

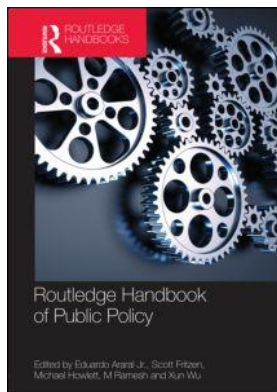
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Eduardo Araral, Scott Fritzen, Michael Howlett, M Ramesh, Xun Wu

### **Comparative approaches to the study of public policy-making**

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Sophie Schmitt

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# Comparative approaches to the study of public policy-making

Sophie Schmitt

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## Introduction: what is comparative public policy analysis?

Scholars of comparative public policy are interested in systematically studying public policies and their origins in order to gain a better understanding of the causes, factors and institutional or actor constellations that bring about different kinds of policy decisions. They try to advance our understanding of the processes and determinants of public policy-making by comparing the situations and contexts that lead policy-makers to agree on similar or diverging policies. In this vein, these analyses include comparisons over time and/or over units (comparing, for example, national, state or local governments). In a nutshell, comparative policy researchers seek to explain why and under what conditions policy-makers agree on what policies (see, for example, Lerner and Lasswell 1951; Windhoff-Héritier 1987; Howlett and Ramesh 2003). In an oft-cited definition, Dye describes public policy as “whatever governments choose to do or not to do” (1976: 1). A review of a number of subdisciplines of comparative public policy analysis shows that scholars of different research traditions employ different strategies in order to probe this inclusive and vast definition of “public policy” in both theoretical and empirical respects. While policy science covers a broad field that includes analyses of actors, institutions, instruments, programs, decision-making processes, policy implementation or evaluation from various theoretical perspectives (cf. Mayntz 1983; Howlett and Ramesh 2003), the analytical focus of the literature on comparative policy analysis is on the policy decisions themselves and the explanatory factors.

Research on comparative policy-making can be classified into three groups according to its analytical focus. First, while a number of approaches aim to compare *public policies* as such, other subdisciplines address the *patterns* of policy-making or the decision-making *processes* from a comparative perspective. In this context, the first category covers the entire policy change literature, which is rather fragmented with regard to the different approaches for conceptualizing and defining the subject of study (public policy).

Second, the patterns of policy-making are at the focus of scholars of policy diffusion, policy convergence, policy termination or policy dismantling. Whereas the policy diffusion perspective departs from the patterns of spread and the mechanisms of policy change, the policy convergence literature does not try to explain the individual policy-making behavior of governments but focuses on the degree of similarity their policy decisions reach over time. Scholars of

policy termination and of policy dismantling compare decisions to completely or partially revoke policies introduced in the past.

Third, the process-oriented strands of comparative policy research focus on particular explanatory factors or causes that determine the decision-making of governments. In this context, research on policy learning or lesson-drawing analyzes how policy actors perceive and process policy experiences made elsewhere, while the policy transfer perspective describes and explains how policies travel from one unit (e.g. nation-state) to another. Institutional analysis is a useful strategy to assess the impact of institutional constraints (e.g. veto players) on the actors' policy decision.

However, the broad field of comparative policy research also diverges with respect to the underlying methodological choices and to the range of causal explanations taken into account. This has led to contradictory results and a variety of identified factors and constellations that determine policy-making, its direction, extent and implications. Thus, in order to advance this field of research as a whole and to conceptually locate related research within the broader field, it is essential to have an overview of its different strands of research, approaches and analytical foci.

This chapter provides a systematic review of the field of comparative public policy research with regard to the fields of environmental and social policy. The following sections address first, different ways of conceptualizing and operationalizing the subject of study (public policy), second, different analytical perspectives of the patterns of public policies, and third, literature with distinct foci on the processes and explanatory factors of public policy-making. Next, I will provide a short review of the methods used to compare and analyze decision-making in the fields of social and environmental policy. I will then conclude with a short discussion of the main strengths and shortcomings of current approaches to comparing public policy-making over space and time along with an outlook on the challenges for further research.

### **Varieties of comparative public policy research: policies, patterns or processes**

The broad field of comparative public policy research comprises of research perspectives or traditions, theoretical approaches, empirical scopes and research methods. Numerous sub-disciplines and perspectives have emerged over the last decades. This development reflects the variety—and probably also limited commensurability—of the different paradigms guiding scholars of comparative public policy. So far, no dominant approach has emerged. In the following sections, I identify and discuss four dimensions along which studies of comparative public policy diverge.

### **Comparing public policies**

There is a variety of different approaches in the literature to depict and measure the subject of study, namely “public policy.” This conceptual heterogeneity delimits the comparability and consolidation of the findings.

Scholars of comparative public policy analysis seek to systematically describe and explain the decisions of different governments, their timing and content. To this end, several strategies have emerged to determine governmental behavior and decisional output—including for instance legislative acts, executive decrees or administrative circulars. A first group of scholars measures the *impact* of policies by analyzing the policies' effects on the target of regulation. A second group of researchers focuses on policy *outcomes*, namely the immediate consequences of a

policy decision, while the third approach refers to policy *outputs*, namely the content of the decision. As an example from the social policy field, one might consider unemployment protection policies. In this context, the decision to introduce monetary unemployment benefits at a certain level reflects the immediate policy output. The same decision could also be approximated by referring to total government spending on this particular social protection scheme (i.e. the outcome) or by measuring the effects of the policy decision on the regulatory target, such as, for instance, the number or the quality of life of unemployed persons (i.e. the impact). In the field of environmental policy-making one could consider emission standards for industrial plants. The definition of the standard itself, such as a limit value for the emission of sulfur dioxide, connotes the policy output, whereas the policy impact would be measured by the associated change in industrial emissions and air quality with respect to this particular substance. These brief examples illustrate the considerable risk of incomparability and incommensurability that result from the conceptualization and operationalization of the dependent variable (government policy decisions). From a policy cycle perspective, policy output on the one hand and policy outcome or impact on the other refer to different stages of the policy process. While the former is more a part of the policy formulation stage, the latter concepts pertain to the implementation phase (see Windhoff-Héritier 1987: 18f; cf. Sabatier and Mazmanian 1980, Howlett and Ramesh 2003: 143ff.). There is, however, a divide between policy outputs and their consequences (outcome and impact) not only with respect to the temporal patterns but also with regard to the potentially high number of intervening factors that influence the effects of policy decisions. It is almost impossible to infer governmental decisions and intentions based on indirect outcome and impact measures. Jänicke (1992) for instance finds that environmental policy performance and success crucially depend on institutional arrangements, economic structures and international dynamics. Esty and Porter (2005) conducted an extensive study in which a variety of different factors were analyzed to examine their influence on environmental performance (outcome data). The authors find other factors besides institutional arrangements to have an impact on the policy outcome in addition to the policy outputs themselves including socio-economic and infrastructure-related factors. Thus, as this example shows, selecting indicators for the subject of analysis or the dependent variable is far from trivial.

The literature on both social and environmental policy shows that the majority of large-n comparative studies rely on outcome or impact instead of output measures due to eased data availability. Wälti (2004), for instance, approximates the different nation-states' prioritization of environmental protection by using air quality data on nitrogen and sulfur oxides levels. Others argue that policy outcomes are the more appropriate and feasible way to measure a government's commitment toward environmental protection since its willingness to reduce air pollution is not only reflected in single policy decisions (e.g. to lower limit values). It is rather the result of a series of decisions including institutional ones that cannot be comprehensively assessed by comparing single policy outputs (see Scruggs 2003: 20ff.). As a consequence, many scholars have opted for environmental performance indices that are designed to reflect the policy-makers' overall commitment for protecting the environment. These indices are compiled from various outcome measures. They differ in their breadth in terms of the number of included pollutants (cf. Crepaz 1995; Jänicke 1996; Jahn 1998; Scruggs 1999, 2003).

Impact and outcome measures are also common in the literature on social policy. This might also be due to the conceptual and notional focus given that most scientists belonging to this area of research focus on the analysis of the *welfare state* as a whole rather than the explanation of single social policies. Analogously to the field of environmental policy research, policy output studies are uncommon. Nevertheless, scholars of social policies are usually more careful to

distinguish between approaches focusing on outcome measures and those addressing the policies' impact. The former branch of research usually seeks to indirectly measure the politicians' commitment with respect to certain policy fields while the latter research takes more the form of program evaluation studies. Outcome indicators in the field of social policy differ with regard to their conceptual closeness to the underlying policy decision.

On rather abstract levels, data on public expenditure allow for the comparison of public commitment to policies, governments or time. Expenditure data are usually easily available proxies for policy decisions. They are often used in quantitative comparative studies (cf. Stephens *et al.* 1999; Huber and Stephens 2001; Castles 2004, 2009; Clasen and Siegel 2007). However, as with the case of environmental policy the direct linkage between policy outputs and outcomes is questionable. A number of authors find alternative factors that have an impact on public spending levels (Wilensky 1974; Castles and Mitchell 1992; Pierson 1996; Castles 1999; Kitschelt 2001; Allan and Scruggs 2004). The comparison between the politics of pension reform and unemployment protection, for instance, illustrates the complex interplay between socio-economic conditions, government action and welfare expenditure and the risk of endogeneity for the resulting analyses. On the one hand, demographic change and aging of the population are likely to trigger policy-making by governments which then translates into (expected) expenditure levels for this specific social policy program (Bonoli 2000). On the other hand, socio-economic conditions might also lead decision-makers to adapt unemployment protection policies. This is quite evident in the field of unemployment policies, where altered rates of unemployment directly impact on the resulting expenditure levels of the protection scheme (Allan and Scruggs 2004). Again, these developments might motivate policymakers to take action (Vis 2009). As these brief examples show, multidirectional effects cause problems of endogeneity which in turn pose serious risks for the validity of the findings obtained from such analyses. Furthermore, expenditure analyses entail the risk of omissions, as stable outcome levels of social policy might obscure underlying changes due to altered contexts (e.g. higher unemployment replacement rates that coincide with lower unemployment rates, cf. Knill *et al.* 2010).

As a consequence of these problems and the goal to more closely reflect actual political decisions, scholars have turned toward the measurement of replacement rates instead of cumulated expenditure levels (Martin 1996; Green-Pedersen 2004; Swank 2005; Clasen and Clegg 2007; Kühner 2007). Replacement rates refer to the amount of monetary compensation paid to retirees, unemployed persons or those unable to work because of illness. Social generosity from this perspective is operationalized through the benefit levels (e.g. pension, unemployment or child allowances) for such people, usually industrial workers (Allan and Scruggs 2004). This strategy allows for consistent cross-country or cross-time comparisons for certain sub-aspects of policy-making. A major problem with this approach is that available data on replacement levels cover only few aspects of the policy. On the one hand, the use of replacement rates is biased toward policy decisions with monetary implications. On the other hand, by focusing on the benefits for representative standard employees, such studies often also neglect the full range of policy decisions with regard to the different levels of benefits. Thus, cross-country comparisons on the basis of replacement rate indicators only incur serious risk of biased results due the systematic focus on the monetary implications of social policies (Whiteford 1995; Lynch 2001; Bonoli 2007; Scruggs 2007; Knill *et al.* 2010).

The recent literature on social policy-making, however, shows a number of more sophisticated fine-grained analytical frames to study and compare policy-making in different countries. Immergut *et al.* (2007) as well as Häusermann (2010) systematically analyze and compare policy decisions in the field of pension politics in different countries. Altogether, the decision of how to conceptualize and measure the subject of study (i.e. public policy) is of crucial relevance as it impacts

on the ability to describe and explain public policy-making. The comparative approach often requires a certain degree of pragmatism and simplification with respect to the operationalization of the underlying concepts—particularly when it comes to designing quantitative large-n studies. However, as this brief overview of different ways of conceptualizing and operationalizing the dependent variables in comparisons of public policy-making illustrates, these decisions might considerably influence the validity of the findings due to the choice of variables and indicators.

In this context, policy (change) analyses with a direct focus on policy output are one way to assess the underlying decision-making of governments—hence covering various stages of the policy cycle including agenda-setting, policy formulation and decision-making (see Howlett and Ramesh 2003: 162). They represent the eventual consensus that has been reached by the group of involved policy actors. Policy outcome studies are based on rather indirect measures of the underlying policy decisions. These include performance indices or pollution data for certain substances and expenditure data for the fields of environmental and social policy, respectively. Given the supposedly complex processes that account for the outcomes, the direction of causal mechanisms is far from evident, which again creates risks of endogeneity. Scholars of quantitative comparative environmental policy research have partly acknowledged this challenge by including certain policy outputs (e.g. limit values for emission) as only one set of explanatory factors for predicting policy outcomes (see above; cf. in particular Esty and Porter 2005). Nevertheless, given the bi-directional causation between policy output and outcome, one could argue that policy outcomes are crucial in explaining follow-up policy-making. As outcomes reflect the effectiveness of previous policy decisions (through records of either financial expenditure or pollution) they might also create incentives for future policy-making.

Furthermore, the heterogeneity of the different approaches found in the literature impacts on the degree of comparability of the results of different studies themselves. Even within the subfield of outcome studies, there are currently many different strategies to design environmental performance indices or to compile expenditure indicators for social policies. This arbitrariness might explain the limited comparability and inconsistency of the findings.

### Comparing patterns of public policy-making

The above discussion on the different ways to conceptualize and operationalize “public policies” in comparative research on environmental and social policy-making illustrates that governmental behavior and decision-making can be measured at different levels of abstraction depending on the scientific aim of the research endeavor. As a consequence of the difficulty in comparing the policy-making behavior of governments in its entirety, various research traditions have emerged to analyze and compare public policies from distinct perspectives. In this section, I present and discuss three different research traditions that analyze public policy-making from a comparative perspective by taking a particular analytical lens and focusing on the observed patterns of policy change or adoption.

First, studies of public policy can be classified according to the direction or range of policy change that follows from a government’s choices. While the majority of scholars include positive as well as negative decisions in the analysis, scholars of *policy termination or dismantling* focus exclusively on decisions that are of reductive nature through the partial or complete abolishment of policies.

Research on policy termination was initiated by Brewer in the early 1970s with the objective directing scientific attention toward this final stage of the policy cycle process. He defined this type of policy choice as those adjusting “policies and programs that have become dysfunctional,

redundant, outmoded, and/or unnecessary” (Brewer 1978: 338). His initiative led to a vital but short-lived scholarly reaction to analytically advance research into this aspect of policy-making (cf. Bardach 1976; Biller 1976; Behn 1978; deLeon 1978; Hogwood and Peters 1982). Despite persistent theoretical problems and inconsistencies, a number of empirical studies followed (e.g. Frantz 1992; Daniels 1995, 2001; deLeon and Hernández-Quezada 2001; Geva-May 2001; Harris 2001; Graddy and Ye 2008). The policy termination approach develops types or forms of policy termination that are of different scope and that are debated between groups of opponents and proponents of different strengths (cf. in particular Bardach 1976).

Policy dismantling is a related concept in that it focuses on policy decisions to reduce public generosity (distributive policies like social policy) or water down the rigidity of regulatory policies (e.g. environmental policies). Policy dismantling has initially been studied in the context of welfare state analyses. Scholarly attention has continuously been at a high level since Pierson’s seminal book (1994). So far, various methods have been applied to analyze such policy decisions mainly in the field of social or welfare state policy (e.g. Esping-Andersen 1996; Clayton and Pontusson 1998; Bonoli 2001; Kitschelt 2001; Green-Pedersen 2002; Korpi and Palme 2003; Hacker 2004; Starke 2006, Starke *et al.* 2008).

A second criterion for case selection is based on the empirically observed patterns of spread of certain policy innovations. The broad literature of *policy diffusion* seeks to explain the dissemination of certain policies among units at different levels (i.e. nation-states, states or local entities) by identifying causes and factors that promote policy diffusion. In order to reduce complexity in comparing public policy-making over cases or units, policy diffusion scholars analyze single policies or policy innovations by describing the underlying adoption patterns over time and units. Assuming that policy choices are “interdependent” (e.g. Braun and Gilardi 2006: 299), diffusion scholars try to explain the spread of policies by identifying the relevant domestic and international factors at work. This way, diffusion scholars seek to estimate the international influence on domestic policy decisions (cf. Frank *et al.* 2000; Busch *et al.* 2005; Elkins and Simmons 2005; Elkins *et al.* 2006). Since its emergence in the 1970s (Gray 1973; Collier and Messick 1975), policy diffusion research has become ever more sophisticated especially with respect to the development of ambitious research methods to detect diffusion channels (cf. Tyran and Sausgruber 2005; Brooks 2007; Volden *et al.* 2008; Marsh and Sharman 2009; Plümper and Neumayer 2010).

Third, the *policy convergence* perspective is another way of comparing the patterns of policy-making of different nation-states, states or local entities by focusing on and explaining the degree of similarity they reach over time as a consequence of passing policies of similar contents (Bennett 1991; Knill 2005). This rather indirect analysis of public policies does not seek to explain the actual decision of a government but how it changes the status quo in relation to other cases (e.g. nation-states). There are a number of studies dealing with the degree of transnational convergence in the fields of environmental and social policy (cf. Heichel *et al.* 2005; Jordan 2005; cf. Overbye 1994; Howlett 2000; Starke *et al.* 2008). The analytical motivation of convergence scholars has often been twofold: to describe the dynamics of policy change over time and in relation to other units, and to explain the observed patterns. This way, they address the question of whether and under which conditions globalization leads to “races to the top” or “races to the bottom” in for instance the adoption of environmental policies (see e.g. Holzinger *et al.* 2008; cf. Drezner 2001, 2005; Busch and Jörgens 2005; Holzinger and Knill 2005).

This brief summary of different analytical strands, that each address certain sub-aspects of policy-making from a comparative perspective, highlights the complexity of the subject of investigation. Comparing public policies over space and time often requires narrowing the analytical lens

in favor of a more selective focus on policy-making. As a consequence of this conceptual simplification the above approaches suffer from certain theoretical limitations that impede on the generalizability of the results with respect to public policy-making in general.

First, the risk of biased results cannot be excluded due to the one-directional analysis of policy-making that is inherent to, for instance, the subdisciplines of policy dismantling, policy termination and policy diffusion research. While the former two perspectives make statements about government decisions of reductive nature, the latter have traditionally exclusively dealt with expansion policies (although this does not occur by definition).

Second, biases are likely to affect those studies that select their subject of study (i.e. the policy) based on its empirically observed distribution. In other words, results from diffusion studies might only allow for valid inference with respect to policies that have reached a certain degree of dissemination. Policies that do not reach the stage of a “best practice” are *ex ante* excluded from analysis, which is why large-*n* diffusion studies are most likely to overestimate the impact of international factors, such as harmonization (for a critical analysis of the limitations of this particular research perspective cf. Howlett and Rayner 2008).

### Comparing processes of public policy-making

In the following paragraphs, I will provide a further criterion along which to classify the literature on comparative public policy: the processes and factors of public policy-making. While the conceptualization and operationalization of the dependent variable (see above) crucially influences the validity of the findings, the selection of policies according to their patterns of spread (see above) primarily impacts on the generalizability of the results toward public policy-making in general.

There are several subdisciplines of comparative research on public policies that explain policy decisions or outputs by focusing on selective explanatory factors or processes. These include scholars of policy learning and policy transfer as well as research on political institutions. One common feature of these studies is the objective to analyze and compare the respective processes of the decision-making and the behavior of the involved actors. As a consequence, the results of these studies are often *ex ante* focused on specific explanations.

One way of narrowing down the empirical focus of comparative public policy analysis can be found within the literatures on *policy learning*, *policy transfer* or *emulation*. Scholars belonging to these research traditions identify certain mechanisms or factors that cause the dissemination of policies with the aim of tracing and explaining the underlying processes. Similarly to the diffusion perspective, they describe the way in which policies travel from one unit (e.g. nation-state) to another by focusing on distinct mechanisms or ways of communication. As opposed to the previously discussed research perspective, policy transfer, learning or emulation take a process orientation. In this context, policy learning (or lesson-drawing) refers to instances in which governments adopt a certain policy based on the evaluation of a policy in place elsewhere (for a thorough discussion of different forms of horizontal and vertical learning see Bennett and Howlett 1992; cf. Sabatier 1987; Rose 1991, 1993; Hall 1993; Meseguer 2006, 2009; Radaelli 2008).

Further, lesson-drawing may cause governments to decide on policies found elsewhere as “transfers can be voluntary or coercive or combinations thereof” (Stone 2001: 9). Thus, the policy transfer literature analyzes the role of actors by pointing to the importance of interest groups, NGOs, think tanks, non-state policy entrepreneurs (as transfer agents) and the role of policy networks in promoting the diffusion of ideas and their intersubjective perceptions of solutions as well as in providing social learning and building up epistemic communities (cf. Dolowitz and Marsh 1996, 2000, Radaelli 2000; Stone 2000, 2001, 2004). Cases of negative lesson-drawing,



in turn, might also lead governments to deliberately exclude policy options found elsewhere (cf. Rose 1991, 1993).

The literature subsumed under the label of *institutionalism* provides another framework for the analysis of government choices by explaining policies and their content based on the institutional conditions that channel the decision-making processes. The point of departure of this approach is veto players, “individual or collective decision-makers whose agreement is required for the change of the status quo” (Tsebelis 2000: 442). According to this view, policy-making is best explained by the systematic analysis of the institutional rules that delimit the actors’ leeway and influence on the eventual policy decision (cf. Tsebelis 1995; Hall and Taylor 1996; Scharpf 1997; Jupille and Caporaso 1999). Veto player (Bonoli 2001; Immergut and Anderson 2007) and institution-centered analysis (Swank 2001; Streeck and Thelen 2005) are common approaches in the comparative analysis of, for instance, social policy change. As the “veto players approach emphasizes the ways in which political decision-making institutions structure attempts to change the legislative status quo” (Immergut and Anderson 2007: 7), it allows for explaining policy differences between units (e.g. nation-states) for a range of issues. There are a number of studies that illustrate the role of the fragmentation of political power (horizontal or vertical) for reforming the pension systems of Western democracies (cf. Bonoli 2001, 2004; Swank 2001; Baccaro 2002; Ferrera 2007; Baccaro and Simoni 2008; Häusermann 2010).

Research of comparative public policies that belong to the sub-disciplines of policy learning, policy transfer or institutional analysis puts the analytical focus on understanding and describing the processes that impact on and shape the policy decisions. As a consequence, the empirical results of these studies might be of limited generalizability to policy-making in its complexity. Given the individual conceptual points of departure, scholars belonging to these research traditions are at risk to overestimate the influence of certain explanatory concepts either through potentially biased case selection (policy learning or transfer) or by the analytical focus on one explanation only (institutionalism). As studies pertaining to these research traditions tend to select their cases according to specific causal processes, their findings might not hold for explaining policy-making in general.

Altogether, the degree of specificity of the dependent variable differs over the analytical perspectives discussed in the previous two sections, which furthermore reduces the generalizability of the results for public policy-making.

While transfer and diffusion studies solely explain whether a certain policy has been passed or not, policy learning studies allow for a more detailed conceptual calibration. Similarly, the analytical precision of policy termination studies is rather low; dismantling or retrenchment studies in turn apply refined conceptual approaches by considering different sub-aspects of policy outputs. Policy convergence in this context, also allows for a multidimensional perspective on the dependent variable (i.e. a government’s decisions with respect to a range of regulatory aspects; e.g. the emission standards designed to assess a country’s prioritization of regulating air quality). Nevertheless, they provide only indirect and selective accounts of the governments’ actual decisions because they measure policy-making not in absolute terms but with respect to a certain threshold (i.e. the average policy output of the sample included in the analysis).

## Research methods and causal explanations in comparative public policy

There is a large number of empirical studies that analyze social and environmental policies based on different methodologies (qualitative versus quantitative) and levels of analysis (micro versus macro). Interestingly, the methodological lines of division are almost identical to the ones separating the various research traditions discussed above.

More precisely, the question of whether to study policy outcomes instead of policy outputs is predominantly an issue for scholars of quantitative research. Given the difficulty of constructing and obtaining comparable measures for policy-making over large numbers of cases, macro-quantitative studies often switch to outcome indicators due to improved data availability. However, authors of case studies (e.g. Weidner and Jänicke 2002; Jordan *et al.* 2003; Jordan and Liefferink 2004; Busch and Jörgens 2005; Hall 1993; Kersbergen 1995; Huber and Stephens 2001; Taylor-Gooby 2004) seem to be less affected by the “dependent variable” problem (Green-Pedersen 2004; Clasen and Siegel 2007; cf. Howlett and Cashore 2009) by taking a micro-analytical perspective.

The division between quantitative and qualitative studies continues also within the different subdisciplines of comparative public policy research as discussed earlier in this chapter. In this context, policy learning and lesson-drawing are mostly addressed through comparative case study designs (for an exception see Sommerer 2010), while diffusion is often analyzed through large-n designs (but see, for example, Tews *et al.* 2003).

The policy change literature also reflects the methodological divide. While the policy termination literature almost exclusively consists of comparative case studies, welfare state retrenchment research of policy outcomes (comprising studies based on expenditure or replacement rate data) usually involves large-n studies. In this context, analyses of the dismantling or termination of environmental policies are still in general the exception (but see, for example, Knill *et al.* 2008). While research on policy dismantling or termination tends to overestimate the factors that lead to negative policy choices, the diffusion and transfer literature is biased toward policy innovations and positive policy decisions, respectively. In spite of this potential bias, there have been hardly any efforts in comparative analyses of social or environmental policies to systematically compare policy outputs of both directions, with the possible exception of the literature on policy convergence. As already mentioned, output studies that provide in-depth analyses of policies or policy change in social or environmental policy are almost exclusively limited to qualitative case studies due to their conceptual and empirical complexity.

The literature on comparative social and environmental policy shows biases with respect to the explanatory factors taken into account. Policy diffusion, convergence or welfare-state retrenchment studies in these policy fields, for instance, tend to take a macro perspective focusing particularly on the effects of globalization and economic pressure (Castles 1998; Drezner 2001; Sykes *et al.* 2001; Weidner and Jänicke 2002; Korpi and Palme 2003; Stone 2004; Swank 2005; Holzinger *et al.* 2008). Looking at the role of political parties for public policy-making (from a meso perspective), for instance, there is an interesting fragmentation between the literatures on environmental and social policy. While this factor has received abundant attention in research on the welfare state in general and welfare state retrenchment in particular (e.g. Huber and Stephens 2001; Kitschelt 2001; Green-Pedersen 2002, 2007; Korpi and Palme 2003; Allan and Scruggs 2004; Vis and Kersbergen 2007; Vis 2009), it has less frequently been studied in the context of environmental policy-making (but see Shipan and Lowry 2001; Knill *et al.* 2010). Similarly, the two fields of research differ with respect to the incorporation of institutional explanations for policy-making. The concept of veto players is often applied to analyze reforms of the welfare state and to explain the feasibility of cutbacks in public generosity (Bonoli 2001; Crepaz 2001; Ganghof 2003; Immergut *et al.* 2007; Ha 2008). However, it is a concept scarcely addressed in comparative analyses of environmental policy research (for an exception see Jahn and Müller-Rommel 2010). In addition, institutional factors have received limited attention in this field of research (but see Dryzek *et al.* 2003).

This brief overview on the methods used and causal explanations tested in the analysis of social and environmental policy-making points to systematic differences between the approaches

used in the two policy fields. Choices of methods and explanatory factors, which determine the comparability of results, seem to be related to both the analytical perspective on the dependent variable and the field of research (e.g. social or environmental policy). These patterns of comparative policy research illustrate the internal fragmentation of this scientific discipline and the limits of generalizability of its findings.

## Discussion and outlook

This brief presentation and discussion of different approaches toward the study of public policies from the comparative perspective shows that we are still far from academic consensus with respect to the meaning of the term “public policy” itself and in view of the range of explanatory factors to be considered. Scholars of comparative public policy usually make an implicit statement through either the conceptualization of the dependent variable, case selection based on certain policy patterns, by focusing on certain processes or by choosing specific explanatory concepts. These choices entail fundamental consequences for the expected degree of generalizability of the results and the scope of explanation (see below Table 3.1).

On the one hand, process-oriented approaches toward public policy-making reveal a tendency to focus on the explanatory factors (i.e. lesson-drawing, transfer or institutional determinants in this context). On the other hand, pattern-oriented studies (termination, dismantling, and diffusion) tend to put more analytical emphasis on explaining and comparing certain types of public policies themselves. Both subdisciplines share the narrow perspective on the subject of study, i.e. public policy-making. As a consequence, the approaches are limited to policies with certain characteristics or policy aspects. In this context, the literatures on policy learning, transfer or institutional change consider policies that are influenced by distinct explanatory factors. Policy termination and policy dismantling studies incorporate exclusively negative policy decisions, while research on policy diffusion is biased toward policy innovations that have reached a certain degree of dissemination.

These features might limit the generalizability of all these approaches. The policy change literature claims to broaden the analysis of policy-making—at least theoretically—by means of an inclusive conceptualization of the dependent variable and explanatory processes and factors (for a discussion of the deficits in current policy change research, see Howlett and Cashore 2009). As shown, however, in the discussion on the different ways to conceptualize

*Table 3.1* Subdisciplines of comparative public policy research

		<i>Focus on generalizability</i>	
		<i>Low</i>	<i>High</i>
<i>Focus on</i>	<i>Explanans</i>	Policy termination Policy dismantling Policy diffusion	Policy change (outcome/impact analyses)
	<i>Explanandum</i>	Policy learning Policy transfer Institutionalism	Policy change (output analyses)

Source: Author

and measure public policies in practice, the policy change perspective also has its limits of comparability.

This fragmentation in current public policy analysis illustrates the potential benefits of more integrated approaches that on the one hand, give primary attention to a more careful conceptualization of the subject of research and comparison. On the other hand, the findings call for more flexible combinations of research perspectives, methods, and different explanatory factors in both fields of research. This would enhance the generalizability and the validity of the findings and enable theoretical progress to be made based on the consolidation of the different approaches.

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