

THE POLITICS OF POLICY CHANGE

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What accounts for changes in public policy? This should be a central question of political science. Policies, after all, are the main outcomes of political systems. When we study political institutions or public behavior, we often imply that these subjects are important because they relate to the decisions made by government on policy. Yet we rarely consider all of the potential determinants of policy change in one setting because the policymaking process potentially involves all branches of government and many outside actors.

Scholars, journalists, and policy specialists, however, often do attempt to explain how, when, and why public policy changes. They select among potential factors and produce in-depth narrative accounts of policy history. Based on an initial search for literature on U.S. federal government policy since 1945, I have located more than 200 books and articles that review at least 10 years of policy history. Many of these studies do not cite much political science research and most do not set out to test any established theories of the politics of the policy process. Instead, they are motivated by an interest in a specific area of public policy and a desire to set the historical record straight about who was involved, the timeline of decisions, and the conventional wisdom on the reasons for each policy change.

The explanations for policy change in narrative histories tend to be idiographic, in that they list potential factors that may have led to policy change one case at a time. Up to now, these explanations have not been systematically compared to traditional nomothetic explanations for policy change in political science. We do not yet know if our theories of the policy process match the explanations advanced in narratives of policy change because these explanations have never been aggregated.

In what follows, I begin to compile accounts of U.S. federal policy change since 1945 and to aggregate explanations for these changes. I focus on civil rights & liberties, education, and the environment and include some content about housing & community development and science &

technology policy. I introduce a new method for content analyzing secondary sources, rather than independently analyzing each policy change. This has the disadvantage of relying on the reports of many other scholars who do not share the same assumptions and were not engaged in the same research enterprise. It has the advantage, however, of allowing me to assess very broad questions. For example, I ask all of the following:

1. What significant policy actions has the U. S. federal government taken in these areas?
Did these actions stem from lawmaking in Congress, regulatory changes in the administration, orders from the President, or court decisions?
2. What actors were involved most often in policy change? Which individuals, government units, or interest groups frequently initiated, advanced, or opposed policy change?
3. What political factors did observers judge as important in driving policy change? Were particular Congressional, administrative, or court circumstances critical? Did sub-national or international action precede federal change? Did advocacy groups, think tanks, corporations, associations, or media outlets contribute to change? Did public opinion, elections, news events, or past policy decisions play important roles?

For each question, I seek to aggregate existing qualitative knowledge of policy history rather than reach definitive conclusions via original causal modeling.

Theories and Explanations

Political scientists and policy scholars have long studied the determinants of public policy change. Common theories of the policy process with distinct explanations for policy change include the advocacy coalition framework focusing on the ideas of interest group and government proponents of policy (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993), institutional rational choice theory based on solutions to the collective action problem (Ostrom 1990), and punctuated-equilibrium accounts

premised on limited policymaker attention (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). Other models emphasize the multiple, largely independent, streams of problem definition, politics, and policy development (Kingdon 2003) or the incremental process of policy development that results from path dependence (Pierson 2004). Each of these theoretical frameworks has generated a voluminous literature, based primarily on case studies of a few policy areas or decisions. One important critique of this scholarship is that it constitutes a search for confirming evidence, with theory guiding explanations for events and findings.

These theories of the policy process are not evaluated in most subject-specific literature on U.S. policy change. Literature on civil rights policy instead focuses on protest (Stetson 1997) and presidential leadership (Shull 1999). Literature on education policy emphasizes appropriations (Spring 1993) and bureaucracy (Cross 2003). Environmental policy histories are more closely tied to political science but tend to compare federal policy to an ideal type where technocrats utilize scientific research results to decide optimal policy (Portney and Stavens 2000; Graham 2000).

Neither theories of the policy process nor these subject-specific accounts outline a series of testable hypotheses for the kind of secondary source content analysis that I undertake. Rather than introduce a new set of hypotheses, I try to aggregate others' explanations and compare them with the emphases of existing theories of the policy process. The explanations that I aggregate are qualitative and do not take a consistent form. They typically rely on archival research and interviews by authors of policy histories as well as the expertise of the author in a particular area of public policy. The accounts often seek to establish a sequence of events and to highlight the most important factors relevant to each period of policymaking. Some of the accounts attempt an exhaustive review of major policy changes over a particular historical period, but others simply examine the few changes that they consider most important.

A New Method

The first step in the project was to compile published accounts of federal policy change that cover at least 10 years since 1945, including academic scholarship and journalistic and historical accounts. I used Policy Agendas Project subcategories to find resources on specific policy subtopics in the four areas. In this initial analysis, I use 15 books and articles on civil rights and liberties (Lichtman 1969; Burstein 1985; Bok 1992; Ashmore 1994; Riddlesperger and Jackson 1995; Stetson 1997; Lawson 1997; Sollinger 1998; Schull 1999; Conway et al. 1999; D'Emilio et al. 2000; Layton 2000; Jenness and Grattet 2001; Skrentny 2002; Browne-Marshall 2007), 9 books on education policy (Ravitch 1985; Spring 1993; Moran 1988; Hill 2000; Cross 2003; Thomas and Brady 2005; Jeynes 2007; Anderson 2007), 3 books on environmental policy (Graham 2000; Porney and Stavins 2000; Kraft 2000), 6 resources on housing & community development (Martin and Leone 1977; James 2002; Peters and Fisher 2002; Dreussi and Leahy 2002; Snow 2002; Cooper and Cooper 2002), and 1 book on science & technology policy (Marcus and Bix 2007). In the first three policy areas, I obtained what appear to be reasonable histories of policy change since 1945. The others policy areas are used for comparison. I have obtained many more resources, including some from the bibliographies of the initial sources. Because I have yet to exhaust the literatures, this analysis should be seen as preliminary. To decide on the initial texts for analysis, I used several criteria: 1) coverage of a substantial historical period, 2) coverage of more than one branch of government, 3) offers explanations of the policy process, rather than advocacy of particular policies, and 4) no promotion of a single theory of the policy process.

The second step in the project was to read each text and identify significant policy changes. I used five research assistants, training them to identify policy changes. We tracked passed legislation, Presidential directives, administrative agency actions, and court rulings identified by each author as significant. We included policy changes when any author indicated that the change was important

and attempted to explain why the change occurred. As a reliability check, two students assessed two of the same books and identified the same list of significant policy changes.

For each policy change, we catalogued all mentions of proponents and opponents of the policy change by each author. We also coded mentions of more than 60 factors that may influence policy change. We also copied narrative explanations that emphasized the factors judged important. We used a formal spreadsheet-based content analysis to record each author's explanation for every major change in public policy that they analyzed. Coders recorded every involved individual and organization that the author mentioned in their explanations. They also asked themselves 60 questions about each author's explanation of each change from a codebook. The result is a database of which factors were judged important by each author. Inter-coder reliability tests of the codebook instructions confirmed that the method produces reliable results, with coders of the same volume reaching agreement on more than 95% of codes.

A similar method was used by Schickler (2001) to assess theories of changes in Congressional rules. Schickler found that explanations for rules changes in disinterested historical descriptions did not match any previous theoretically driven account of Congressional rules, but did incorporate some points of emphasis found in each of the main theories of Congressional action. I hope to aggregate the same kind of insights from historical and qualitative research on the politics of the policymaking process. A similar method was also once used in the policy evaluation literature (see Yin and Heald 1975). This method also involved aggregating case studies using a content analysis but the objective was to look for how evaluation of the same policy differed across cases. My objective is much wider: to aggregate explanations for how, when, and why public policy changes.

Civil Rights

Civil rights & liberties is the policy area where we analyzed the most texts to identify important policy changes. Figure 1 shows the significant policy changes highlighted by authors in a timeline of post-WWII American federal policy. The first finding that jumps out as one looks at the timeline is that civil rights policymaking did not occur in spurts interrupted by long periods of inactivity, as is often suggested. Instead, relevant policymaking has been relatively constant, with the exception of inactivity in the early 1980s. Types of policy changes were also quite diverse. Of the civil rights policy change explanations that we analyzed, 59% were legislation and 32% were court decisions with 9% administrative or presidential.

[Insert Figure 1]

Among the individual proponents of civil rights policy change, Martin Luther King Jr. and Lyndon B. Johnson were each mentioned as being involved in 5 explanations of policy change. President George H. W. Bush was mentioned most as an opponent of policy change in this area. Among the many interest groups providing outside pressure for policy change, the NAACP was noted for their involvement most often; they were involved in 26% of policy change explanations. The American Civil Liberties Union, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, and the National Organization for Women were also noted for their involvement in multiple policy changes.

Education

I also uncovered substantial diversity in types of policy changes and explanations for change in education policy. Figure 2 presents a timeline of important changes in federal education policy over the same period. Again, you see relatively constant policymaking rather than long periods of equilibrium with intermittent punctuation. Like in civil rights, this appears to occur for two reasons: 1) landmark legislation is regularly reauthorized or amended and authors often highlight important policy changes made in these revisions and 2) policymaking that occurs in other branches of

government does not follow the same timeline. The famous No Child Left Behind legislation, for example, was the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Significant education policy changes were 69% legislative, 9% judicial, 13% administrative, and 4% presidential.

[Insert Figure 2]

Presidents were mentioned most often as proponents of education policy change. Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush were all listed as important drivers of education policy change. Nixon and Clinton were each credited as initiating two important education policy changes. Senator Edward Kennedy, however, was mentioned as an important proponent more than any other individual. The Department of Education and presidential advisory panels were also mentioned as proponents of policy change. The NAACP was mentioned as an important proponent of court rulings while the National Education Association was mentioned most often as a proponent of legislative change. The Council for Exceptional Children and the National School Boards Association were also credited with achieving education policy change. Senator Strom Thurmond, Representative Robert Michel, Barry Goldwater, Senator Judd Gregg, and Representative Peter Hoekstra were all mentioned as opponents of more than one federal education policy change.

Environment

Even though I examined fewer distinct sources covering federal environmental policy, it emerges as the busiest policy area. Figure 3 presents the timeline for post-WW2 environmental policy. Though authors find few important policy changes before the 1960s, environmental policy change since 1963 has been constant. No two-year period from 1963 until at least the mid-1990s has seen inactivity. 82% of environmental policy changes uncovered by these histories have been legislative, 5% have been administrative, almost 10% have been presidential, and just over 3% have been judicial. The low proportion of changes that were administrative or judicial is striking given the

amount of environmental regulation and litigation. Yet these authors do not see much important policy change occurring in the courts, at least relative to the torrent of relevant legislation.

[Insert Figure 3]

The primary proponents of environmental policy change mentioned in the texts were Presidents, Members of Congress, and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Clinton was given a share of the credit for policy change 16 times with Nixon mentioned 4 times, and Johnson mentioned 3 times. The EPA was given credit for their support in 11 different explanations of policy change. The World Wildlife Fund and The Earth Island Institute were mentioned as important proponents in more than one explanation. Senators Edmund Muskie, Gaylord Nelson, and Henry Jackson and Representatives Paul Rogers, John Saylor, Morris Udall, and John Blatnik were also given partial credit for more than one change. Strangely for a policy area involving so much policy change, authors spent considerable time discussing opponents of enacted policy changes. Presidents Nixon and Reagan were regularly mentioned as opponents, as were industry and agricultural groups.

Community Development

I have also begun to identify major policy changes in the area of housing & community development, but have identified fewer explanations for each change in this area. Figure 4 illustrates the timeline of federal community development policy change. Policymaking is again relatively constant over the period covered by the texts. Most of the policy changes (88%) are legislative; the others are split between administrative, presidential, and a single court ruling. Units of the bureaucracy, however, show up most often as important policy proponents. The Economic Development Agency is the most commonly named policy proponent, along with the Area Redevelopment Administration, Housing and Urban Development, and the Small Business Administration.

[Insert Figure 4]

The timelines and narrative histories for all four policy areas share some important similarities. First, policymaking does not necessarily occur in spurts. There are often important reforms in between original legislative efforts. The lists of policy changes considered here are based on what historians later highlight, rather than contemporaneous accounts. This differs from the focus of previous scholarship. In the debate over gridlock and legislative productivity, for example, both Binder (1999) and Mayhew (2005) look at Congressional agenda items and enactments viewed as significant at the time. Considering only these policy changes could lead to the erroneous conclusion that policy only changes in high-profile cases involving the attention of the public, the media, and all of Congress. The historical accounts suggest that important policy changes often occur even if all actors do not see them as significant at the time.¹

Second, Congress dominates policy changes but they are not exclusively responsible for policy change in any area. Table 1 shows the breakdown by venue across all policy areas studied here. There are important policy changes that occur in administrative agencies, courts, and the White House. The named proponents of policy change are also quite diverse and depend on the policy area. They include administrative agencies, interest groups, and individuals in Congress. Even though Congress is the most frequent venue, however, explanations for policy change cite the influence of the President more often than any other type of actor.

[Insert Table 1]

¹ The most famous example of a policy change that was considered much more important in retrospect was an IRS regulation based on the Revenue Act of 1978, which created 401(k) retirement plans. These were originally expected to be used only by executives but were later widely adopted. An important example from the literature analyzed here is the extension of affirmative action programs to Hispanic and Asian Americans reviewed by Skrentny (2002). These changes were not particularly controversial at the time, even though they had important implications.

Explanatory Factors in Policy Change

What factors are responsible for public policy change in these areas? In addition to crediting specific individuals and organizations with pushing for policy change, narrative histories often point to circumstances that made each policy change more likely to move forward. Authors rarely go through every potential factor, eliminating all those considered irrelevant. The typical explanation, however, refers to a few circumstances that led to policy change; we catalogued every factor that these authors included in their explanations.

Partisanship is among the first categories of explanations offered for policy change by the news media and scholars of Congress. Table 2 reports the results of our content analysis, including the percentage of policy change explanations that included each type of partisanship. Partisanship was not mentioned at all in most explanations (71%); these authors did not say that one party was more supportive and did not point to the importance of bipartisanship. Bipartisan support was cited in 13% of cases of policy change. Democratic support was mentioned much more often than Republican support, possibly due to the social policy focus of this study or the Democratic control of Congress over much of the period.

[Insert Table 2]

Table 3 summarizes the other types of factors that are present in explanations of policy change. More than 39% of policy change explanations referred to executive branch factors, including Presidential support. Fewer explanations referred to Congressional factors or Judicial Branch factors. Even though policy changes occurred more often in legislation, therefore, authors attribute change to executive branch influence more often. In addition, more than 35% of explanations referred to factors related to interest groups whereas less than 15% referred to public opinion or news media coverage. This may suggest that authors see bargaining among groups as more important than direct public influence. Real-world events like war and economic change,

however, were cited in 22% of explanations; policymakers may sometimes be driven to act by events outside their control. Just over 18% of explanations implied path dependence, linking policy change to some previous decision or set of decisions. Authors found limited evidence that policy change could come from the bottom up, influenced by state or local action, or from the top down, influenced by international action.

[Insert Table 3]

Table 4 delves deeper into the Congressional factors that authors saw as important determinants of policy change. The most often-mentioned factor was ability to reach agreement between the House and the Senate, but it was seen as important in only 13.6% of cases. Congressional lobbying was also cited in more than 1 out of 10 explanations.² Constituent pressure and individual supportive Members of Congress were mentioned somewhat less often. Committee actions, key votes, supportive Congressional leadership, and changes in party control of Congress were all mentioned in less than 1 in 20 explanations for policy change.

[Insert Table 4]

Table 5 reviews the executive and judicial branch factors seen as important in policy change. A supportive president stands out, present in almost one-third of explanations. Court rulings requiring action were cited in 12.5% of cases, including some legislative, executive and judicial policy changes. Government reports were cited occasionally in explanations, as were supportive lower-level executive branch officials. Influence from fear of lawsuits or court intervention was minimal in explanations of policy change.

[Insert Table 5]

² In Table 3, I did not include lobbying in the totals for either congressional or interest group factors.

Table 6 reviews the influence of state and local factors in explanations for policy change. In almost 10% of cases, federal policy takes its cue from a state-level policy. The states do appear to offer laboratories for democracy, but their solutions only make it to the federal level occasionally. No other state or local influence is common. The international factors in Table 7 show the same low levels of influence. International pressure or competitiveness concerns are much more common in explanations for policy change than formal government agreements or using a foreign model. In sum, it is not consistent with the qualitative analysis of policy history to base a theory of U.S. domestic policymaking on the place of the U.S. in the world or the place of the national government in the federal system but researchers cannot ignore either set of factors.

[Insert Tables 6 & 7]

Factors related to interest groups are cited much more commonly. Table 8 breaks down the types of interest group factors mentioned. Most often, the explanations mentioned a supportive interest group; the table accounts for the types of groups that were mentioned. Strikingly, advocacy groups or non-governmental organizations were mentioned far more often than other types of groups, in almost one-quarter of all explanations of policy change. Professional associations and scientists were each mentioned in about 1 in 20 cases but corporations, think tanks, and unions were mentioned much less often. Some explanations included specific circumstances or tactics that led to interest group influence. Interest group research reports were cited for their influence almost as often as government reports. Protests were mentioned occasionally. Financial advantages, changes in interest group positions, and group mobilization were rarely mentioned.

[Insert Table 8]

As Table 9 shows, factors related to public opinion or the media were occasionally seen as influential in explanations of policy change. General media coverage of the problem and the raising of an issue in an election campaign were the most commonly noted factors. Supportive changes in

public opinion were also noted occasionally. Table 10 shows that real-world events were rated as influential by some scholars of policy history (in almost 13% of explanations). These focusing events are said to stimulate public and policymaker interest by Baumgartner and Jones (1993) and Kingdon (2003). Military events and economic downturns were the most common of these events. New data on policy problems was also said to be influential in more than 1 in 20 explanations.

[Insert Tables 9 & 10]

Finally, I uncovered some evidence of the kinds of path dependent explanations of policy change emphasized by Pierson (2004). Almost 12% of explanations for policy change included some reference to the influence of a previous policy decision. Most of these explanations were fairly obvious, however, in that legislation was amending previous legislation or administrative agencies were following up on enacted legislation. Almost 1 in 20 explanations, however, did include some reference to the kinds of path dependence highlighted in the American political development literature, where some earlier policy choice eliminated an important alternative from consideration at the time of a later policy decision.

[Insert Table 11]

Even though the authors that I included were engaged in long-term historical analysis, they did not overwhelmingly rely on explanations for policy change based on history. Instead, they typically reviewed a lot of policy history as an opportunity to consider a larger number of cases of policy change. Similarly, almost every other school of theory on the politics of the policy process receives only limited support from qualitative explanations in these policy areas. Almost everything is seen to be important by at least some authors in some circumstances. Scholars attributed importance to all three branches of government and many external factors but no factor was considered necessary for policy change. In fact, no specific factor is mentioned in more than one-third of explanations for policy change. The causes of policy change may be quite diverse.

Differences Across Branches, Policy Areas, and Time

Thus far, we have treated explanations for all policy changes equivalently. Of course, there may be important differences in explanatory factors for policymaking that occurs in different branches or for policymaking related to different issue areas. Figure 5 presents a summary of factors involved in explanations of policy change in different venues. More than 30% of legislative policy change explanations involve interest groups, with 20% involving real-world events. Legislative changes are also sometimes path dependent, especially with reauthorization. Administrative changes, in contrast, are path dependent in the majority of cases; this is primarily because the legislature directs an agency to make policy but does not make many of the important decisions. Events also drive administrative decision-making in more than 1 in 3 cases. Interest groups and events are also cited in explanations for Presidential decision-making, but public opinion is referenced just as often. Interest groups are involved in the explanations for judicial policymaking in most cases, with events and state and local precursors playing secondary roles. There is definitely diversity in explanation across branches.

[Insert Figure 5]

Different policy areas are also associated with unique sets of explanations for policy change. Figure 6 illustrates these differences. Interest groups are judged to be important in almost two-thirds of civil rights policy changes and almost one-half of education policy changes but less than 20% of environmental policy changes. This is surprising given the huge environmental community in Washington. Events are judged commonly influential in civil rights and the environment, but less so in education. Public opinion has been cited most in education and civil rights. Environmental policymaking has been judged path dependent most often while international factors mattered most

often in civil rights. There is again considerable diversity in explanation, though interest groups are consistently given some credit.

[Insert Figure 6]

Patterns of partisanship have also been distinct across policy areas. Figure 7 illustrates the types of partisanship referenced in explanations for policy change within each issue area.

Explanations for civil rights policy change unsurprisingly credit Democratic support, with no examples of differential Republican support. Explanations for education policy change involve bipartisanship most often, but also sometimes feature one party in the lead. Environmental policy changes exhibit a similar pattern, except that many explanations did not involve parties at all.

[Insert Figure 7]

Since the dataset covers policy changes from 1945 onward, I can also assess whether explanations for policy change differ across time. Figure 8 looks at time trends by decade in how often each category of explanatory factors is cited. Explanations for policy changes in the 1990s involved executive branch support most often whereas interest group support was cited most often for policy change in the 1970s and international factors were judged most important in the 1940s. In the policy areas covered here, it appears that interest groups have been judged less and less important since the 1950s. This is the same period that saw a tremendous proliferation of interest groups in Washington; it may suggest that expanding numbers have not led to increased influence, at least in the minds of qualitative observers. Explanations for policy change were more likely to involve the executive branch in the 1960s and 1990s, primarily because Johnson and Clinton were often credited with driving policy change. The judicial branch, in contrast, was cited most often for policy changes in the 1950s and 1970s. The influence of international factors was judged most important in the early years, but has undergone a small recent resurgence. The trend for path dependence suggests that policy change in the 1950s and 1980s was derivative of past policies,

possibly due to the legacy of the New Deal and the Great Society. Together, these divergent trends suggest that policymaking in different eras may be driven by different sets of factors. Each category does not necessarily trade off with any other, but different branches of government and different types of external forces may drive policymaking in each time period.

[Insert Figure 8]

Given these important differences across branches of government, policy areas, and time periods, it may be unrealistic to expect political science to develop a general theory of the politics of the policy process. Qualitative explanations for policy changes are quite diverse. Historical accounts of policy change do not seem to uncover unheard of determinants of policy change; they refer to many of the same variables referenced in our theories of the policy process and policymaking institutions. Yet these accounts do suggest that no single set of factors is most important and that some factors that are quite important in some instances may be irrelevant to many others. In the aggregate, these accounts may reflect a policymaking system that is driven by many different inputs and is not amenable to a simple nomothetic model.

Even though they point to difficulty ahead, however, the aggregate qualitative results may allow scholars to reach some important conclusions about the policy process. First, policy change in these areas has been relatively constant in the post-war period. Second, the determinants of these policy changes are somewhat distinct across policy areas and across historical periods. Even without changes in the official rules by which policymaking occurs, each issue raised in each time period may be associated with a different set of outcome determinants.

Do the Explanations Match Our Theories?

This analysis is an imperfect test of previous theories. It does not test any theoretically derived hypotheses on their own terms. It also merely looks for consistency between aggregated

historical case studies and theoretically driven accounts; it is not obvious that one type of analysis should be preferred to the other. Yet there are some interesting discrepancies in emphasis between previous theoretical accounts and the evidence accumulated here.

First, I have noted that punctuated equilibrium theory expects long periods of stability interrupted by periods of rapid change (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). At face value, the timelines do not reflect this. The theory, however, envisions the stable periods as being dominated by similar elite interests and including incremental change. Observers could still look at the policy changes covered here and conclude that only a few fundamentally changed policy outcomes or which interests were most served by them. Though the historical coverage of policy change certainly highlights some changes as more important than others, however, it presents a different picture. In these analyses, some “incremental” changes are quite important and there is no clear line dividing periods of overwhelming change from periods of stability. Second, punctuated equilibrium theory envisions a greater role for media attention and Congressional committee hearings than is reflected in the aggregated case studies. Both factors were mentioned only occasionally in explanations for policy change. Overall, the historical analysis pays less attention to the dynamics of agenda setting, except to emphasize that real-world events often drive policymakers to act. The emphasis on interest groups in Baumgartner and Jones (1993) is consistent with the aggregate results here, though new group mobilization is not regularly emphasized and accounts of more recent policy change are less likely to mention interest groups.

The case studies aggregated so far also fail to match up with the factors emphasized in the advocacy coalition approach (see Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). The studies analyzed here took the approach suggested by Sabatier and Jenks-Smith, historical analysis of policy over more than a decade. At fact value, however, the explanations given by these authors are not consistent with the advocacy coalition framework. First, they occasionally mention individual supportive Members of

Congress, interest groups, and executive agencies but rarely point to any stable coalitions. Second, they rarely, if ever, cite the importance of shared belief systems among diverse actors. Third, they occasionally refer to the importance of individual studies, new data on policy problems, and focusing events, but nothing resembling policy-oriented learning appears regularly in their explanations. Yet again, there are important differences in the theory and this analysis. I tracked proponents of enacted policy change and qualitative explanations for those policy changes, rather than tracking continued involvement by every player. It was also quite difficult to track the role of ideas. Every policy change began with at least one idea, so one could code every policy change as involving ideas. Yet the most commonly cited ideas were not very inventive; for example, many policy proponents emphasized economic benefits, improved efficiencies, or helping a larger population. These common frames were rarely invoked as potential explanations for why proponents succeeded.

In comparing the analysis here with the multiple streams theory of the policymaking process popularized by Kingdon (2003), I find both similarities and discrepancies. The opening part of Kingdon's analysis (that is less remembered) does review all of the different parts of the executive and legislative branch that may influence policy outcomes and all of the outside factors that may play a role, including most of those outlined here. His survey results indicate that when subjects are prominent, almost every category of factors is considered relevant; when subjects are not prominent, every category of factors matters occasionally. These distributions are roughly consistent with the analysis here. His theory of policy change, however, is less consistent with the historical case studies aggregated here. Kingdon emphasizes focusing events and new data on policy, sometimes implying that one of the two is necessary to open a window for policy change; these factors are only present sometimes in the case studies. His discussion of the political stream is also more limited than implied by the aggregated case studies. Kingdon emphasizes national liberal or conservative moods and interest group mobilization but changes in public opinion and new group mobilization are rarely

mentioned in the explanations analyzed here. The explanations do contain plenty of the policy entrepreneurs envisioned by Kingdon, such as Members of Congress and interest groups, but also emphasize the consistent role of the President. The explanations also imply that these entrepreneurs can sometimes achieve change without a large number of other factors supporting change. The policy histories imply that policy can be changed in significant ways without a joining of independent streams: changes in the public mood, new information on policy problems, and entrepreneurs with ideas can all matter but they are not always present together when policy changes.

Finally, the explanations for policy change aggregated here are not too consistent with the emphasis on incremental policy development and path dependence in the literature on institutional development (see Pierson 2004). Though policy changes are sometimes influenced by previous decisions or long-term trends, the influence process is typically straightforward. Most commonly, Congress gives itself the task of regularly revisiting a policy through authorization or appropriations. Secondarily, Congress sometimes gives a vague task to administrative departments or the courts; in the eyes of historical analysts, the other branches occasionally respond by making new policy that is limited by what Congress allowed. The explanations analyzed here also often imply that new policies can arise without important ties to previous policies. The political process around some policy changes can also occur relatively quickly, without accompanying long-term causal trends.

What Accounts for the Discrepancies?

Since this project is a work in progress, the findings should be considered preliminary. It is possible that discrepancies between previous theory and this research partially reflect the incomplete nature of this study. First, I have not covered all policy areas. I have concentrated on an unrepresentative sample of issue areas that leans toward social policy. The findings so far show that there are significant differences in attributed causes of policy change across policy areas so I expect

to find that adding new issue areas will change the aggregate results. Second, I have not yet covered all relevant scholarship in the policy areas that I cover here. It is possible that the explanations of these authors will be different than those found in uncoded books and articles.

There are also some generic problems with the research method that may limit the applicability of findings. First, some scholars will be skeptical of case analysis and historical narratives. I am merely taking the word of each of these scholars, aggregating their explanations. I have confirmed that different explanations of the same policy change by different authors are quite similar, but I have not independently confirmed their findings. Second, aggregating the case studies may lose some of the depth in the original explanations. Some authors imply conjunctural causality or rank the importance of various factors, for example; our codes have noted this, when obvious, but sometimes it is difficult to code narratives that are not designed to become quantitative data.

The third generic problem with the method is the lack of null cases, attempted policy changes that were not enacted. Though some authors do present in-depth studies of attempted policy changes that failed, most do not. Even when discussing failure to change policy, most authors refer to a general attempt or set of attempts to solve a problem or advance a category of solutions, rather than pointing to a specific bill or regulation that was never enacted. Theoretically, one could look at all legislation introduced on a given topic, though the equivalent population for executive orders, agency directives, and court cases would be difficult to find. Even bill introductions, however, would account for only a small percentage of all attempts to change federal policy. Following every policy suggestion by interest groups, bureaucrats, media outlets, or citizens would be even more daunting. The inherent limitation is that the analysis will be based on selecting on the dependent variable, enacted policy change. Case study authors have some responses to critiques of this method, however. Close analysis of policy change over long periods should provide some expertise in identifying causal factors. In other words, if an author says that legislation passed due to

presidential support, advocacy group lobbying, and a focusing event, they presumably observed enough to know that these circumstances were not common over the period they studied.

Of course, the extant literature on the politics of the policy process also suffers from some defects that may account for the discrepancies that I observe. First, most of the empirical evidence is theory-driven analysis of particular cases. All scholars have to select issues, time periods, and variables to track. Even if scholars do not cherry pick cases that fit their theory, it is quite likely that studying evidence with a theory in mind changes your focus. Existing theories of the policy process were undoubtedly developed through a combination of both inductive and deductive reasoning, with the policy changes scholars know best informing their theory development and case selection. It is also possible that each theory is used to correctly analyze distinct cases, with all theories correct in some circumstances and no existing theory correct in other unstudied circumstances.

Second, existing theoretical frameworks may be designed to be more parsimonious than the complexity of the policy process warrants. Whereas qualitative analysts and storytellers are concerned with detail and illustration, researchers driven to nomothetic explanations are likely to look for a few key variables. The policymaking process in the U.S. federal government is quite complex, however; it relies on a large number of institutions and players and many detailed rules and customs and it involves ideas about almost every topic of concern to society. There is little reason to expect a priori that it will conform to a few general patterns. Third, the literature on the politics of the policy process is not the only research that investigates the determinants of policy outcomes. Literatures on Congress, administrative rulemaking, the presidency, public law, political parties, interest groups, social movements, and many other topics also include theories of why public policy changes, as do literatures on every individual public policy area. Theories of the policy process often attempt to collapse all of these different topics to come up with a general theory of policymaking. Yet it seems likely that the policy process works differently in distinct venues, with different players,

in different time periods, or in covering different topics. Scholars should refrain from assuming that the frameworks used in the politics of the policy process literature exhaust the alternative views of policymaking present in political science.

Conclusion

We have a lot to learn about the politics of the policy process. Even though the U.S. federal government is probably the most studied policymaking system in the world, we still have conflicting theories about how it operates. Our theories also appear to highlight some factors that disinterested historical reviews rarely find important and may also ignore some factors that are referenced repeatedly in qualitative accounts. Aggregating qualitative analyses of policy change offers a new picture of the policymaking process that should encourage us to reevaluate existing theories.

A preliminary analysis of research on civil rights, education, environmental policy, community development, and science policy since 1945 indicates that observers of policy history attribute policy change to at least 50 different factors but that no factor is judged important in more than one-third of explanations. Policy histories in these areas also demonstrate frequent policy changes in diverse venues, though legislation is certainly the most common form of policy change. Explanations for policy change reference the executive branch and interest groups more often than other sets of factors; Congressional factors and real-world events are the next most frequent components of explanations for policy change. When specific proponents of policy change are identified, they are almost always within Congress, the executive branch or interest groups.

Qualitative accounts show that there are important differences in the types of factors contributing to policy change across venues, across issue areas, and across time. Explanations for legislative and judicial change most commonly cite interest groups, for example, and explanations for administrative change cite path dependence; public opinion is cited disproportionately in

presidential actions. Explanations for civil rights policy change disproportionately involve interest groups whereas public opinion and partisanship are cited more often in education policy.

Differences across time are also frequent; the judicial branch, for example, is cited more often for policy changes in the 1950s and 1970s whereas the executive branch is said to play more of a role in the 1960s and 1990s.

Given the complexity, scholars of the politics of the policy process may have to become comfortable with a causal world where lots of things matter, a little bit, sometimes. We cannot easily jettison any category of potential causal factors in the policy process. Yet no type of factor may be relevant all the time, or even most of the time. Each factor may have a small influence, rather than be necessary or sufficient. The causal relevance of each factor may also depend on the issue area, the time, and the venue. If we seek to build a theory of the policy process, rather than of an individual institution or policy area, we may have to be accepting of the complexity and the ambiguity.

I hope that there is also a lesson in these findings about methodology. Every form of policy research involves many judgment calls with implications for what scholars look for and what they find. If we are to take advantage of the close analysis that comes with qualitative research, we may have to sacrifice standardization of procedure. Aggregation of explanations for policy change in historical narratives is one method of assessing how different research strategies lead to distinct findings. I would not claim that atheoretical recitations of the people and events surrounding policy change is the best method of inquiry, only that it offers something valuable and different than other types of research. Ideally, we could work toward a “correlates of policy change” dataset that includes null cases and measurements of every potential causal factor. Until that type of analysis is possible, however, we will be left with incomplete data. Aggregating what we think we know so far may be a useful technique for building knowledge in the face of this uncertainty.

Table 1: Types of Significant Policy Changes

	Policy Changes
Legislative	72.2%
Administrative/Regulatory	10.3%
Presidential	10.6%
Judicial	12.8%

These percentages are taken out of 273 policy change identifications by authors. The total is more than 100% because a few policy changes involved more than one venue.

Table 2: Partisanship of Significant Policy Changes

	Policy Change Explanations
Partisan – Republicans More Supportive	4.4%
Partisan – Democrats More Supportive	12.1%
Bipartisan	12.8%
Neither Party Part of Explanation	70.7%

Table 3: Types of Factors Mentioned in Explanations for Significant Policy Changes

	Policy Change Explanations
Congressional Factors	23.4%
Executive Branch Factors	39.2%
Judicial Branch Factors	14.7%
State & Local Factors	10.6%
Interest Group Factors	35.2%
International Factors	9.9%
Public Opinion Factors	14.7%
Events	22%
Path Dependence	18.3%

These percentages are taken out of 273 explanations. Most explanations involved more than one factor.

Table 4: Congressional Factors Mentioned in Explanations for Policy Change

	Policy Change Explanations
Change in Party Control of Congress	3.3%
Supportive Chair of Congressional Committee	4.8%
Supportive Congressional Leadership	4.8%
Supportive Individual Member of Congress	8.4%
Ability to Reach Agreement Between House and Senate	13.6%
Success in a Key Vote on the Floor of the House or Senate	4.4%
Success in a Key Vote in a Congressional Committee	1.5%
Congressional Lobbying	10.3%
Constituent Pressure	7.7%

Table 5: Executive & Judicial Branch Factors in Explanations for Policy Change

	Policy Change Explanations
Supportive President	31.1%
Supportive Cabinet Secretary	2.2%
Supportive Agency Director	6.6%
Government Report Issued	7%
Court Ruling Required Action	12.5%
Fear of Court Ruling	1.8%
Threats of Lawsuits	2.6%

Table 6: State and Local Factors in Explanations for Policy Change

	Policy Change Explanations
Example Taken from State Action	9.5%
Example Taken from Local Action	2.9%
Report by State Officials	0.7%
Modeled on Specific State Plan	2.2%

Table 7: International Factors in Explanations for Policy Change

	Policy Change Explanations
Foreign Example	1.8%
International Pressure or Competitiveness	8.8%
International Government Agreement	2.2%

Table 8: Interest Group Factors in Explanations for Policy Change

	Policy Change Explanations
Supportive Advocacy Group(s) / Non-Governmental Organization	22.3%
Supportive Corporation(s)	2.6%
Supportive Professional Association(s)	4.8%
Supportive Union(s)	2.9%
Supportive Academics / Scientists	6.6%
Change in Position by Interest Group	0.7%
Supportive Think Tank	2.2%
Supportive Foundation	2.2%
Report Issued by Interest Group	6.6%
New Interest Group Mobilization	1.8%
Protest/Demonstration	4.8%
Financial Advantage of Proponents	1.1%

Table 9: Public Opinion Factors in Explanations for Policy Change

	Policy Change Explanations
General Media Coverage of Problem	6.2%
Specific Media Report	2.9%
Change in Public Opinion	4.4%
Issue Raised in Election Campaign	5.5%

Table 10: Events in Explanations for Policy Change

	Policy Change Explanations
Event Highlights Problem	12.8%
Event Highlights Unsuccessful Policy	2.2%
New Data Arises on Problem	5.5%
Affected by Ongoing War or Military Event	4%
Affected by Economic Downturn	4%

Table 11: Path Dependence in Explanations for Policy Change

	Policy Change Explanations
Change Extends Earlier Policy	7.7%
Affected by Early Policy Choice	11.7%
Earlier Policy Choice Eliminated a Policy Alternative	4.8%

Figure 1: Civil Rights Policy Timeline

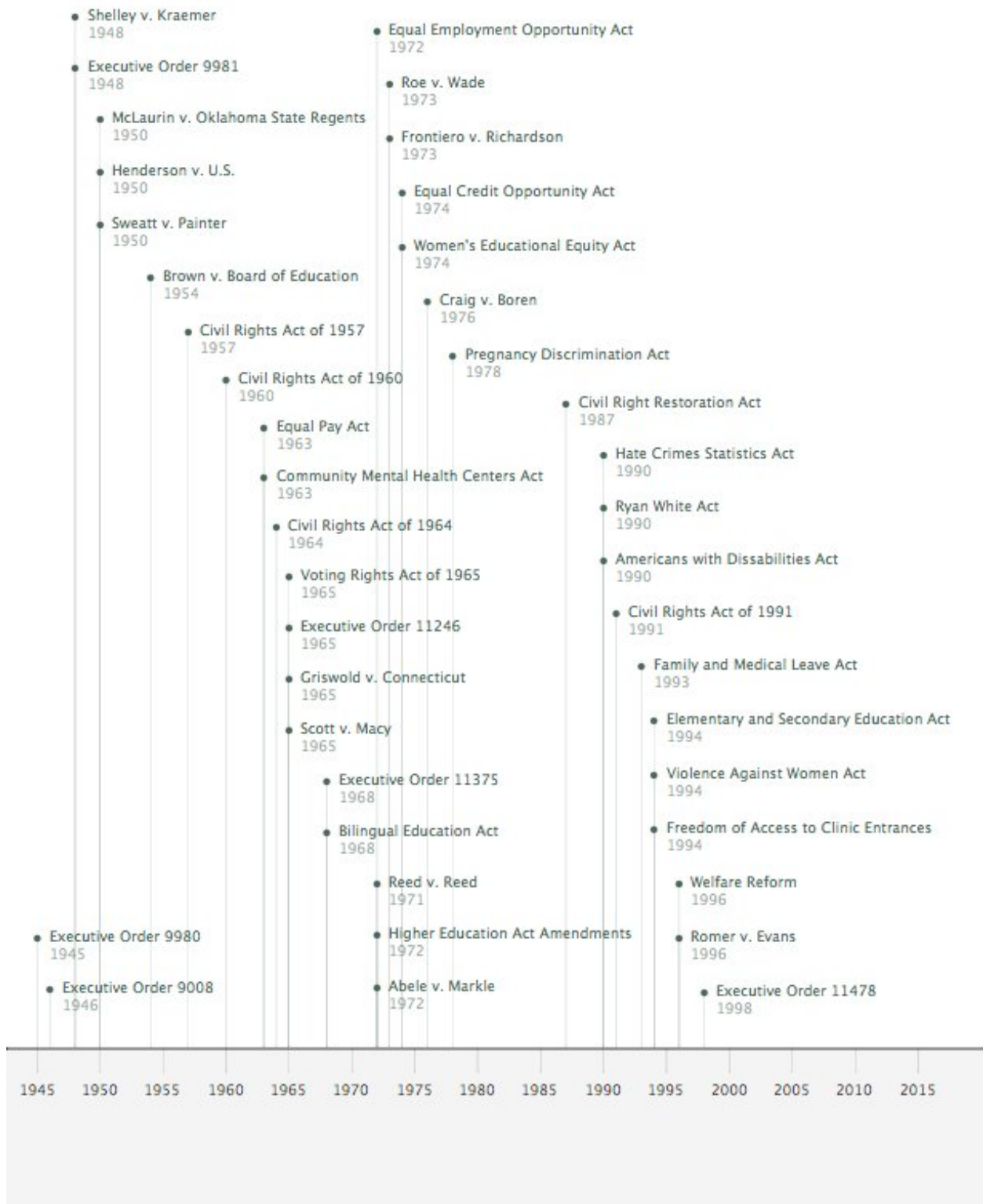


Figure 2: Education Policy Timeline



Figure 3: Environmental Policy Timeline



Figure 4: Housing & Community Development Policy Timeline



Figure 5: Types of Factors Involved in Different Policymaking Arenas

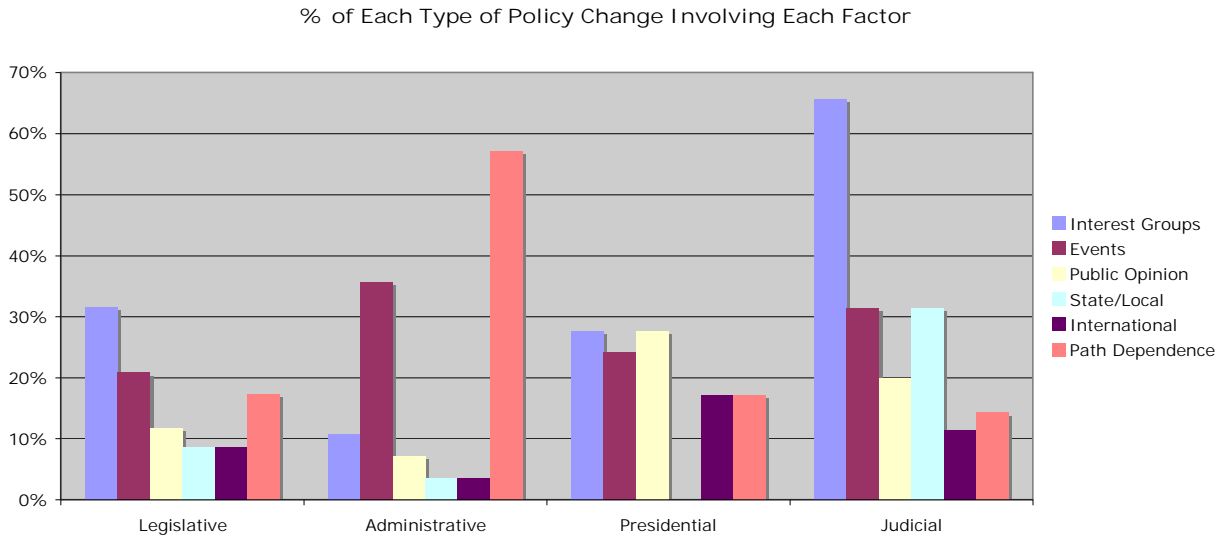


Figure 6: Types of Factors Involved in Different Policy Topic Areas

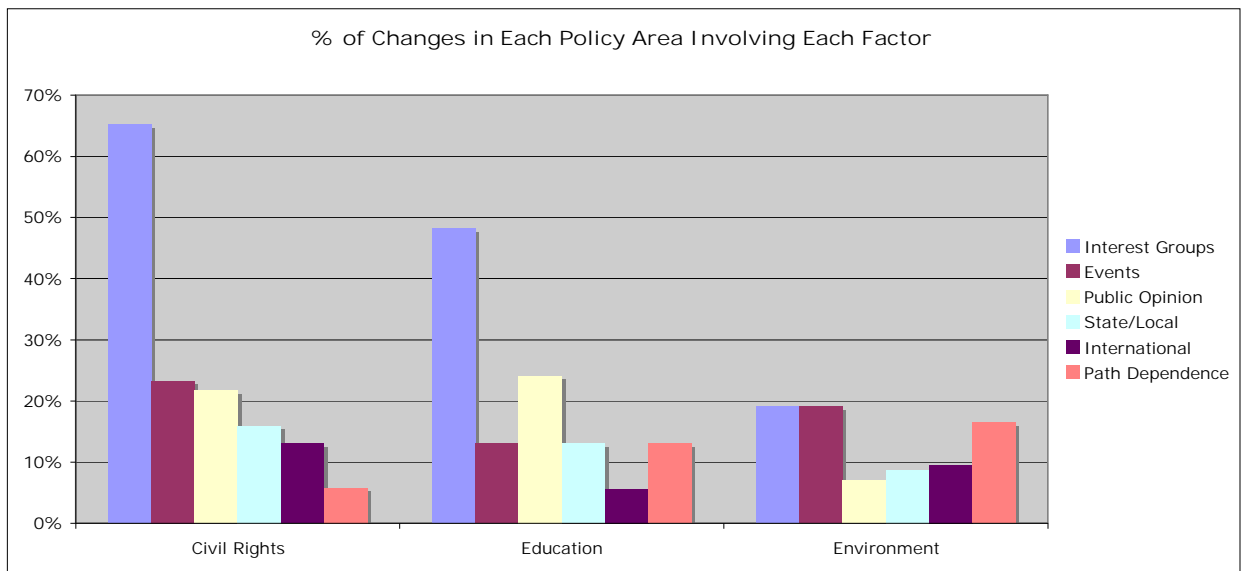


Figure 7: Types of Partisanship Involved in Different Policy Topic Areas

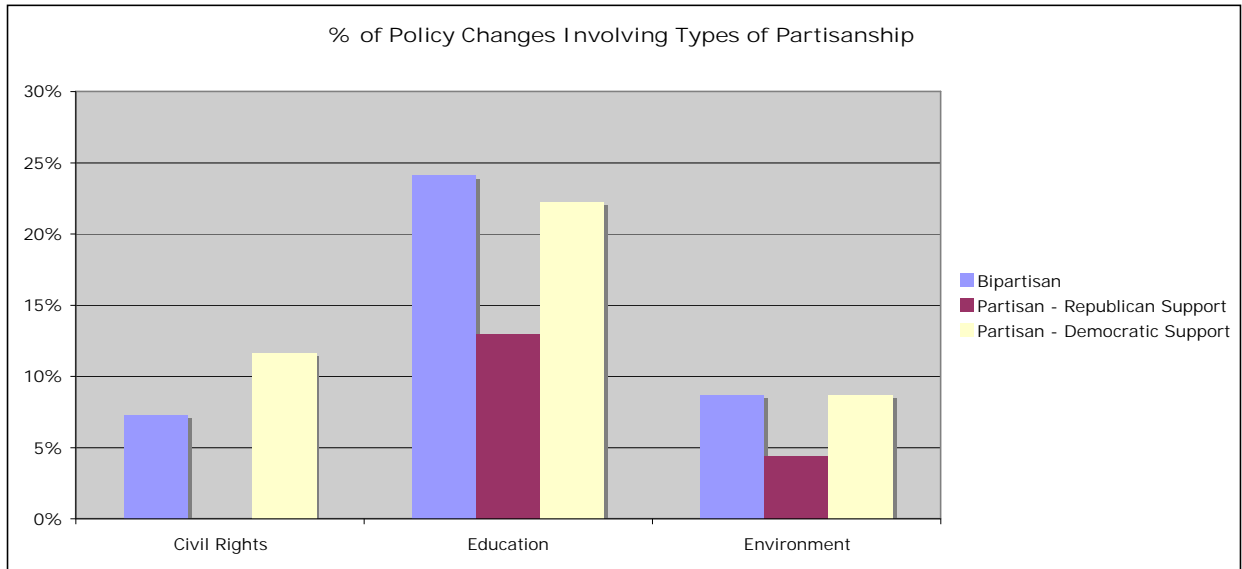
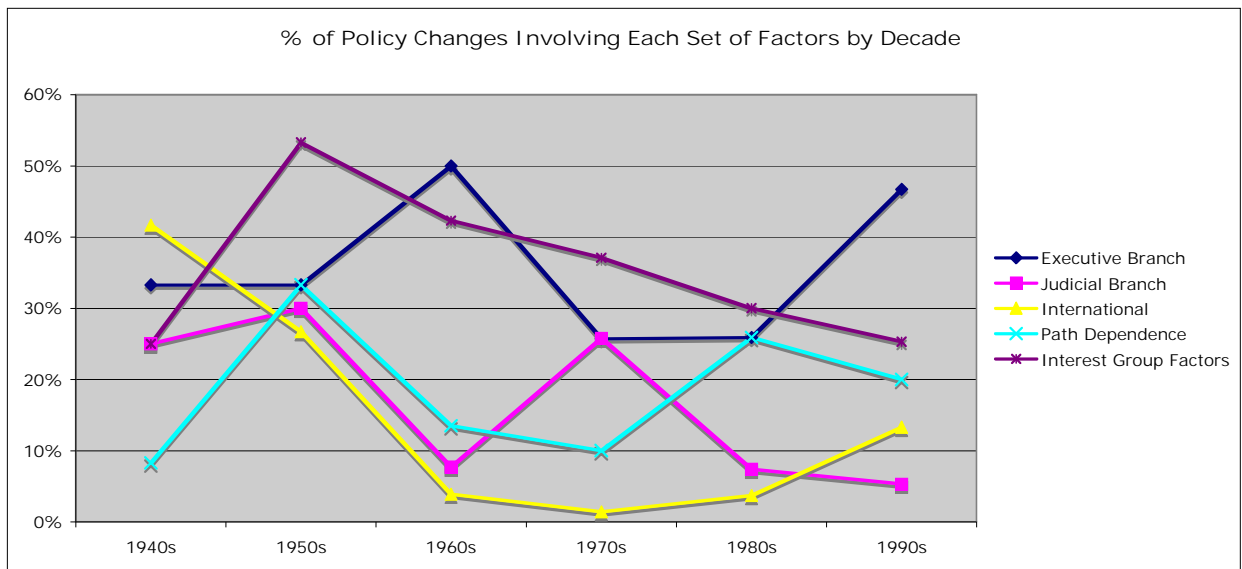


Figure 8: Change Over Time in Explanatory Factors



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