

What and When? Description as a Method in the Policy Process Literature

Descriptive Research Conference Memo

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Often, one of the first lessons in an empirical research methods class is that there are two types of questions: “what” questions and “why” questions. “What” questions seek to understand facts regarding the phenomenon in question, while “why” questions try to untangle the forces that result in those facts. Although a great deal of modern political science research focuses on those “why” questions, as scholars try to untangle the causal mechanisms, “what” questions form the foundation of social science. Description contributes greatly to the scientific understanding of social scientific phenomenon, as it allows scholars to establish a common ground, with an emphasis on understanding what is directly observed, particularly in the case of new quantitative studies in areas of scholarship that have long been studied through qualitative methods. Studies of public policy rely on description as a methodology to untangle the dynamics of attention to the policy process, in large part because description allows us to understand when change occurs. In this memo, I will talk about the way description is used in theories of the policy process, generally, before diving into one vein of research, punctuated equilibrium theory and the information processing perspective, to talk in more depth about how description has opened doors for significant understanding and growth. Finally, I will highlight a case, U.S. presidential decision making, where description is allowing us to gain a new understanding of the institution.

Theories of the Policy Process

There are a wide range of theoretical frameworks that fall under the umbrella of the study of policy processes, which include Advocacy Coalition Framework, Multiple Streams, Institutional Analysis and Development, Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET), Ecology of Games Framework. What they all have in common is a desire to understand in an empirical,

positivist way, how the many complex actors and forces that make up the policy-making process operate (Sabatier 2014). Each of these frameworks has a rich intellectual tradition that has generated a great deal of research about how decisionmakers and institutions work together to make policy.

While all of these theories are interested in question of “how” and “why,” Samuel Workman and Christopher M. Weible, in the introduction to their new book on methods of the policy process, make a special discussion of descriptive versus causal inference in policy process research (2022). They highlight how methods of description inference, on their own, have allowed policy scholars to make significant strides in understanding the policy process, in some cases producing findings that were a goal in and of themselves and in other cases providing the foundation for further work in causal inference (Ibid). For example, in the Advocacy Coalition Framework, extensive work has gone in to theoretically developing key concepts, such as political beliefs (Jenkins-Smith et al. 2014). Beliefs are a central concept to the scholarship which means that considerable work has be done to define (Jenkins-Smith, St. Clair, and Woods 1991), classify, and measure the phenomenon (Sabatier and Jenkin-Smith 1993; Sabatier 1998; Sabatier and Jenkin-Smith 1999). This measurement has been done both through observation of unsolicited statements and written messages and through solicited self-reports, but either way, the description of the data observed feed significantly into the refinement of the theory (Henry et al. 2022). The goals of descriptive methods differ across the various frameworks, with description as the end goal in some, and as a prerequisite for causal inference in others (Workman and Weible 2022), but one framework in which methods of description provide significant leverage is the Punctuated Equilibrium Theory and the broader information processing perspective.

Punctuated Equilibrium and the Information Processing Perspective

In 1993, Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones wrote *Agendas and Instability in American Politics* which sought to understand policy subsystems and how changes to those involved in the subsystems produced significant changes in the associated policy areas. Much of their research involved looking at time series of attention with the theoretical assumption that

changes in attention would be largely normally distributed, as change was previously thought to be the product of incrementalism (Wildavsky 1964; Jones and Baumgartner 2012). What they found, by taking the task of describing the distribution of changes seriously is that the dynamics of policy change are anything but normal, instead characterized by periods of incremental shifts, interspersed with periods of significant large-scale shifts in attention, that couldn't be explained by the existing theories (Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Jones, Sulkin, and Larsen 2003; Baumgartner et al. 2009).

This pattern, that what governments do is characterized by periods of small changes, interspersed with big punctuations in attention, was first observed in the context of the United States. However, thanks to the work of the Comparative Agendas Project community, it has been observed across a wide and increasing range of national and sub-national governments (see Baumgartner, Bruenig, and Grossman 2019; Baumgartner et al. 2009). Despite the different types of governments, the different policy histories, and the different paths of political development, research focusing on describing what governments pay attention to revealed that there is a fundamental common pattern (Jones et al. 2009). This descriptive research has allowed policy process scholars to better understand the nature of policy decision making and home in on the human organizational and psychological dynamics that explain why we see these common patterns. Namely, the findings of the punctuated equilibrium theory have led to a rich discourse on information processing, which identifies the ways that people search for and assimilate information to understand how people decide to pay attention to policy (Jones 2001; Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Baumgartner and Jones 2015). The Comparative Agendas community and the work on Punctuated Equilibrium theory have centered description in the effort to understand the operations of a wide range of policy areas and political institutions (see Baumgartner, Jones, and Mortensen 2014 for a further review and exploration of the literature in PET).

The Presidency as a Case of Description

One specific application of description as a generative research method is in the study of the U.S. president as a policy actor. U.S. presidents are significant political and policy actors

whose involvement in a policy area can represent a significant disruption to the established decision-making process (Gais, Peterson, and Walker 1984). A great deal of the study of the presidency has used case-study methods, highlighting the small number of presidents in U.S. history, particularly during the modern era (King 1993), focusing instead on one policy area or one type of presidential action (Light 1999; Whitford and Yates 2009; Edwards 2006; Eshbaugh-Soha 2010; Cooper 2002; Gitterman 2017). These studies do a good job at examining the piece of the puzzle that they are exploring, however, we are not able to understand the full scope of what the president does and the choices that the president makes from these separate pieces. Only when we look at a number of different tools together, using the same methods and theoretical framework, can we begin to understand how the pieces together.

My work, which utilizes a dataset of 10 types of presidential activity, categorized by 20 policy areas spanning the breadth of the policy agenda over 40 years, offers us a chance to understand the underlying dynamics of presidential attention. This requires asking question some of those fundamental “what” questions relating to presidential attention. Description as a social scientific method allows me to answer questions like: what policy areas command the president’s attention? How does that attention change over time? Are some tools used more than others? What are the dynamics that characterize presidential attention?

By using descriptive methods, we have already demonstrated empirically that the distribution of presidential agendas contained within different tools are meaningfully different, even when the tools are structurally very similar, such as the State of the Union address and the presidential budget message (Russell and Eissler 2022). The process of answering questions about the presidency using descriptive methods has the potential to re-shape our understanding of the presidency as an institution, as our current understanding is based largely on snapshots of data, qualitative impressions, and assumptions.

Conclusion

Descriptive methods of research are a key component of all research, but the descriptive exploration of phenomenon is often undervalued, as the trend of publishing causal inference

work dominates political science disciplines. Workman and Weible note this deficiency in their work on the methods of the policy process:

To read academic policy journals is to understand that the step of descriptive inference is often assumed away or buried beneath the burden of issuing a model and making a causal argument. In our view, the discipline does not take descriptive inference seriously enough” (Workman and Weible 2022, 14).

Yet, this “assuming away” does not only occur in policy journals. A great deal of political science would benefit from taking description seriously. Any new exploration of a social phenomenon with quantitative data requires extensive descriptive work. By recognizing and valuing what we can learn from using description as an empirical research method, we are able to better establish facts and identify patterns worthy of deeper exploration within a phenomenon, an often-overlooked stage in the larger goal of explaining why the political world operates the way that it does.

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