author showed that “the salience and complexity of an issue condition lawmakers’ willingness to discount long-term
consequences in favor of short-term electoral gain and, thus, to forgo policy learning in favor of immediate adoption” (p. 192). Other studies, including one of states’ adoption of the Common Core State Standards, shows that rapid diffusion can also be conditioned by federal fiscal incentives, especially in lean budget years (Allen, Pettus, & Haider-Markel, 2004; LaVenia, Cohen-Vogel, & Lang, 2011).

Other scholars too have suggested that a policy learning explanation may over-simplify the reasons for state policy adoption. Volden, Ting and Carpenter (2008), for example, argue that much of the research seen as evidence of policy diffusion “could have arisen through independent actions of states that confront common problems at about the same time and only learn from their own experiences” (p. 329). In short, many of the policy phenomena held up as examples of policy learning may in fact simply reflect the individual decisions of independent adopters. The authors do not suggest “that policy learning is absent from the decision-making processes of politicians and bureaucrats” but, instead, that scholars should redirect their “efforts toward providing evidence that distinguishes between policy diffusion and myopic choice” (p. 327). They call for studies that “focus on policy success, on conditional patterns of policy maintenance and longevity, on policy abandonment, and on free-riding behavior” (p. 329).

Several other critiques of the Policy Innovation and Diffusion framework have surfaced, among them concerns that the research is limited because it (1) focuses on the correlates of policy adoption, while ignoring other stages in the policy life cycle, and (2) emphasizes a positive regional effect, whereas, in fact, empirical evidence for diffusion is questionable (McLendon, Hearn, & Deaton, 2006; Mintrom & Vergari, 1998; Mooney, 2001). With respect to the former criticism, it is indeed the case that state policy diffusion research traditionally has
focused on factors leading states to adopt altogether new policies (i.e., enactment), rather than on forces shaping problem identification, agenda formation, implementation, or policy termination.

Two efforts intended to remedy this limitation bear mentioning. Through interviews with state policymakers, Cohen-Vogel and Ingle (2007) concluded that the influence of neighboring states is most pronounced during the agenda setting and proposal formulation stages, and least pronounced during the adoption stage. Cohen-Vogle and Ingle found evidence that policy entrepreneurs, working across state lines, attempt to build awareness about problems and, then, link those problems with particular solutions. The authors found little to suggest that policymakers in nearby states borrowed political strategies from one another in an effort to build support (or opposition) for a given policy.

A study by Mintrom and Vergari (1998) also examined diffusion pressures at various stages of the policymaking process with respect to charter school legislation. In exploring the role that policy networks – and policy entrepreneurs within them – play in the diffusion of policy innovations, the authors found that external networks of advocates from other states increased the likelihood of legislative consideration, yet did not affect the likelihood of legislative approval. External networks can be a source of new ideas, but may lose significance as state policymakers attempt to secure legislative approval. To ensure approval, policymakers instead turn inward and rely on their own knowledge of local context and intrastate politics.

Another critique of policy diffusion research contends that state policy scholars have emphasized a positive diffusion effect, even though evidence for such an effect is mixed (e.g. Lutz, 1987; Mooney, 2001). In fact, Mooney (2001) reported that only half of the twenty-four EHA models reported in studies of state policy diffusion and published during the 1990s in top-tier political science journals contained positively and statistically significant coefficients
indicating a regional, diffusion effect. Mooney attributes, in part, the positive bias to methodological flaws in much of the early EHA modeling. By failing to account for temporal dependence, many early models of state policy innovation and diffusion produced spurious diffusion results.

Methodological improvements since that time – including, the use of annual dummy and time-trend variables, the introduction of spline techniques, and, most importantly, increasing use of the Cox Proportional Hazards model – have corrected for these early design flaws. With these recent methodological improvements, event history analysis has become the dominant analytic approach for use in studying policy innovation and diffusion in the states (e.g., Box- Steffensmeier & Jones, 2004; McLendon, Hearn, & Deaton, 2006).

Only recently has a robust research program focusing on state-level policy innovation and diffusion arisen in the arena of state education policy. Most of the works on K-12 education, launched in the wake of the frenzied school-reform movement in the U.S., examine the conditions that are associated with the introduction of school-choice initiatives in the states (Karch, 2010; Mintrom, 1997; Mintrom & Vergari, 1998; Wong & Langevin, 2005, 2006; Wong & Shen, 2002). For example, Wong and Langevin (2006) conducted an event history analysis of

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7 The first diffusion studies in the field of education, those conducted in the 1950s by researchers at Teachers College, had as their primary concern the extent to which local control and educational spending led to school and district innovativeness (e.g., Gray, 1957). Later research focused on the teacher as the unit of analysis, and examined the diffusion of ideas and practices within schools (Rogers, 2003). Another vein of research in K-12 and postsecondary education has focused on technology adoption among classroom teachers and college faculty (Straub, 2009; Tabata & Johnsrud, 2008; Williams & Rooij, 2009).
the influence of social, economic, political, and interstate diffusion factors on state passage of charter school laws. They found statistically significant evidence for the influence of partisan gubernatorial control (Republican), classroom spending (negative), minority legislative representation (positive), and the percentage of private school enrollments in states (positive). They found, however, no evidence of a diffusion effect.

As noted, Mintrom (1997) melded event history analysis with surveys of state officials to ascertain the influence of “policy entrepreneurs” in the spread of school choice policies. Mintrom found the likelihood of adoption of these initiatives to be higher in states with the following characteristics: larger percentages of students enrolled in private schools; looming statewide elections; weaker unions; and poorer student test score performance, relative to national norms. He also found adoption more likely in states where policy entrepreneurs had helped facilitate passage of the laws. In addition to these within-state factors, Mintrom found evidence of state-to-state diffusion: states with a larger proportion of neighbors that had already adopted a given policy were more likely themselves to adopt.

Research into policy innovation and diffusion in higher education evolved later than it did in the field of K-12 education studies, yet has recently gained strong momentum. Hearn and Griswold’s (1994) study was one of the first systematic empirical works to delve into the influences on state-level policy innovation in postsecondary education. These analysts used multivariate regression and a cross-sectional research design to test a variety of hypotheses, which they had distilled mainly from the field of organization theory, about state policy innovation in such areas as college savings bonds and prepaid tuition plans, mandated assessments of undergraduate students, and alternative licensure for K-12 teachers.
Hearn and Griswold found some evidence indicating that governance structure, along with population size, levels of wealth and postsecondary enrollment, and regional variation, appears to influence a state’s propensity to innovate, although the relationships varied across the six polices the authors studied and the directions of the patterns were not always consistent with the hypotheses.

The longest-sustained line of scholarship around policy innovation and diffusion in higher education – that by McLendon and colleagues – adheres closely to the conceptual scaffolding of Walker (1969), Berry and Berry (1990), and other political scientists. This line of work has relied primarily on EHA in analyzing the rise and spread of new state policies in the areas of postsecondary accountability, governance, and finance (e.g., Doyle, McLendon, & Hearn, 2010; Hearn, McLendon, & Lacy, 2013; Hearn, McLendon, & Mokher, 2008; McLendon, Deaton, & Hearn 2007; McLendon, Hearn, & Deaton 2006; McLendon, Heller, & Young 2005; Mokher & McLendon, 2009).

For example, in the field’s first application of EHA to state policy adoption in higher education, McLendon, Hearn, and Deaton (2006) found Republican legislative strength and centralized governance structures for postsecondary education to have exerted a statistically significant influence on the probability of state adoption of new performance funding policies. Hearn, McLendon, and Mokher (2008) deployed EHA in analyzing passage of state student unit-record systems, while Mokher and McLendon (2008) conducted an EHA study into the determinants of state adoption of dual-enrollment programs.

A series of studies by Cohen-Vogel and colleagues has used qualitative approaches to explore the mechanisms of policy diffusion, interviewing policy makers and other policy “elites” about the adoption of merit-based funding programs in higher education (e.g., Cohen-Vogel,
Ingle, Albee, & Spence, 2008; Cohen-Vogel & Ingle, 2007; Ingle, Cohen-Vogel, & Hughes, 2007). They found evidence for what they termed the “3 Cs” of diffusion – that convenience, coalitions, and competition among states for high performing students explained whether and when a state adopted a merit aid program.

**Viewing Future Research on Education Policy Change**

**Through the Four Lenses**

Although a subfield devoted to the analysis of politics and public policy long ago arose in the K-12 research arena, and one such has recently emerged in higher-education studies, too little research has analyzed education policymaking and policy change in the American states. In this chapter’s final section, we explore how each of the four policy theories can be productively deployed in shedding new research light onto state policymaking for K-12 and higher education.

**Viewing K-12 and Higher Education Policy Change through a Multiple-Streams Lens**

Thirty years since its emergence in the political science literature, the Multiple-Streams framework remains a highly distinctive explanation of policy change. By inviting the analyst to conceptualize governmental decision making as being subject to the same forces as arise in organizational “garbage cans,” the Multiple-Streams framework has challenged once-conventional assumptions that policy change in education necessarily must unfold incrementally or rationally. Instead, the Multiple-Streams model focuses the analyst’s attention on occasional intersections of presumably unrelated – or, only marginally related – sets of developments, involving (1) the availability of solutions at a given moment, (2) policymakers’ awareness of problems, and (3) political contingency.
The Multiple-Streams framework contends that education policy change is most likely to occur when policy solutions already in the open become linked with problems of emergent concern to politicians during moments of political volatility. Many different policy ideas can serve as “answers” to different kinds of problems, even those the problem was never intended to address – the only requirement being that a potential solution must satisfy an entrepreneur’s parochial interests. Because of this residual randomness, virtually any solution can become bound up with a given problem; almost anything, the model contends, can conceivably be related to almost anything else – and in unexpected ways.

Despite the growing number of studies that have applied Multiple Streams in K-12 and higher education policy settings, questions persist about the model and its utility. For example, it remains unclear why policy windows open at the times they do. Precisely what combination of factors and actors “converge” to enable the opening of policy widows of opportunity? And how do policy windows in the education domain function differently than political windows of the kind Kingdon conceptualized, occurring in other policy domains?

Additionally, how does the content of a possible solution influence the solution’s credibility, when policy entrepreneurs make choices among different (indeed competing) alternatives? To paraphrase Kingdon on this point, what are the criteria that elevate some of the available solutions up out of the “primeval policy soup” of the education community, while consigning others to continued floating? In what specific ways do policy entrepreneurs facilitate education policy change? Scant research has inventoried, much less elucidated, the roles entrepreneurs play in defining educational problems, identifying solutions, and positioning issues on the state policy agenda.
How and where do interest groups fit in? Kingdon’s original formulation viewed interest groups as serving primarily to “soften up” the political system. Might not the roles of interest groups in state-level agenda setting differ from those of groups operating at the national level? In the states, the advent of term limits for elected officials, the waxing influence of national policy organizations (e.g., Complete College America) and large foundations (e.g., Gates and Lumina Foundations), and the emergence of issues of substantial technical complexity (e.g., value-added modeling in K-12 education or performance-based funding for higher education) may well be undermining the policy-independence of elected officials, rendering them more reliant on outside groups (e.g. such as those above, as well as think tanks) at all stages of the policy process, particularly agenda setting. Each of the questions raised here represents gaps in our understanding of the Multiple-Streams model, and signals interesting conceptual directions for future research.

Future research into education policy change using the Multiple-Streams lens would stand to benefit from several methods-related improvements. First, greater sophistication in study designs is needed. Multiple Streams scholarship on K-12 and higher education policy making has relied almost exclusively on case studies, whether of a single-case or a comparative-case design. This approach has yielded valuable perspectives, but other designs are warranted, now that descriptive and conceptual insights have accumulated. For instance, by studying multiple episodes in a given state over time, analysts could better assess the dynamics underpinning the opening and closing of policy windows under consistently similar structural conditions (e.g., demographic, economic-development, and political patterns), yet meaningfully dissimilar contextual ones (e.g., across reform initiatives).
A greater diversity of data-collection techniques also is warranted. To date, most research has utilized interviews and document analysis. Mintrom’s (1997) study of the rise of charter-school legislation in the states, however, points to the value of other kinds of data. He used mail surveys of state education experts, asking them to identify specific individuals who had advanced charter-school proposals in their states (i.e., policy entrepreneurs) and to rate the importance of certain actions these individual had taken. Case studies are appealing, because they permit analysts to combine eclectic modes of in-depth field research (e.g., in-depth interviews, archival data, observations, etc.). Integrating insights derived from interviews and document analysis with ones gleaned from surveys conducted across a large number of states, however, would enable analysts to build richly textured accounts of how policy entrepreneurship (or other facets of the model) plays out episodically, while also gauging the range and prevalence of such phenomena in the education policy domain across state varied contexts.

Viewing K-12 and Higher Education Policy Change through a Punctuated Equilibrium Lens

The Punctuated Equilibrium framework holds considerable promise as a lens through which to understand education policymaking and policy change in the states. By describing the conditions under which (1) issues become defined and, later, redefined, (2) policy agendas become institutionalized, and (3) prevailing policy images and venues become challenged and, in time, overturned, the PE framework provides both a plausible rationale for the rise and fall of education policies over time and conceptual and analytical constructs with which to study the phenomena. Future research could draw on the PE model in a number of ways.

First, analysts could study how the personal electoral interests of state legislators influence the transition in education policy from periods of stasis to ones of punctuation. To
date, little research in the education arena has empirically assessed the relationship between legislators’ electoral interests and their policy behaviors. By analyzing data on bill sponsorship, committee and floor votes, and bill sponsors’ party affiliations and district characteristics, researchers could better discern how legislators’ electoral interests shape policy changes over time (McLendon, Mokher, & Doyle, 2009).

Second, the PE framework points to the value of future research into policy venues. The existence of multiple policy venues is a foundational component of the PE framework, because individuals and interests that are excluded from a policy monopoly must have other venues to which they can appeal. How do education reformers in the states bypass existing policy monopolies and how do alternative venues pay off in terms of advocacy success? One such alternative venue appears to be the statewide ballot, an arena of growing, if ill understood, significance in education policymaking (McLendon & Eddings, 2002). How do education advocates make strategic use of the availability of alternative policy venues, when seeking to challenge existing monopolies from which they are disenfranchised?

Third, tracking the agenda status of education-reform legislation across both chambers of state legislatures, rather than aggregating data for the legislature as a whole, would enable analysts to assess the relative suitability of upper and lower chambers of statehouses as venues for different kinds of education reform initiatives. Fourth, adding information on committee deliberations and floor debates would enable analysts to assess how advocates use political rhetoric and technical information in advancing policy change. Finally, with respect to research design, collecting information on bills introduced in a number of states, rather than data on bills enacted in a single state alone, would allow analysts to draw even stronger inferences about the conditions under which education reforms advance onto and recede from the agenda.
The data requirements the PE model imposes on analysts can be quite burdensome, however. Collecting, organizing, and coding trend data on media coverage of education reforms in the states – the conventional approach in the PE literature for assessing the stability of policy images over time – present significant challenges. This kind of challenge has been made easier in recent years by the continued enhancement of searchable, electronic databases of newspaper coverage in each of the states. Analyzing change in policy venues is even more formidable an undertaking. For research at the national level, the Policy Agendas Project, a data archive that is publicly available at the University of Washington, now stands as an important data resource. At the web sites (http://www.policyagendas.org), one can find archived historical data on the U.S. budget; House and Senate committee hearings of the U.S. Congress; Executive Orders; Gallup Poll information; State of the Union addresses; Supreme Court cases; New York Times Index Data; and data on public laws passed since the 1940s.

No such comparable data sets exist at the state level, thus necessitating of analysts extensive archival work in one or more states of interest. Whereas, in many states complete bill information from the early 1990s forward is available online, elsewhere the record is incomplete. For instance, the format for reporting bill information in a given state may change over time, limiting comparisons. Alternatively, the record may cover only a brief span of time or omit particular years of interest.

Yet, the strategy of selecting a small number of states, chosen for their theoretical importance, and concentrating attention on publicly available data sources within them seems feasible. Notwithstanding the challenges in collecting bill histories from state legislative databases, state departments of education and statewide coordinating and governing boards for higher education in most cases serve as good data repositories for archival information on
various policy initiatives.

A few data banks hosted by national policy organizations, such as the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO), the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS), the Education Commission of the States (ECS), and the National Conference on State Legislatures (NCSL), also provide key information on the governance patterns of the states and of their education systems. When combined with governors’ annual state-of-the-state addresses, executive budget notes, and indicators of state political systems derived from other reliable archives, these data provide the necessary information for testing key tenets of the PE framework and for elaborating new conceptions distinctively tailored to studying education policy change in the states.

*Viewing K-12 and Higher Education Policy Change through an Advocacy Coalition Lens*

The Advocacy Coalition Framework points analysts of education policymaking and policy change in several prospectively important directions, each distinctive to the model. First, the ACF focuses the attention of analysts on the belief systems of members of coalitions and how changes in beliefs over time influence changes in public policy. This emphasis on beliefs is particularly useful in the context of studying K-12 education policy because of the deep, longstanding differences among members of the education policy domain in their views over the proper role of government in American schooling. In a school choice policy coalition, for example, deep core beliefs about the fundamental value of freedom or equality would be expected to shape policy core beliefs about the proper role of governments and markets in education and secondary beliefs addressing details such as resource allocations for school choice policies.
How do these differences in belief structures shape coalition formation, coalition maintenance, the choice of coalition strategy and, eventually, policy change involving other deeply contested issues in education, such as debates surrounding teacher professionalism and performance? Although scant Advocacy Coalition research exists in the domain of higher education, growing debate in that sector over the proper role of for-profit postsecondary providers, the future of public subsidies for state colleges and universities, the productivity of faculty, the value of the research enterprise, and the relative merits of the liberal arts and of vocational preparation, signals the potential value of the ACF as a lens for understanding policy change in the sector. In each of these areas, differences in beliefs among policy actors seem to be playing an important role in intensifying policy debates in the states. Application of Advocacy Coalition Framework in clarifying how these purported differences in beliefs indeed are shaping policy changes at the state level would be a useful direction for future research.

A second possible contribution of the ACF involves its focus on the role of scientific and technical information in the policy process. Rigorous scientific studies on the effects of policies and policy interventions – for example, on such hotly debated matters as teacher effectiveness, student performance, college affordability, and student financial aid – are more readily available to members of the education policy domain today than at any previous time. The use of education research among state policymakers, however, is not very well understood (Ness, 2010). There is a large and growing market in the states for technical analysis of education policies and interventions, but as yet little systematic understanding of the ways in which technical information is (rather than should be) used in defining the magnitude and parameters of problems, their causes, and their likely impacts (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999).
How do coalitions in the education domain use research and other technical information to organize their efforts, adhere their members more closely to the coalition’s policy objectives, and influence the behavior of governmental authorities? How does the availability, credibility, and perceived quality of education research influence coalitions’ choices of “guidance instruments,” when seeking to influence the behavior of governments? How do public and elite perceptions about the adequacy of governmental decisions, in turn, influence the strategic choices coalitions make, and the role research and technical information plays in these choices? These are illustrative questions of the kind that could productively frame future research into education policy change.

Clearly, one finds limitations in applying the ACF to state education policymaking. Neither the original nor revised models account as fully as they should for the processes by which policies indeed change. Additionally, there is a significant question in this model involving data collection requirements.

Although a clear conceptual and analytical advantage to ACF is its focus on an expanded set of policy subsystem actors, to include officials from all levels of government, as well as consultants, researchers, and members of the media, the data burdens associated with obtaining meaningful information from all of these parties, and perhaps doing so across states in an effort to generalize findings, could prove prohibitive for analysts. The use of creative research designs, therefore, perhaps to involve surveys of different actors in the education domains of a large number of states, combined with an in-depth analysis of the Advocacy Coalition Framework in only a few states, would enable researchers to apply the framework in educational settings, under reasonable expectations with respect to resources and timing.
Viewing K-12 and Higher Education Policy Change through an Innovation and Diffusion Lens

The distinctive value of the Policy Innovation and Diffusion lens resides in its ability to incorporate into a single analytic formulation, indicators both of “intrastate” and “interstate” factors hypothesized as likely to influence a state’s adoption of a new education policy or program. Whereas, some other contemporary models of public policy formation attend only tangentially to the intergovernmental dimensions of policy adoption, the PID framework expressly seeks to account for them – conceptually and empirically. In so doing, the PID model enables analysts to ascertain the independent influence on policy adoption of factors such as demographic, social, economic, political, and structural conditions within states and pressures arising between and among states. With the important methodological advances of the past decade, PID designs that utilize event history analysis now can produce highly reliable and efficient estimates of the effects of such hypothesized factors on the probability of a state’s adopting an education change or reform at a given moment in time.

Because innovation-and-diffusion researchers seek to examine patterns in policy adoption across states and over time, studies applying the framework require datasets possessing both temporal and spatial dimensions. Most such analyses call for the use of panel data sets, incorporating indicators of the states (both internal characteristics of states and indicators of state-to-state policy influence) over time; the state-year, in these studies, serves as the primary unit of analysis. In the K-12 arena, Mintrom (1997) and Wong and Shin (2002) created early data sets of this kind. In an effort to study innovation and diffusion of state policies for higher education, McLendon and colleagues (e.g., Hearn, McLendon, & Lacy, 2013; McLendon, Deaton, & Hearn 2007; McLendon, Hearn, & Deaton 2006; Mokher & McLendon, 2009) built event history datasets that include several hundred indicators of the states and their higher
education systems spanning a period of almost 40 years. Other analysts have built similar data sets (e.g., Doyle, 2006; Doyle, McLendon & Hearn, 2010).

Creating and maintaining state-level event history data sets of the kind needed for PID studies of the factors driving education policy change requires the assembling and cleaning of data from a variety of primary and secondary sources. Analysts often compile data for the dependent variable(s) – i.e., state adoption decisions – from on-line databases of state statutes and legislative bill histories. Occasionally, secondary sources, such as policy organizations (e.g., Education Commission of the States or National Conference of State Legislatures) and state boards of education will have systematically reported on dates of adoption for certain education policies enacted in the states.

In many studies, data for most of the state-level independent variables are drawn from a variety of reliable secondary sources, such as the Bureau of Economic Analysis (e.g., data on per capita income), the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (e.g., political ideology scores of state governments and citizenries), or the National Conference on State Legislatures (e.g., aspects of legislative design). Data on party strength in state legislatures often is taken from datasets publicly available, such as the online archive of the State Politics and Policy Quarterly (http://academic.udayton.edu/sppq-TPR/index.htm) or from the Council of State Governments. Increasingly, researchers have begun developing unique indicators of certain hypothesized influences of state education policy, including, for example, ones on the representational attributes of state legislators (e.g., McLendon, Mokher, & Flores, 2011).

The conceptualization, coding, and analysis of diffusion in these studies represent a critical set of decisions for PID researchers. Traditionally, the diffusion variable included in longitudinal analyses of state adoption of new policies or programs represents some measure of
the number (or percentage) of states that had already adopted an innovation, at the time a given state adopted one. The higher the number (or percentage) of previous adopters, the greater the presumed diffusion pressure on a given state to follow suit. The important question, therefore, involves the proper defining of a social community of states among which the policy is likely to have spread. Taking cue from Walker (1969) and the early work of the Berrys (1990, 1992), many studies have defined this community of influence as residing strongest among geographically proximate states, usually contiguous neighbors. Alternative specifications of diffusion can also be modeled. For instance, fixed-region models assume that state officials will be inclined to emulate educational policies of states within their region; analysts following this convention, therefore, will include the number (or percentage) of states from the region that already had adopted the policy or program by the year a given policy is adopted.

While these specifications of diffusion may seem straightforward, other approaches entail greater complexity. For example, when studying education policies, why would analysts presume that new policies and programs should diffuse along regional lines, when regionalism in American public policy matters less today than at any previous time in the nation’s history? While regional influences may still exert some pressure on states, communication channels within and among education policy communities today tend to be fashioned along national lines, through professional associations, such as the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), the Educational Commission of the States (ECS), the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO), the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), the National Governors Association (AGB), and through any number of other organizations that view their role as working to diffuse educational reforms and “best practices” nationally.
Clearly, professional associations built along strong regional ties, including the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (WICHE), the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), and others among the higher education regional “compacts,” still play an important role in disseminating ideas and information about postsecondary education. Yet the trend increasingly has been one toward national communication channels and interactions among state officials. Future research on education policymaking and policy change using the PID framework must better account for these developments in its modeling efforts.

CONCLUSION

Public policy for education in the United States today exhibits as much volatility as that at any moment in the nation’s history. Understanding education policymaking and policy change in the states may grow more important still, as the states and the federal government continue rethinking – and, redesigning – the nation’s education landscape.

Indeed, as we draft our conclusion, President Barack Obama has announced a historic series of proposals that fundamentally would overhaul the role of the federal government in higher education, an arena historically dominated by the separate states. Among other things, the administration’s proposals, for the first time, would (1) establish a new ratings system for colleges and universities, whereby campuses would be evaluated based on the performance of their graduates, (2) link federal student aid allocations to these outcomes at the campus level, and (3) toughen requirements on students receiving federal student aid. Although, at present, the prospects of Congressional passage of these proposals seem unlikely, the announcement caps years of growing public frustration over questions around accountability and affordability in higher education, and signals the lengths to which both federal and state governments in the U.S.
have been willing to go in altering the nation’s educational landscape. As we noted at the chapter’s outset, this shift also includes numerous other recent policy changes both in K-12 and higher education, including new and different ways of holding education publicly accountable, governing schools and campuses, financing education, promoting coordination and competition, compensating faculty and leaders, staffing systems and schools, and measuring learning and the many other outcomes of schooling.

In this context of frenetic change, systematic and rigorous scholarship around education policy formation in the states can serve at least two valuable purposes. First, *theorizing* about education policymaking – meaning, formulating propositions, empirically assaying relationships, and elaborating extant understandings – is useful in its own right, because doing so is a foundational step in the field’s awareness of how the world it purports to understand, indeed, works. Although scholarship around education policy change can demonstrate some noteworthy advances over the past decade, overall, the knowledge base remains thin and piecemeal. Much more research is needed.

Second, policy theory can and should improve policy advocacy and practice. Understanding better how policy systems work, and the conditions under policy systems change, can enhance advocates’ success in affecting change in desired ways – and in forestalling change in undesired ones. Multiple Streams, Punctuated Equilibrium, Advocacy Coalition, and Policy Innovation and Diffusion afford valuable lenses through which to improve the field’s theoretical and applied-policy foundations, at a time when the political, financial, and symbolic stakes for the nation’s K-12 and higher education systems have never been greater.
References


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