New Directions in Public Policy: Theories of Policy Change and Variation Reconsidered

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Theories of policy change and variation reconsidered: a prospectus for the political economy of public policy*

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Abstract

In this paper, the development of field of public policy is represented as three distinct ages of theory building and testing. The first was the classic period of studies of decision-making and rationality; the second was an age of synthesis when theories of decision-making were blended into accounts of agenda setting; and the third—which is starting to take shape—is the age of political economy of public policy drawing on models and methods that have been applied to international relations and comparative politics, which are increasingly addressing public policy. The paper’s argument offers a challenge to public policy scholars to use theory and approaches from political economy and to integrate them with classic and synthetic approaches so that knowledge and theory building is cumulative. The paper contains a review of the development of public policy theory in the 1990s; it provides an account of the current period as one of normal science; and it then reviews some recent work in comparative political economy as examples of the research on public policy taking place.
So far there have been two ages in the study of public policy: the first—the classic period—was when key terms were defined and debates took place about the nature of decision-making and the extent to which full information prevails. It was the time when incrementalism, the rational model, the stages heuristic and sectoral representations of decision-making processes were elaborated and were notably represented in the lens of Allison’s (1971) influential *Essence of Decision*. The second—synthetic—age was of complex accounts of decision-making, which produced the policy advocacy coalition framework, the garbage can/policy window metaphor and the punctuated equilibrium model—the currency of many modern policy scholars. In these frameworks of analysis, considerations about the nature of decision-making were blended into accounts of the influence of ideas and the processes of agenda-setting.

It is not clear at present whether the scholarly equilibrium of produced by these works of synthesis is about to weaken and to give way to third age of public policy scholarship. The progress of normal science suggests such a development whereby new empirical studies increasingly yield less novel findings; then there is the inevitable turning of the wheel as scholarship that was groundbreaking in the 1990s has itself become more routine, prompting the search for new models and approaches. The challenge is about how to build on the existing approaches and to ensure the knowledge and theory building is cumulative. Just as synthetic studies integrated and built on the foundational works in the field, so future studies could draw on the insights of studies in public policy from the 1990s.

In this paper, the argument is put forward that innovative work is happening in public policy in a cognate sub-discipline. Even though the language and models
are very different to those used in the first two ages, they have the same dependent variables that policy scholars use—that is policy outputs and outcomes that vary across space and time. In the burgeoning arena of comparative political economy, scholars are producing a spate of new works on public policy, and it is striking that they do not usually cite classic works from the first two ages. The argument of this paper is that public policy scholars could embrace and take advantage of this new paradigm because of the level of innovation that is taking place currently. The time has how come for a reconstruction of public policy studies associated with the application of testable theories of policy change and variation, and the use of models that attribute causal relationships rather than leaving them in a black box of multiple influences. In this way, work from comparative political economy can help overcome the key weakness of mainstream public policy studies where it is hard to test the core claims because the key terms often end up as descriptions or metaphors of policy changes rather than explanations of them. Such a field could be called the political economy of public policy.

To make this argument, the paper first reviews the classic works in public policy. Second, it seeks to explain the direction in which policy studies took in the mid-1990s, explaining the reasons why such multi-causal frameworks were adopted and why they were thought to be useful. The next section of the essay is an examination of the use of such approaches in the 1990s and 2000s, reflecting on the relative lack of innovation in public policy in recent years wherein scholars have largely worked within existing frameworks and tested extensions of existing studies. The argument in the paper is that such frameworks were able to represent the world in certain ways
that yielded a fruitful research programme, but eventually the research started to exhaust the range of testable implications from these theories. In the final part of the paper, new theories of policy change and variation are reviewed. In the conclusion, it is argued that models from comparative political economy could be integrated into mainstream public policy studies.

**The First Age: the Classic Works**

The key problem in public policy is to explain public decision-making: why do we get the policies we do and how to political actors seek to influence them. There are other issues in public policy, such as the evaluation of public policies, how to improve decision-making, or to understand the operation and management of bureaucracy; but for policy scholars explaining policy choices is the key problem to resolve. This question influenced the foundational studies in the field, such as work by Herbert Simon (Simon, 1955, 1997b,a), which stressed the limited range of decision-making choices that are considered and offered an account of bounded rationality. Complementary work developed the incrementalist model of decision-making whereby decision-making process reflects a limited search for options, constrained by cognitions and groups from within the bureaucracy (Lindblom, 1959; Braybrooke and Lindblom, 1963). These studies influenced some of the most important empirical work in the field, such as work on budgeting (Wildavsky, 1975).

Such foundational work, based on observing slow changes and standard operating procedures, influenced studies of decision-making in policy sectors. It appears in the
sub government literature, that of iron triangles (Ripley and Franklin, 1975, 1976), and in accounts of policy-making and democracy (Lowi, 1969). The literature on policy communities built on classic studies by examining interrelationships between key actors, usually designed to limit options in policy-making or policy communities (Richardson and Jordan, 1979), though sometimes with more options and fluidity, as with the literature on policy networks (Heclo, 1978; Marsh and Rhodes, 1992). Even literature on elites reproduced this stable account of decision-making Schattschneider (1960, 1935) by assuming relative stability in decision-making.

The classic book in the classic period is—as referred to in the introduction—is Alison’s (1999) with its schematic approach. Although the book discusses the rational model, it is clear the emphasis of this book lies with the bureaucratic and organisational process model of limited rational decision-making, and the account of rational decision-making is often thought to be too simple (Bendor and Hammond, 1992). And it is at the end of the classic period in the 1980s that we see public policy studies and rational actor accounts parting company, something that grows stronger in the second age, especially as this is the time that formal models of Congress and their testing start to be published (For example, Epstein and O'Halloran, 1999), though there are ways of integrating rational actor models into the study of public policy (John, 1998, 2012). Writers in the 1990s took a different tack: they used the classic studies as the baseline, but refined them integrating them into a study of agenda setting.
The Second Age: Synthetic Approaches in Public Policy

The underlying theme of much work in public policy in the 1990s is that change and variation emerges from the interaction of multiple factors, in particular from the importance of ideas in public policy, which had become more prominent in series of publications in the 1980s (e.g. Stone, 1989; Majone, 1989). Writers become more alert to the way in the policy agenda is constituted by new ideas and where shifts in policy can happen rapidly as a result.

Sabatier’s framework is instructive in this respect. He—and Jenkins-Smith—synthesized many insights from classic accounts of public policy with accounts of ideas in policy formation (Sabatier, 1987, 1988; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993). In the framework the advocacy coalition is an alliance of bodies holding the same ideas and interests for the purpose of arguing against other coalitions within the same policy sector. Coalitions include more participants than the traditional whirlpool or triangle of decision makers. There are journalists, policy analysts and researchers as well as the more familiar bureaucrats, politicians and interest-group representatives. They all play a role in the dissemination of ideas. The idea is that normally between two and four competing policy advocacy coalitions, each with its own ideas about policy content, compete for dominance in a subsystem. Knowledge plays a crucial role because the coalition is a reflection of ideas and interests about a set of policy issues. They utilise Hofferbert’s funnel model of policy innovation (Hofferbert, 1974), whereby changes in economy and society feed into public opinion. This in turn affects
the policy positions of political parties and interest groups, and thence the ideas and preferences of policy makers. Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith pioneered research methods to map the structure of coalitions over time. For example, Sabatier and Brasher (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993) code the policy actors in land use and water quality at Lake Tahoe Basin. Since the publication of the book, it has launched an extensive research programme tracking the existence of coalitions, using either quantitative and qualitative data (For example, Sotirov and Memmler, 2011), such as the European Union level (Rozbicka, 2013), and across studies of public policy generally (for a review, see Weible, Sabatier and McQueen, 2009)

Kingdon’s book, *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies* (1984), also examines the political system as a whole, and embraces the relative importance of individual agents, ideas, institutions and external processes in it. Kingdon’s starting point is the folk wisdom that people in the policy process do not know where policy ideas come from. Attempts to trace an idea back in history usually end up in an infinite regress of causes. There is often no beginning. Policy solutions seem to come from anywhere; they emerge because the time for an idea has come and they often disappear as rapidly. Kingdon regards policy-formation as the result of a flow of three sets of processes or streams: problems, policies and politics. Problems are public matters requiring attention, such as fiscal crises or environmental degradation, that may or may not get defined as important or not. Policies are proposals for change based on the accumulation of knowledge and development of interest among the specialists in a policy sector. Certain highly motivated people, the policy entrepreneurs, propose solutions to policy problems. Policy entrepreneurs mobilise opinion and institutions,
and they try to ensure the idea does not fall off the agenda. They can be politicians, bureaucrats, analysts, consultants, journalists or academics. Third, political processes, such as election results and swings in the popular mood, influence how the media and other opinion formers define public problems and evaluate the potential solutions.

He argues that agendas are not an automatic reflection of the power of the participants in the policy process. Policy formation is based as much on luck and chance as on intention. While incrementalism summarises some aspects of the process, the contingency of the interactions between the streams can cause discontinuity or sudden agenda change. An idea often catches on and moves rapidly onto the political agenda, especially when there is an opportunity. Kingdon’s policy window. This is an opportunity, such as a new policy problem or a new administration in power, for policy advocates to press home their ideas. Kingdon deploys a version of the garbage can model of organisational choice (Cohen, March and Olsen, 1972) to understand the way the streams join together. The model examines how decision makers try to move or dump problems in an organisation. What happens is that problems emerge to engage some of the people who take decisions. On the next occasion the policy is discussed, these decision makers move on to try to solve other problems. But, in the meantime, the original decision creates new problems. The policy streams approach was a major step forward in understanding policy formation. The book is a convincing explanation of why policy changes, though it has less to say about why policy varies, and it is no surprise to see the book inspire many other treatments (for example, Zahariadis, 2003), and that it is cited in many textbooks and general
works on policy.

Similar, in some respects, to the policy streams approach is Baumgartner and Jones’s (2009) punctuated equilibrium model of policy change set out in their book *Agendas and Instability in American Politics* (2005) first published in 1993). Their starting point is the presence of both change and stability in policy making in the USA. Whereas, on the one hand, traditional accounts of policy making emphasise the stability of policy making in elite policy communities, on the other, writers—like Kingdon—stress continual change and adaptation. Instead, Baumgartner and Jones are interested in the presence of both characteristics in policy formation over time. In a policy sector there are long periods of stability followed by periods of public interest, media scrutiny and public action.

Baumgartner and Jones are particularly interested in the rapidity of the change between periods of partial equilibrium and of issue-expansion, hence the idea that stable periods of policy making are punctuated by policy activism. It is the explanation of the shift in the rates of change in policy-making subsystems that is the essence of how policies change and vary: 'The forces that create stability during some periods are the same that combine during critical periods to force dramatic and long-lasting changes during other periods’ (1993: 237). Their research task is to explain policy change, stability and variation. By focusing on agendas, Baumgartner and Jones explore how ideas become prominent and institutionalised in a policy system. Institutions do not just exist in a vacuum without a grounding in ideas about policy. Likewise, institutions and the influence of power elites ensure that a particular policy can remain in place, supported by the beliefs of other members of the
elites in the political system, favourable reports in the media and a supportive public opinion. In this case, policy changes only incrementally. Yet, given favourable conditions, agendas can shift very rapidly, upsetting the consensus of established ideas. New agendas feed into policy outputs, and these sets of ideas can introduce new decision makers and groups into the political system. In time these actors shift the rules about decision making that institutionalise them into the policy process. Thus changing agendas in the political system create new monopolies which other agendas and groups challenge at a later date with a different set of policy proposals.

The punctuated equilibrium model connects together in a dynamic framework those various elements of decision-making. Institutions are important because they freeze a set of political participants into the policy process and exclude others. Institutions help ensure that problems are defined in a particular manner and not in another. They set the agenda. Ideas, however, are vital. They are the building blocks of agendas. Baumgartner and Jones argue that policy makers and the institutional framework shape the way policy problems are defined. Policy makers interpret a problem in the context of an agenda. Later work by Baumgartner and Jones elaborate the theoretical framework and offer models for tests of functioned equilibrium (Jones and Baumgarner, 2007), which have been taken up by scholars in a range of jurisdictions and time periods (for example, Robinson et al., 2007; Mortensen, 2005; Baumgartner et al., 2006; John and Jennings, 2010).

These elaborations of familiar frameworks used by policy scholars are designed to show the similarities with these approaches. They are concerned to explain policy change just as much as policy stability, hence are interested in the way in which ex-
isting routines and interests are broken down in particular periods of change. They are pre-occupied with the influence of ideas as much as institutions and interests. In expanding the range of causal inferences in public policy, they offer an account of the complex interactions between these factors. They often use a concept to represent these influence, such as the advocacy coalition, policy window or punctuated equilibrium. These terms are simplifications, or even metaphors, for these complex policies. In spite of this approach, these studies have generated rich empirical programmes of work, whether to test for the stably of coalitions over time, case studies of the garbage can, or tests of punctuated equilibrium. The problem is that they tend to use metaphors rather than offer testable theories. It is true that hypotheses can be tested such as between degrees of leptokurtosis between venues in the punctuated equilibrium model and the impact of shocks on the policy advocacy coalitions, but too many studies are descriptive that is confirmed the world of the model in empirical data, or using metaphors to account for why policy changes which is characteristics of policy windows. In seeking to present the structure of decision-making whether coalition-based, equilibrium or through entrepreneurs, these theories are in danger of describing the effects of policy change rather than the causes of it.

The Current State of Policy Studies

Such has been the success of the three approaches highlighted above that they now dominate the study of public policy. For example, Kingdon’s (1984) book has received 9,883 citations in Google Scholar. Baumgartner and Jones (1993) gets 3,711
and Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993) has 2,315. Such a preponderance of citations generates a large number of case studies and research programmes. Indeed the project Comparative Policy Agendas arose from the Baumgartner and Jones’s work, and itself is generating further studies and tests of the framework.

The main innovations from this line of work is greater depth of comparative understanding of the impact of institutions on policy choices. However, there have been few other theoretical advances since the 1990s. For policy scholars, new entrants have been happy to work with these frameworks, partly because of their ubiquity and they do not need that much adjustment to make them work in different contexts. They provide a useful set of labels and concepts to motivate different kinds of study, such as data collection and analysis, or case studies. In the 2nd edition of Analyzing Public Policy, John (2012) found that not much had changed in his survey in the first edition in 1998: ‘The surprise is that, bar the large expansion of interest in interpretative policy analysis, there have been relatively few innovations in the theory of public policy since 1998, or at least not as many as there were in the early 1990s’. Petridou’s (2014) survey of recent work in public policy confirms this stable state of play.

This is not to mean that there have not been innovations, such the rise of behavioural public policy (for a review see Peters, 2013), but that there have been no new theories of policy change or variation, which is core to the subject. Given how fast certain sections of political science are moving, this relative stasis is not something to be satisfied with, especially as the three frameworks have as their origins debates that come from the first age of public policy back in the 1950s and 1960s.
The problem is that topics in public policy are appearing in current debates in political economy, but that they do not refer to work done by mainstream public policy scholars. The next section is going to outline some of this recent work and to suggest that it has some novel accounts of public policy questions in spite of not using the language and concepts from the first two ages of public policy.

**Comparative Political Economy**

One of the most significant intellectual changes of recent years has been the revival of interest in political economy, especially with a comparative range. Economists have always been interested in politics, and the public choice revolution from the 1950s laid the foundations for the economic analysis of institutions. However, as Besley (2007) points out, articles on political economy did not appear in the top economic journals until recently. In empirical analysis economists have made the economy the dependent variable, and examined how politics affect it, for example the impact of the size of the public sector on economic growth. The newer field of political economy has an interest in seeing politics and policy as the dependent variable, the object of explanation, so that the economy may be modelled into political choices as well as vice versa (For one of the most well known examples of this approach, see Acemoglu and Robinson, 2006). This is a wider-ranging subject with interest in the impact of constitutions, voting in legislatures, representation, term limits—to name just a few topics. The interest from economics has stimulated political scientists either to model the relationships between key variables of interest, such as
parties, voters, legislators, institutions and outcomes, or at least to heighten their interest in these issues. What characterises this line of work is the attention to formal models, or at least care in specifying the causal relationships in advance, which are then implemented in statistical designs that are attentive to need to make a causal inference. In economics, and in political science, there has been a revival in experimentation as a desired form of research, not just by randomised controlled trials, but in quasi-experiments or natural experiments that use the experimental design and methods to make inferences where the context satisfies the ‘as if random’ conditions (Dunning, 2012). Hence the expansion of methods such as difference-in-differences, regression discontinuity design, interrupted time series and propensity score matching as well as the analysis of randomised controlled trials (Angrist and Pischke, 2008).

The field of comparative political economy models relationships between politicians and economic power holders, which results in policy choices. There is a complicated pattern of bargaining between these two actors, and between other power holders such as bureaucrats. Of particular interest is a line of work which looks at the extent to which policy making is constrained by the bargaining between capital and labour. The key to the analysis is to see how the universal constraints imposed by markets and capital interact with contexts and institutions to produce different kinds of outcomes. Franzese (2002) summarises this approach in his book on macroeconomic policy:

similar policy-making challenges and universal tensions in the allocations of political resources in liberal market democracies induce different
policies and outcomes because the domestic and international political-economic institutions, interest structures, and conditions within public and private actors operate and to which they respond to over time each factor interacts with the rest in shaping the incentives of strategic political-economic actors (2002: xviii).

In this way comparative political economy is particularly focused on the impact of institutions upon the relationship between the economics and policy. Beramendi and Rueda (2007), for example, argue that the bargains between labour and the state, in the extent of corporatist arrangements, determine policy. They argue counter-intuitively that governments in corporatist countries have a weaker relationship to the market. This is because unions pre-commit to wage moderation and social peace in return for capital investment: Because of capitals mobility and the credibility of its exit threats to finance the welfare state, the state is structurally dependent on it and unions must accept bearing the lions share of the cost of the welfare state (2007: 627). This means that states find it very hard to follow their preference for consumption taxes. In order to fund the welfare state more, they have to tax labour all the more.

The link between economics and politics, and thence to policy, emerges in Cusack, Iversen and Soskice’s work (Soskice and Iversen, 1998; Cusack, Iversen and Soskice, 2010; Iversen and Soskice, 2010). Here the puzzle is the choice of institutional arrangement, the electoral system. Here the choice of proportional representation helps ensure more consensual policies on labour relations and training, and more egalitarian policies, but the choice of system is generated by the type of economy and employee
relations in each country that encouraged it. Countries with a high degree of coordination, chose more proportional systems which generated different policy outcomes from countries with less cooperative industrial relations. Thus the structure of political parties—and hence policies—is dependent on the economic structure. Electoral systems feature in Hicks (2015) who studies their impact on the concentration of left wing votes, and shows that support for privatisation policies may not be restricted in partisan terms.

There a line of work in comparative political economy that uses statistical evidence to suggest that nation-states, and parties from the left when they are in power, can develop autonomous polices, such as social welfare, independent of the international market. Boix (2003) argues that parties of the left and right follow distinctive policies, and that international trade competition does not impede these choices. Garrett (1998) argues that globalisation does have an impact, but it causes left governments to invest more in the welfare state in order to counter the economic insecurity caused by globalisation. Swank (2002) argues that institutions and political interests maintain their influence and ensure some autonomy over polices. Countries with strong welfare states can maintain them, and the effects of capital mobility are partial, affecting the smaller liberal welfare states rather than the larger ones that have a corporatist style of government. The argument is not that globalisation does not exist, but that its effect is partial and mediated by political institutions, and this argument transports the approach into a form of institutionalism. Moreover, Iversen and Cusack (2000) argue that domestically-driven de-industrialisation causes welfare expansion, showing no impact of globalisation. Undermining Garrett’s finding
that globalisation stimulates public spending, they find no relationship between a country's openness to trade and any measures of volatility.

There is a growing literature on whether policies have converged as a result of globalisation, testing the race-to-the-bottom argument. One test is that countries will not be able to tax mobile capital because it can jump ship, but a line of tests in the comparative political economy literature has found that this does not happen - countries carry on taxing (see review and test in Plumper, Troeger and Winner (2008)). What constrains policy makers is a set of national factors, such as the size of the country, norms about fairness and budget constraints. The context sets the constraints on the extent of tax competition that takes place. Hays (2003) finds that there is more convergence in the middle, with the type of political institutions being important. There is no evidence for a race to the bottom in other policy fields, such as labour regulation and environmental standards. The extent to which policies are becoming more similar is questionable with some studies suggesting convergence, others not (see Pl¨umper and Schneider, 2009). Franzese and Hays (2008) find some evidence for interdependence for tax policy, but none for labour taxes.

Nation-states remain the powerful actors in determining international public policy, such as regulation standards (Drezner, 2007). There is a wider commentary that suggests that political action—particularly at the international level—can counter the effects of globalisation. Even writers on globalisation claim that policy makers are not powerless in the face of global pressures and that they can introduce and implement some of their preferred policies. This is a common feature of theorising where adherents of a perspective make their account more realistic by adding in fea-
tures that address some common objections. This can be done in a model, such as Plumper, Troeger and Winner (2008), or simply, as in Ha (2008) paper that uses an institutional veto players model to examine the impact of globalisation on welfare spending, by arguing that the number of veto players limited the ability of government to put these reforms into effect. This, in turn, links to Hays’s (2003) finding about capital taxation.

Another line of work explores the relationship between economics and politics in sectors. Ansell (2014) discusses the impact of valuation in housing on preferences, using the housing crash as a source of evidence. Whereas in a period of high house prices it is possible that homeowners will become less supportive of social insurance policies because they see their houses as investments. This provides an important link between the operation of markets and the structuring of political choices. Similar is (Rehm, 2011) who argues that public opinion in relationship to unemployment benefits is structured by the extent of inequality rather than being embedded preferences. Ansell’s larger project (Ansell and Lindvall, 2013; Ansell, 2010; Ansell and Samuels, 2015) is about how policy outcomes are structured by past partisan conflicts and competition between elites. More aligned to traditional work on interest groups and political power is Gilens and Page (2014) who is concerned with which kind of public has most influence on policy outcomes. In fact, one way to look at comparative political economy is to see it as a revival of interest in the structural determinants of politics, but with new methods and theories.

These examples are just a few of the newer studies that are starting to emerge using models from political economy and advanced statistical methods. The out-
come variable is often the same as the ones that public policy scholars use, that is policy variation over time and place, but the mode of analysis and set of theories are different. In this way, accepted wisdoms from the literature can be tested and advances in theory made.

Comparative political economy can also be criticised too. It has tended to be focused on a narrow range of questions that have come from the pre-occupations of the founders, in particular examining the role of the state, private capital and trades unions, which are important topics but come from concerns of the 1960s and 1970s, whereas currently there are a large range of influences on policy choices and fragmentation of interests, an insight of second policy studies. The other issue is that in spite of good methods being used in these largely quantitative studies they have not been infused by causal methods and natural experiments as is now common in large parts of economics and political science. With the limitations, it suggests there is new field—the political economy of public policy—that could open up where models would be prominent but would be seeking to explain a wider variety of outcomes and processes than in contemporary political economy.

**Conclusion: The third age of public policy**

The argument of this paper is simple and may not prove to be controversial. Public policy studies has proceeded along a path started by its founders who speculated on the reasons why policy varies in different places and at various times. Early writers drew on theories of decision-making to build up a set of explanations, whether based
on stages of the policy process driven by different external causes, or constraints on decision-making. What public policy scholars did in the 1990s was to extend these ideas and synthesise them adding in the salience of competing ideas in the policy process. The three frameworks that are closely linked are policy windows/the garbage can, policy advocacy coalitions and the punctuated equilibrium model. They have been successful and will continue to be so, but the danger is that they have become insulated from developments in other academic arenas. They tend to suffer from a familiar problem of using description rather than explanation to understand change in a complex decision-making. In contrast, comparative political economy is a fast moving sub-discipline operating between economics and political science, which has expanded in recent years, is engaging with debates in international relations and comparative politics, and is now examining policy outputs and outcomes as explanatory variables. The paper gives some examples of recent work examining tax competition and policy diffusion, for example. These works tend not to refer to the classic works in public policy.

It may be the case that a form of sorting will occur with scholars who are more interested in models and methods not engaging with the mainstream approaches in the study of public policy, and public policy scholars making few citations to these new works. But public policy has always been an integrative and synthetic sub-discipline, and it is possible to envisage that new studies of the policy process influenced by comparative political economy can appear alongside and linked to the synthetic frameworks discussed above, perhaps adding to them micro-foundations and improved empirical tests. Such concerns would characterise the political economy
of public policy.

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