



Policy integration as a political process

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Abstract

Scholars and practitioners agree that dealing with complex policy problems poses a challenge of policy integration. In other words, we need to understand how to integrate new problems into existing policies and create linkages between existing policy systems. Up to now, the scientific literature has focused on policy integration predominantly from a policy design perspective. This special issue puts the focus on political aspects of the policy integration process. The papers examine the politics of policy integration from a theoretical and empirical perspective. The results underline the importance of issue salience, political leadership, actor consultation and policy implementation for the political process toward more policy integration.

Introduction

Policy integration has become an important part of the debate in public policy research. The term was first used by Underdal to analyze marine policy (Underdal, 1980). Since the 1990s, various international governmental organizations have employed the term to denote the necessity to combine services from different sectoral policies to make public policies more efficient, for example, regarding labor market integration. Nowadays, scholars use the expression to conceptualize the linkage between new policy problems, such as climate and environmental policy, with existing policy sectors (Jordan & Lenschow, 2010; Adelle & Russel, 2013; Tosun & Lang, 2017).

The academic literature on policy integration has rapidly evolved in recent years. From early discussions about integrating climate and environmental protection policies, research on policy integration has had significant conceptual clarifications, theoretical advances, and methodological improvements (Trein et al., 2021a). Conceptually, scholars have argued that policy integration itself is a process (Candel & Biesbroek, 2016) and have distinguished policy integration from similar concepts like coordination or policy coherence (Cejudo & Michel, 2017). Theoretically, scholars have unveiled the mechanisms

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for integration and disintegration (Biesbroek & Candel, 2020), shed light on the capacities required for policy integration (Domorenok, et al., 2021), and the instruments needed to keep policies integrated over time (Cejudo & Michel, 2021). Empirically, it has been shown that policy integration reforms differ across countries and policy fields (Trein & Ansell, 2021; Trein & Maggetti, 2020), and the focus has extended into new sectors; for instance, countering violence (O'Halloran, 2021), water policy (Milhorance et al., 2021), or innovation policy (Zhang, 2020).

Nevertheless, there is a need for more research to better understand *how the political process of policy integration occurs*. This special issue looks at the process of integration and unveils the political dynamics underlying it.¹ Many of the papers use analytical tools from policy process theories (Weible & Sabatier, 2018) to understand how policy integration takes place. In contrast to the dominant emphasis on a design perspective on policy integration, the articles in this special issue explicitly unpack the political aspects of the process of policy integration. By doing so, this research builds on the premise that the study of policy integration is not isolated from developments in the policy sciences and that the concepts, theories, and frameworks of the policy process are relevant for research on this topic. Specifically, these papers continue recent work focusing on the political dynamics of policy integration, such as the study of political interactions between policy subsystems (e.g., Brandenberger et al., 2022; Metz et al., 2020), or broader institutional aspects of policy integration (Trein & Maggetti, 2020; Trein et al., 2021b).

The special issue opens with a theoretical paper that sets the tone for the empirical analysis, followed by a review of the literature on policy integration in the last decade. The empirical papers highlight policy integration in diverse countries and cover a variety of policy problems. One paper is a comparative analysis of climate policy integration in forty-four countries. The case studies focus on climate policy in Mexico and Switzerland, forest policy in Uruguay, immigration policy in Italy, and railway policy in Switzerland. In the following, we present the main empirical and theoretical lessons from the different articles in this special issue.

Toward a focus on the politics of policy integration

The papers in this special issue contribute to research dealing with the politics of policy integration and take more seriously the political process involved in decision-making processes for cross-cutting policy problems and coordination challenges within and between policy sectors. The article by Cejudo and Trein defines policy integration as a political process reaching from agenda-setting to the evaluation of public policies. By harking back to different theories of the policy process, the authors develop different theoretical propositions about possible pathways to policy integration. These propositions cover agenda-setting, decision-making as well as implementation and evaluation of integrated policies (Cejudo & Trein, 2023). The main contribution of this theoretical paper is that there are different pathways to policy integration. For example, establishing integrated policy strategies as an overall goal follows a different political logic than creating integrative policy

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capacities in implementing organizations. Furthermore, policy integration can be achieved bottom-up, due to the integrated evaluation of sectoral policies at the local level without the presence of an integrated policy program at the national level.

The review article by Trein et al. (2023) takes stock of recent progress in the literature and identifies four new directions for empirical research on policy integration. Notably, the authors suggest that future research on policy integration should follow one of the following directions. There is a need to (1) strike a better balance between conceptual richness and consolidation; (2) Much value could be gained evaluating integrated policies; (3) More attention should be given to actor-oriented and explanatory theories; and (4) There is more potential for work combining qualitative and quantitative methods of data analysis. In particular, the third direction supports the argument by Cejudo and Trein (2023) that we need to better understand the political process of dynamics in policy integration. Following the theoretical papers, the articles in the special issue offer specific insights into this process.

Salience as a driver of integration and disintegration

A first insight from the empirical papers in this special issue is that issue salience (i.e., issue importance) contributes to policy integration. Notably, the paper by Kefeli et al., which analyzes policy change in forestry policy in Uruguay, shows that integrated policy agenda (in this case the integration of environmental concerns into forestry policy) might advance if a dominant advocacy coalition changes its policy beliefs. Furthermore, a minority coalition might gain influence if the (international) salience of the issue increases and there is more political support for their position (Kefeli et al., 2023).

The research by Sarti on policy integration in Italian immigration policy indicates that issue salience and polarization by political parties at the local level impact the implementation of policy integration related to the link between security concerns and immigrant integration into society (Sarti, 2023). The work by Lambelet that examines policy integration of spatial planning policy, railway policy, and agglomeration policy indicates how the salience of a new agenda can result in unintended policy integration. This research shows that the importance of maintaining railway infrastructure contributed to policy integration at the local level (Lambelet, 2023).

Elites: political leadership and MPs

The second lesson for policy integration research from the papers in this special issue concerns how political leadership by elites matters for policy integration. Von Luepke et al. (2022) examine the role of policy design spaces, taking the example of coordinating bodies in climate policy. In an empirical comparison of 119 coordinating bodies from forty-four countries, the authors show that about two-thirds of the coordinating bodies place more emphasis on political aspects than on problem-related aspects of climate policy. Thus, this research emphasizes the importance of understanding and analyzing political aspects of climate policy coordination (von Lüpke et al., 2023).

In their analysis of parliamentarians' contribution to policy integration in Swiss biodiversity policy, Reber et al. demonstrate that the more specialized members of parliament are in a policy field, the less they focus on integrated aspects of public policy. Nevertheless,

the more specialized and developed some policy issues are, the more likely they become to be integrated into a larger number of other policy sectors (Reber et al., 2023). Therefore, actor specialization at the level of parliament has an indirect effect on policy integration.

Political involvement and participatory processes

The bias toward a design perspective in policy integration research has concealed the role of political actors in the process of integration. The third insight would be that a full understanding of the process requires looking at the ideas and interests of all those involved in it, including actors different from policy-makers or political leaders. Two contributions to this special issue pay attention to the role of other types of actors. Solorio et al. (2023) analyze two cases of environmental policy integration in Mexico, where indigenous consultations were required by law. When implementing clean energy infrastructure projects, participation by local indigenous communities is deemed essential to legitimizing them, while responding to the needs of local populations. Yet, they show that the participation of local communities in indigenous consultations exacerbates policy integration challenges. The tension between the logic of environmental policy integration and the politicization involved in indigenous consultations usually ends up neglecting indigenous views of sustainability.

In their analysis of the process of policy integration in the forestry sector in Uruguay, Kefeli et al. (2023) analyze the interaction between two coalitions holding contrasting beliefs about how environmental concerns should be addressed, one calling for better regulation of the forestry sector, and the other calling for more drastic changes. The process of integration occurred not through a smooth development of design and implementation, but through conflict and contestation, shaped by changes in the governmental alliances (the leftist Frente Amplio accelerated the process), and external shocks (a pulp mill dispute with Argentina). By analyzing a decades-long process of integration, they identify how nascent subsystems evolve when policy beliefs change, how coalitions take advantage of external factors, and, in contrast to what happened in the case of Mexico, how participatory processes involving different stakeholders foster integration by making opposition coalitions converging, at least partially, in their beliefs. In the same vein, Lambelet (2023) introduces the concept of “integration entrepreneurs,” actors that manage to integrate policies during the implementation.

Implementation at the local level

A fourth overarching theme is attention to local implementation. As explored in Cejudo and Trein (2023), articles in the special issue highlight the importance of looking at integration pathways beyond the decision-making stage, challenging the traditional top-down sequential approach to understanding policy integration. In his analysis of three Swiss cities’ efforts to address urban sprawl, Lambelet (2023) studies the role of actors that manage to integrate federal policies that were designed in sectoral silos during the implementation stage. The author coins the notion of “integration entrepreneurs” at the local level and finds that policies may be integrated “on the way,” even without a deliberate design of new integrated policies at the national level.

Sarti (2023) also contributes to our understanding of this dimension. His study of local policy implementation (in Bologna and Pesaro) of a national security decree makes explicit the implementation games and the political tensions that shape the integration process. He identifies three factors that play a role in bottom-up integration: the alignment of state and local policy frames, the interests of different policy subsystems, and the way local politicians try to avoid risks. Solorio et al. (2023) also analyze implementation at the local level, where indigenous communities resist or respond to environmental initiatives and take part in participatory initiatives that shape the process of integration.

In this way, these papers show that policy integration is not only a matter of national politicians' interests and central bureaucracies' priorities. As a political process, policy integration remains contested during the implementation stage.

Conclusion

This special issue's contributions shed light on the various ways in which policy integration is a political process by which actors pursue their interests, carry out strategies, and interact with others. The integration process is not linear; it is usually politicized, occurs not only at the design stage, and may take several paths during the implementation. The process becomes more complex as new actors (stakeholders, implementers, and local communities) get involved. More advances in the literature should test some of the new expectations advanced in these papers, as well as expand the analysis into new sectors with new case studies and more comparisons.

Governments will insist on integrating policies as long as public problems remain complex and their resolution necessitates cross-sectoral policy responses. These articles show that, in every integration initiative, policy integration is a political process in which problems and solutions are contested and political actors attempt to influence every step of the process.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have no conflict of interest.

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