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Understanding the Evolution of Public Policy & Governance

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Abstract

This article critically explores the history and theory of public policy and governance, following the transformation from hierarchical, institution-based models to decentralized, participatory ones. Using qualitative, theory-driven research combining systematic literature review, historical contextualization, and comparative theoretical assessment, the research investigates four core dimensions: (1) governance institutions' response to societal complexity and globalization; (2) the merits and limitations of prevailing theoretical models, such as institutionalism, pluralism, elite theory, rational choice, and incrementalism; (3) globalization implications for transnational governance mechanisms; and (4) evidence-based policymaking's role in advancing accountability. Findings show that contemporary governance increasingly involves hybrid models, blending state power with civil society and market participation, while transnational challenges require adaptive, multi-stakeholder collaboration. Theoretical models, although different, all converge on the trade-off between policymaking stability and innovation. Evidence-based interventions, although revolutionary, need to balance quantitative rigor and contextual awareness to avoid technocratic traps. The analysis emphasizes the necessity for adaptive, participatory governance to confront 21st-century challenges, such as climate change and public health crises. The limitations include the use of secondary sources and regional bias, suggesting avenues for future research into AI-governance, crisis management, and intersectional policymaking. Lastly, the article calls on governance models to prioritize empirical rigor, participatory inclusivity, and global collaboration to achieve democratic values and collective well-being.

Keywords

Evolution of Public Policy, Models of Governance, Institutional Theory, Pluralism, Elite Theory, Rational Choice Theory, Incrementalism, Globalization, Evidence-Based Policymaking, Participatory Governance.

Introduction

Public policy and governance have also undergone considerable transformations over the years because of political, economic, and social forces. Public policy is a line of action on purpose undertaken by governments to serve the needs of society (Anderson, 1975). Governance, on the other hand, is the mechanisms, institutions, and processes by which policies are formulated and executed (Islamy, 2008). Understanding the evolution of public policy and governance is crucial to being able to comprehend policymaking arrangements in the modern period and the roles of various stakeholders in governance. The move from the traditional bureaucratic models to more networked and participatory models has been a feature of modern governance (Brubaker, 1984; Beetham, 1987).

Historically, governance models have been hierarchical with central power determining policy and enforcing it through rigid bureaucratic mechanisms. Historically, governance models were institutionally based, with formal organization and codified law being the main ways of policy determination and enforcement (Dye, 1978). But as societies became more complex and interdependent, the limitations of rigid hierarchical models of governance came to be realized, and more participatory and adaptive models of governance were embraced.

The establishment of democratic government and the increased involvement of civil society in policy-making processes was a significant departure from the past in public policy-making. Pluralism and group theory point to the fact that public policy is influenced by different groups of interests, each of which tries to mold policies according to their interests (Cochran & Malone, 1995). It focuses on the involvement of non-state actors, including advocacy groups, private sector institutions, and international institutions, in policy-making.

Theoretical evolution of public policy analysis has contributed to the sophistication of understanding governance mechanisms. Rational choice theory, for instance, assumes that policymaking decisions are made on a basis of maximization of collective welfare and that policymakers possess perfect information about cost and benefits (Bentham, 1789; Mills, 1848). This has been criticized as oversimplistic in its decision-making assumption and disregard for political and ideological factors. Incrementalism, on the other hand, assumes that policymaking change comes incrementally and with a bias for small changes rather than revolutionary change (Lindblom, 1959). Incrementalism captures the

risk-averse character of policymaking, where past policies are points of reference for future decision-making (Weimer & Vining, 1999).

The development of governance arrangements has also resulted in the formation of hybrid organizational forms, which combine government institutions with market forces and civic society participation (Verhoest et al., 2010). The transformation from hierarchical bureaucracies to decentralized and participatory governance has altered the policymaking environment. Contemporary governance arrangements comprise procedural mechanisms like stakeholder participation, networked governance, and collaborative policymaking, as a departure from top-down decision-making (Islamy, 2008). These developments reflect the enhanced need for adaptive and responsive governance arrangements that are able to cope with the needs of the times.

Globalization has also affected the development of public policy, now needing transnational modes of governance to address issues that cross borders, such as climate change, economic crises, and public health epidemics. Increased interdependence among states has led to the establishment of international regulatory bodies and policy networks that promote cooperation and policy coordination across borders. This has produced styles of governance that prioritize flexibility, resilience, and multi-stakeholder engagement.

Furthermore, policy analysis is crucial in determining the effectiveness of policy. Cost-benefit analysis, decision analysis, and implementation evaluation are techniques that provide systematic means of evaluating policy effects (Parsons, 1997). Public policy analysis applies multi-disciplinary thought to guarantee effective decision-making and effective governance (Howlett & Ramesh, 1995). The combination of theoretical approaches and empirical policy analysis has guaranteed policymaking is evidence-based, thus guaranteeing policies are not only ideologically rational but also pragmatically viable.

Briefly, the development of public policy and governance has been influenced by a variety of theoretical models and organizational processes. From institutional and elite theories to process and rational choice models, the discipline is still dynamic in addressing complex societal issues. The development from traditional hierarchical governance to more participatory, networked, and inclusive forms is a testament to the dynamic nature of policymaking. Knowledge of these theoretical models and implementation processes is necessary in order to examine current governance arrangements and their effects on public administration.

Literature Review

Public policy and governance are mostly based on different theoretical models of the decision-making, implementation, and evaluation processes. Researchers over time have developed frameworks of analysis of governance systems and policymaking processes so that public policy can be analyzed comprehensively in terms of how it emerges in relation to societal needs, political environments, and economic conditions.

Institutionalism has long characterized the study of public policy, envisioning policy making as the activity of formalized government institutions. This perspective centers on the authoritative function of executive, legislative, and judicial institutions in determining policy directions (Anderson, 1975). Institutions, in this view, direct and limit policy choices through formal rules, norms, and legal codes (North, 1990). Traditional institutionalism centers on the stability and predictability of governance arrangements, whereas new institutionalism adds the dimension of path dependency, whereby past policy choices influence future action (Peters, 1999).

The process model conceptualizes public policy as a linear sequence of events: agenda setting, policy making, legitimation, implementation, and evaluation (Dye, 1978). Each event is influenced by a range of actors like elected officials, bureaucrats, interest groups, and the public (Jenkins, 1978). The policymaking cycle, as conceptualized by Sabatier (2007), suggests policies evolve through ongoing feedback loops and iterations. The model provides a methodical way of analyzing how issues arise as policy problems and political deals eventually make policy choices.

Group theory perceives policy making as a result of contending interest groups attempting to shape governance institutions (Cochran & Malone, 1995). Group theory presumes that the government acts as a mediator between different social and economic interests, resulting in a policy that is representative of a balance of power between groups (Lester & Stewart, 2000). Pluralist scholars like Dahl (1961) contend that policy decisions arise from democratic competition between organized interest groups, thereby promising more representation. Pluralism has been accused of the way in which dominant economic elites wield disproportionate influence over policy making, perpetuating inequalities (Domhoff, 2006).

Contrary to pluralist perspectives, elite theory posits that policy choices represent the wishes of a dominant, cohesive ruling elite over the masses (Dye,

1978). Mills (1956) argues that political and economic elites dominate governance institutions, restricting the public's participation in substantive policymaking. Policies in this theory are most likely to represent elite interests, reinforcing social and economic stratification. Kingdon (1984) builds on this theory by analyzing how elite policymakers use agenda-setting processes to sustain their influence, deciding whose issues get policy attention. Rational choice theory regards policy decisions as rational choices made by rational choice-makers that will maximize utility and minimize cost (Bentham, 1789; Mills, 1848). Rational choice theory maintains policymakers must take alternatives into consideration based on cost-benefit analysis that yields the best policy options (Ostrom, 1990). While useful in explaining certain economic policy and regulatory structures, rational choice theory has been faulted for oversimplification of human actions and minimizing the role of ideological and political concerns in decision-making (Green & Shapiro, 1994). Incrementalism, as suggested by Lindblom (1959), suggests that policies evolve incrementally and not by revolutionary means. Decision-makers in this system utilize existing policies as reference points and incrementally make adjustments over time and not radical changes. Weimer and Vining (1999) suggest that incrementalism is an expression of the pragmatism of governance where policymakers aim for functional solutions and not idealized policy transformation. While the method offers stability, critics suggest that it might deter necessary transformative governance reforms (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993).

By means of the evolution of governance structures, hybrid organizational modes consisting of government institutions, market mechanisms and civil society participation have in fact entered into being (Verhoest et al., 2010). Modern governance frameworks have already abandoned the top down decision making approach towards the participation of stakeholders, the networked governance or collaborative policymaking (Islamy, 2008). There is, therefore, a shift of thought from rigid bureaucratic models to decentralized and participatory governance; thus the complexity of new day modification (Rhodes, 1996).

Due to globalization, public policy analysis has come to include the realm of transnational governance mechanisms (Held et al., 1999). The need for international cooperation for issues of and climate change, economic crises, public health emergencies creates global regulatory bodies and policy networks (Keohane & Nye, 2000). Flexibility, resilience, and multi-stakeholder engagement are the core governance models that prevail today, as they need to address the connectedness of the policy issues we are currently presented with (Stone, 2008).

In the context of governance structure assessment, policy analysis is playing an important role in figuring out how effective and impactful are governance structures. Policies have been examined in terms of cost benefit analysis, decision analysis and program evaluation, which provide systematic approaches to evaluating outcomes of policy (Parsons, 1997). However, evidence based policymaking means integrating empirical research into the policies or policymaking process, based on the fact that policies need not to be taken up on the basis of ideological assumption but on evidence (Howlett & Ramesh, 1995). Cairney (2016) also advocates for this approach which lifts up research driven interventions on the grounds of upholding transparency and public accountability in governance.

The literature on public policy and governance encompasses diverse theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches. Range of theories which have explored this includes institutional and elite theory, rational choice and network governance models. It is important to understand these theoretical perspectives for understanding governance structures of the present and the implications for public administration and the public physically as a result of governance structures of the present.

Objectives

The analysis presented in this article is aimed at systematically evaluating evolutionary and theoretical determinants of development of public policy and governance, from its historical to the contemporary drivers and frameworks of the structuring of public policymaking. Specifically, it seeks to:

- (1) Describe how models of governance shifted from hierarchical, institutionally oriented toward networking, decentralized, and participatory ones.
- (2) Evaluate the contributions and limitation of the dominant perspectives, such as institutionalism, pluralism, elite theory, rational choice and incrementalism.
- (3) Consider the impact of globalization in terms of the appearance of transnational mechanisms aimed at resolving issues between borders.
- (4) Study the function of evidence based policy analysis in boosting effectiveness and accountability in state decision making.

The article synthesizes these dimensions to offer an overall conceptualization of how evolving governance structures and theoretical developments are created in order to meet the complexity of a society, diversity of its stakeholder, and the widening interdependencies of the global system. This investigation underscores the status of adaptive, inclusive, and empirically

grounded tactics in addressing present policy challenges and advancing effective public direction.

Methodology

The methodology for this article is qualitative and theory driven to trace the history and theory of public policy and governance. A combination of systematic literature review with historical analysis and comparative theoretical evaluation of governance transformations and underpinning frameworks are used for the research design in order to conduct a comprehensive examination of the transformations and their underpinning frameworks. The study is based in a structured review of peer reviewed academic articles, seminal treatment and policy documents. Databases used to identify Key sources included JSTOR, Google Scholar and Institutional Web repositories with main focus on definitive works (Anderson, 1975; Lindblom, 1959), contemporary studies regarding globalization and Networked governance (Keohane, Nye, 2000; Verhoest et al., 2010) and theoretical paradigms' critiques (Green, Shapiro, 1994 in the case of rational choice theory). The analysis of historical shifts in the model of governance is also contextualized by tracing changes of institutional, sociopolitical and policy changes claimed in academic literature.

The data collection entailed synthesization of theoretical perspectives such as institutionalism, pluralism and elite theory to imagine their historical origins and disciplinary contexts. The insights integrated based on case based were from pass participatory budgeting initiatives and transnational climate agreements to show the practical implication of globalization and participatory Governance. Moreover, published policy critiques such as Cairney (2016), Cairney (2016) and Parsons (1997) were evaluated in regard to their contributions to modern governance with respect to methodologies such as cost-benefit analysis and evidence based policymaking.

In putting the analytical process to use a comparative framework came to be employed linking theoretical perspectives such as contrasting elite theory to pluralist models to disengage power dynamics of policymaking. Theoretical assumptions were subjected to critical evaluation, for instance the assumption of rational choice, that is based on the idea of utility maximization was scrutinized against empirical evidence as well as 'real world' policy outcomes.

However, limitations include the recall and sources of literature which introduces selection bias because other literature is not searched due to scope of existing literature. Qualitative approach places more importance in depth than in

generalizability, i.e. positing theory and historical dynamics. In addition, transnational governance mechanisms were largely analytically examined through existing cases documented and did not necessarily reflect either existing or lesser researched policy networks.

On analysing using some of analytical lenses, the methodology is in tandem with the objectives of the article. The first objective of transformation of governance models is explored through historical analysis and through thematic trends. Comparative and critical appraisal are carried out to evaluate theoretical contributions with limitations (Objective 2). This is demonstrated using case studies and transnational governance literature synthesis (Objective 3) about globalization's impact. Finally, methodological tools are subjected to an evidence-based policy analysis (Objective 4) in terms of their role in stimulating accountability. Put together, this approach guarantees a robust, multifaceted investigation of public policy evolution while simultaneously keeping a theoretical as well as empirical reasoning in order to further comprehend recent governance.

Analysis

The public policy and governance is a complex historical, theoretical, and global dynamic which reflects the evolution of policy and governance. The article aims to deliver the essence of transforming the world, and it systematically addresses the objectives through synthesis of the literature and theoretical frameworks to analyze key transformations, evaluate the dominant paradigm, and evaluate the role played by globalization and evidence based approaches in modern governance.

1. Transformation of Governance Models

It is a shift from hierarchical, institution-based governance to decentralized, participatory governance which corresponds to complexity of society and a desire for inclusion. From the history, governance has been based in rigid, bureaucratic structures (Dye, 1978) and moving only by formal institutions (North, 1990). However, top down models became exposed for the weaknesses that they exhibit in dealing with cross border problems such as climate change (Keohane & Nye, 2000), especially as a result of globalization and technological advancements. However, the governance today comprises of hybrid models, secular state combined with markets' functioning and civil society participation (Verhoest et al., 2010). For example municipal participatory budgeting efforts provide a way for decentralised decision making from local individuals with established oversight from the institution. The transformation reflects a more general shift toward the networked governance (the one based on flexibility, the one involving

participation of multiple stakeholders, and basing relationship on exchange) rather than rigidity (hierarchy) as in traditional governance (Islamy, 2008).

2. Contributions and Limitations of Theoretical Perspectives

The lenses for interpreting policymaking are from the theoretical frameworks. Institutionalism has tended to maintain the constraints but it has avoided agency and patterns of informal power (Peters, 1999). Critiques of pluralism note its omission of elite dominance (Domhoff, 2006), however, the central theme of democratic contestation among interest groups is not excluded by it, (Dahl, 1961). On the contrary, in elite theory, it is shown how economic and political elites, to their benefit, select policies, but at the expense of underestimating grassroots influence (Mills, 1956). Rational choice in economic policymaking is facilitated by its clarity but oversimplifies ideological and cultural factors (Green, & Shapiro, 1994). Pragmatism, however, may entrain the adherence of outmoded policies through incrementalism (Lindblom, 1959). To know the tension between stability and innovation which is present in the governance, these theories all do this explaining the complexity in the making of policies.

3. Globalization's Impact on Governance

Transnational governance mechanisms have resulted as a need for global interdependence. Pandemics, financial crises and other issues transcend national borders and hence require joined responses through organisations such as the World Health Organization or International Monetary Fund (Held et al., 1999). Globalization too increases the roles played by non state agents, as indicated by treaty outcomes in the Paris Accord and indeed all agreements on the climate like it where NGOs and corporations dictate what wins and what loses (Stone, 2008). Yet, though transnational governance is by no means free of difficulties, such as among them, power asymmetries between nations and accountability gaps in supranational institutions, it is the most flexible governance arrangement available to current public authorities. Although multi stakeholder networks are a result of the movement away from resilience and adaptability, they are effective only if the sovereign interests are balanced out with collective action (Keohane & Nye, 2000).

4. Evidence-Based Policy Analysis

By bringing in the approaches based on empirical rigor onto the policymaking scene, the integration of evidence based approaches brings about a paradigm shift in the rationalization of the policymaking. Transparency and accountability are improved by tools such as cost-benefit analysis (Parsons, 1997), randomized policy evaluations, and a series of other tools. New Zealand's example uses data analytics

to improve the allocation of resources (Cairney, 2016). Although such challenges pose challenges to empiricist analysis within governance framework, by inserting empiricists analysis in governance frameworks it bridges the gap between theoretical ideals and practice implementation (Howlett & Ramesh, 1995).

Discussion

The structural ability, theoretical development, and global integration, it is found, drive governance evolution. Models that are decentralized have been developed in order to fill exclusivity gaps in hierarchical systems, however, they present a challenge in terms of avoiding fragmentation from a lack of institutional safeguards. Policymaking analysis is enriched when theoretically pluralism is combined with the critical appraisal to avoid the ideological silos. Globalization's dual role—as a catalyst for cooperation and a source of inequality—highlights the need for equitable transnational frameworks.

This analysis can be limited by relying on only secondary sources and the qualitative nature, which is depth over generalizability. Forthcoming work could deliberate areas that are less studied or new forms of supremacy technology, e.g., AI driven policymaking. In the end, adaptive, inclusive and empirically physical governance is still fundamental to coping with 21st century problems, and the policies need to be heard by social needs and global realities.

Conclusion

And, the evolution of public policy and governance is the product of dynamic shifts of historical condition, theoretical advance, and transformation of the global environment. In the context of the systematic tracing of the trajectory of governance models, the critical evaluation of foundational theories, the evaluation of the impact of globalization and strengthening of the appeal to the use of evidence-based approaches, this article has unfolded. The combination of these dimensions allows for the analysis of the governance in terms of adaptive construct shaped continuously by the societal needs, political imperatives and face of transnational challenges. Finally, this combines the main insights, implications, limitations and future directions on governance evolution and its relevance to the field of public administration.

The Evolution of Governance Models

Governance has historically been grounded in formal institutions and centralized authority who prioritized the stability by focusing on creating a sense of hierarchy in which bureaucrats believed in strong bureaucratic hierarchies. This traditional models was based in institutionalism, took legal frameworks and top down

decision making. But, however, hierarchical structures proved soon to be limiting, as societies became more and more complex and interconnected. Giving also played to the growing global reach and technological possibilities of decentralisation and participation in governance. Most of the modern frameworks have integrated the state institutions, the market mechanisms and civil society participation, with the result of flexibility and cooperativeness. For example, such local stakeholders initiatives in participatory budgeting show that local actors are empowered in the decision making, while transnational climate agreements point out the necessity of multi level cooperation. This speaks to transformation and recognition that the times necessitates making suitable adaptations both to the institutional oversight and the grassroot engagement.

Theoretical Frameworks and Their Implications

The study of governance is furthered by a mix of theoretical perspectives that add various facets of the policymaking dynamics that establish what Schattschneider describes as the realm of politics. However, institutional approach underplays the role of the informal power dynamic and human agency topics. The emphasis of pluralism is on democratic contestation between interest groups, but criticism has shown its failure to conceptualize elite domination in policy formulation. On the other hand, Elite theory is uncovered that economic and political elites have power over government's outcomes but failed to acknowledge the impact of grassroots movements. It explains why people make the choices they do by claiming rational choice can explain their decisions despite simplifying sociocultural and ideological factors that underlie those choices. The incrementalism argument of gradual policy changes is stable but it can keep the outdated systems intact. Together, these theories prove that government is not monolithic or static; it is an aggregation of pragmatic bargains, clashing priorities, and struggles for power. However, policymakers have to work hard to strike the balance between eclectics of theoretical insight and systematic disloyalty to systemic inequalities and the desire to bring about a transformation.

Globalization and Transnational Governance

Governance, which has been redefined by the fact of globalization, is to a great extent cooperative in nature; it extends beyond national borders. The need for coordinated responses to maintain states and markets transnationally in the face of transnational challenges such as pandemics, financial crises and environmental degradation require the existence of institutions such as the World Health Organization and the International Monetary Fund. Nevertheless, globalization

gives the dominant nations and corporations upper hand over the marginalized voices in the supranational forums. Although rather little known, the Paris Climate Accord is the perfect example of how, in this day and age, non-state actors, NGOs, multinational corporations and advocacy groups are at the forefront in forming the rules of the game at a global level. This change highlights the conflict between the national sovereignty and the collective action. To establish effective transnational governance, such participation by the equitable, accountability mechanisms, and resilience to take on interconnected crises are required. Addressing these issues would alleviate the risks of globalization to perpetuate inequalities and alienate the basis of international cooperation.

Evidence-Based Policymaking in Modern Governance

Here, governance shifts in a paradigm from approaches that are not rooted in facts to those that are. Transparency and optimal allocation of resources are improved by means of tools of cost benefit analysis, randomized evaluation, data analytics and others. For instance, New Zealand's "Social Investment Approach" incorporates data driven strategies for the purpose of improving policy outcomes. But it is a danger for a quantitative bias to diminish qualitative knowledge, namely community narratives, and cultural contexts. Data can also be skewed by political biases to end up interpreting it in ways detached from what you would refer to as societal realities. For this gap to be bridged, mixed methods approaches which combine quantitative precision with participatory processes of policy making must be adopted by the policymakers. At the point of contextualizing and democratizing evidence based governance, it can create an accountability regime while at the same time ensuring the policies reflect public values.

Limitations and Future Directions

While comprehensive, the use of the secondary sources limits the analysis to these first two trends. Concentrating on something established all the risk tends to dismiss 'in the buds' paradigms, for example, feminist or post colonizing critiques of governance. Lastly, case studies of transnational cooperation often work to depict documented successes, leaving out extra research areas corresponding to Failure or undocumented the areas past the Global South. For instance, future research can look at those lacunae that had features like grassroots experiments in governance, policymaking at the regional scale, or the morality of AI driven governance. Further investigations in governance adaptability such as in crisis management responses in terms of pandemic of the COVID-19 or climate induced migrants could shed light into governance adaptability. Intersections approaches

that amalgamate race, gender, class, i.e. systems for the making of gender inequality and to addressing systemic inequalities in policymaking, are equally imperative.

Most of the time, we are on an evolutionary path of public policy making and governance; the path of adaptation, contestation, and innovation on which the public policy making and governance journey continues. Different policy structures for governing are required as societies confront 21st century challenges such as technological disruption, ecological collapse, and others, if societies are to be brought in or kept in 21st century net positive trajectories. However, as this article further asserts, decision making on policy is anything but linear, it is a dynamic negotiation of various potential perspectives on how the world should be organized, the influence of theoretical insights, and the realities of the planet. Adaptive frameworks and ethical prosecution of empirical rigors are embraced by policymakers that embrace equitable participation, form of democratic values and societal well-being by crafting resilient strategies. It is only through its ability to change that the future of governance is alive, because it is just not a matter of governance inherent in old documents.

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