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Policy Advice



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Definition

Policy advice can be defined as the production of knowledge that is relevant for a policy problem and the offering of recommendations regarding possible solutions, or the “covering analysis of problems and the proposing of solutions” (Halligan, 1998, p. 1686). Policy advice can be also described as the various activities aimed at sharing information and knowledge about policies and formulating policy recommendation for action. Policy advice is the result of the matching of the demand of knowledge by decision-makers and the supply of suggestions by the diverse actors who produce different flows of information, data, and knowledge about the policy and the politics in a specific subject matter.

Introduction

Policy advice is increasingly important in a complex world where uncertainty and ambiguity dominate policymaking. Nonetheless, policy advice manifests in very different ways, and it involves a variety of actors with diverse roles, motivations, and goals. Policy advice can be defined as the production of knowledge that is relevant for a policy problem and the offering of recommendations regarding possible solutions, or the “covering analysis of problems and the proposing of solutions” (Halligan, 1998, p. 1686). Conceived also as one type of policy work that provides analytical support to the government for making intelligent choices in problem solving (Aubin & Brans, 2020; Veselý, 2017), policy advice involves a wide range of activities, such as “research, data analysis, proposal development, consultation with stakeholders, formulation of advice for decision-makers, guiding policy through governmental and parliamentary processes, and the subsequent evaluation of the outcomes of the policy” (Gregory & Lonti, 2008, p. 838). In this view, policy advice can be also described as a relationship that implies two basic elements – namely the sharing of information and knowledge about policies and the formulation of a recommendation for action. Policy advice is the result of the matching of the demand of knowledge by decision-makers and the supply of suggestions by the diverse actors who produce different flows of information, data, and

knowledge about the policy and the politics in a specific subject matter (see section Policy Cycle). While the demand side of the relationship can take various forms, with decision-makers explicitly or implicitly addressing questions to acquire both ad hoc responses or strategic visions about urgent problems (Manwaring, 2019), the supply side of the advisory relationship is shaped by an increasing variety of suppliers with different goals and capacities (Halligan, 1995). Moreover, the characteristics of the advisory relationships are shaped by the institutional environment and by the level of formalization of the production and the delivery of the advice, ranging from very informal situations to codified processes in different phases of the policymaking (Seymour-Ure, 1987; Halligan, 1995).

Policy Advice in a Systemic View

To make sense of this increasingly complex scenario, the literature in public administration and public policy (see section Public Policy (studies)) proposed to think about policy advice in systemic terms, with the final aim to understand who the advisors are and what are the dynamics of policy advice in different contexts (national or supranational, administrative, or sectoral). Halligan (1995) usefully described the Policy Advisory System (PAS) as “the interlocking set of actors, with unique configurations in each sector and jurisdiction, who provide information, knowledge, and recommendation for action to policy-makers” (as cited in Craft & Howlett, 2012, p. 80). The attention to the systemic dynamics of policy advice adds precision to the understanding of policy advice as a specific activity while allowing to discover how policy advice affects policymaking in different countries (see section forms of government; democracy). In particular, scholars elaborated different models to describe how policy advice can be influential in policymaking. The locational models described the variety of advisors inside and outside the executive with different levels of control by the government, under the assumption that the closest advisors to the Minister were also the more

influential. At the beginning of the 1990s, Halligan described the civil servants and the ministerial departments as the central actors in policy advice in Westminster countries. At the same time, he acknowledged the growing importance of actors internal to government (such as the policy advisers in the Prime Ministers Offices, the temporary policy units, and the political advisers), of Parliamentary actors, and statutory advisory councils. Most importantly, he noted the number of advisors external to government and external to political institutions, with various degrees of autonomy from other social forces: the professional policy consultants, the academics, the non-governmental organizations, the supranational organizations (such as the OECD or the World Bank), and, notably, political parties, interest groups, and think tanks. The importance of external advisors threatened the monopoly of policy advice by the ministerial departments, with the public service progressively experiencing an erosion of policy and analytical capacities and the policy problems becoming more complex (Peters & Barker, 1993). In the practice of policy advice, the rationalist and neo positivists motivation of “speaking truth to politics” shifted toward a more encompassing “sharing truth with multiple actors” attitude, as the governance shifts implied dynamics of both externalization and politicization of policy advice (Craft & Howlett, 2012). For externalization, the literature points to the moving of advisory practices away from the public service and the central government; for politicization, it identifies a change in the political coloring of the advice, with a growing relevance of political advisors acting in different roles of coordination, expertise, communication, and intermediation toward the Minister (Connaughton, 2010). The study of the PAS became more interested in the content of policy advice than on the nature of the advisors (Craft & Howlett, 2012): scholars distinguished between different types of advice, not only a purely substantive and technical, but also more procedural and political, with possibly different short-term/hot/reactive orientation and long-term/cold/strategic advisory contents. At the same time, the second wave of studies on the PAS highlights that the content of the PAS is

shaped by the subsystem dynamics in the different policy sectors, with ideational compatibility being a crucial element for influential advice (Craft & Wilder, 2017). The emphasis on the content of policy advice in governance settings recognizes that it is not only the scientific credibility and the analytical rigor that make the advice influential but also the representativeness of the advisory bodies expressing the advice (Hustedt & Veit, 2017). This seems particularly evident in politico-administrative systems other than Westminster countries, such as Continental European countries, on the one hand, and as the post-Napoleonic countries, on the other. While the latter countries traditionally present less formalized and more dispersed advisory practices at multiple institutional levels, with a central and sometimes intermediary role of the Ministerial cabinets (Hustedt, Kolltveit, & Salomonsen, 2017), the former countries show more institutionalized practices of advice also thanks to the role of advisory councils and commissions composed of stakeholders, interest groups representatives, and academics. In particular, in the Nordic and in neo-corporatist countries (see Corporatism (and Neo-corporatism)), interest groups are traditionally involved in policymaking also through the advisory bodies, that are considered as hybrid advisory bodies where both scientific expertise and non-scientific knowledge and arguments are present (Krick, 2015). Recent studies have emphasized a trend towards the “scientization” of these hybrid advisory bodies, with a growing number of academics and thus the increase in the use of evidence and scientific expertise in the content of their advice (Krick, Christensen, & Holst, 2019; Pattyn, Blum, Fobé, Pekar-Milicevic, & Brans, 2019).

Interest Groups and Think-Tanks in the PAS

These studies restored attention to the role that interest groups and think tanks may play in policy advice. The literature recognizes the blurred boundaries between activities such as providing advice and making advocacy not only using

political pressure but also by the production and diffusion of values and beliefs for the whole society (Vesely, 2017, see section Interest). While it is still disputable whether interest groups are pursuing policy advice explicitly – by seeking the attention of decision-makers over their policy proposal through dossier position papers or public events about relevant policy issues – or implicitly – by providing information and arguments in support of their favorite policy solutions – it is now acknowledged that interest groups may possess unique and strategic knowledge about the policy problems that can be crucial to policy advice. While academics are considered to provide scientific expertise, interest groups are claimed to offer data, information, and also knowledge, which are instrumental to advocate their cause. The specialized expertise of interest groups can reveal a crucial knowledge resource for making intelligent choices, while their representativeness can contribute to the participatory functions of policymaking (Krick et al., 2019). To better understand the relationship between advocacy and policy advice, many scholars have investigated the activities of the think tanks and the independent research institutes, especially in those countries where think tank have a recognized position as actors of the knowledge regime, such as the United States, Germany, and in the Scandinavian countries. Recent studies describe how think tanks increasingly invest in research to gain scientific credibility to a wider audience, potentially becoming key actors in knowledge production and dissemination in many countries (Goyal & Saguin, 2019).

In a nutshell, both the political representativeness and the research capacity of both interest groups and think tanks increasingly matter for policy advice, especially when the internal bureaucracy lacks policy capacity over specific issues (Goyal & Saguin, 2019). In strategic policy making, think tanks and interest groups pursue advocacy through the offering of tailored policy advice in different ways (Fraussen & Halpin, 2017). Both think tanks and interest groups act purposefully and proactively, offering information, data, and knowledge with position papers or studies to attract the attention of policymakers

over the issues of interest for their constituency. Still, interest groups primarily speak to their constituency, whereas think-thanks may speak to a wider audience. Therefore, both research capacities and organizational autonomy from one specific constituency may matter to the delivery of advice by these advocates when acting as advisers (Fraussen & Halpin, 2017). While the quality of data and evidence is considered increasingly important in making the advice of interest groups and think tanks credible (see Junk Science), the impact of the advice is conditioned also by the overall legitimacy these actors bring to the policymaking. The advice of specialized and representative interest groups becomes increasingly important in policymaking as problems become pressing and wicked. In other words, it is not only the supply side of the advice relationship that matters but also the demand side. When the salience of a policy issue makes the knowledge and the participation of the interest groups highly relevant for taking a decision, the role of interest groups in making not only pressure but also advice increases (May, Koski, & Stramp, 2016). At the same time, both interest groups and think tanks can be more influential with their advice if governments lack capacities and are willing to heed that advice (Goyal & Saguin, 2019).

Conclusions

The configurations and the dynamics of the PAS represent an interesting field of research to explore how the flows of information, data, and knowledge about policies feed into policymaking, and to understand the influence of the different advisors based not only on their individual expertise, but also on their interactions with the decision-makers and the other advisers. This field of research remains unexplored both in the empirics and in theory. As for the empirics, we actually lack a description of the configuration of PAS in many countries, while the dynamics of interaction and influence remain unexplored in most policy sectors. As for the theory, a more fine-grained reflection about the relationship between the demand and the supply of advice could illuminate

conditions for salient and effective policy advice. At the same time, a reflection about the motivations and the resources of the different advisors could be fruitful, in order to better understand what drives interest groups to exert advocacy through policy advice and what are the conditions that make their advice influential in policymaking.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Corporatism \(and Neo-corporatism\)](#)
- ▶ [Democracy](#)
- ▶ [Forms of Government](#)
- ▶ [Interest](#)
- ▶ [Junk Science](#)
- ▶ [Policy Cycle](#)
- ▶ [Public Policy \(Studies\)](#)

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