

## CHAPTER 33

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**PAUL A. SABATIER, “AN  
ADVOCACY COALITION  
FRAMEWORK OF POLICY  
CHANGE AND THE ROLE OF  
POLICY-ORIENTED  
LEARNING THEREIN”**

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**THE ADVOCACY COALITION FRAMEWORK**

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THE Advocacy Coalition Framework is one of the most influential approaches to public policy to emerge from the 1990s. It is highly cited and its approach has been used in over 80 studies of public policy, primarily in the US but also in a wide range of developed countries. It is one of a small number of prominent approaches developed in the US after Hecló’s (1978: 94–7) famous identification of a departure from the simple “clubby days of Washington politics” toward “complex relationships” among a huge, politically active population. Issues which were once “quietly managed by a small group of insiders” have now become “controversial and politicized” (Hecló 1978: 105). Its key aim is to make sense of such complex policy-making systems which:

- contain multiple actors and levels of government;
- process policy in very different ways, from intensely politicized disputes containing many actors in some areas, to issues that are treated as technical or specialist and processed routinely, largely by policy specialists, out of the public spotlight;
- produce decisions based on limited information and often high levels of uncertainty and ambiguity; and

- take considerable time (perhaps “a decade or more”) to turn decisions into outcomes.

The ACF is distinctive in a number of ways. First, it is relatively ambitious, seeking to produce what we might consider to be the closest thing to a general theory of policy-making. Second, it has been subject to an unusually high number of revisions in the light of experience and a desire to extend its insights beyond the US. Third, the framework is largely predicated on the idea that people engage in politics to translate their beliefs, rather than their simple material interests, into action. Consequently, at its heart is a system in which coalitions of actors with different belief systems interact and compete to dominate policy subsystems. Fourth, the description of subsystems appears to be different from most conceptualizations of policy communities or networks, which often describe the great potential for insulated relationships between groups and government (Cairney 2012: 203). Rather, a wide range of actors are involved within each coalition. Fifth, it represents not only an approach to the study of contemporary public policy but also a set of ideas about how we should conduct scientific inquiry. For example, its rejection of the use of cycles and stages to explain policy-making is based as much on scientific criteria as conceptual or empirical concerns. Consequently, its proponents—and Paul Sabatier in particular—have influenced the discussion of public policy as a discipline and a branch of science.

## A SUMMARY OF THE ACF

An advocacy coalition contains “people from a variety of positions (elected and agency officials, interest group leaders, researchers) who share a particular belief system—i.e. a set of basic values, causal assumptions, and problem perceptions—and who show a non-trivial degree of coordinated activity over time” (Sabatier 1988: 139). The ACF focuses on the interaction between competing advocacy coalitions within a policy subsystem which, in turn, operates within a wider political system and external environment. Its description of subsystems paints a picture of a relatively open, multi-level policy-making system:

Our conception of policy subsystems should be broadened from traditional notions of iron triangles limited to administrative agencies, legislative committees, and interest groups at a single level of government to include actors at various levels of government, as well as journalists, researchers and policy analysts who play important roles in the generation, dissemination, and evaluation of policy ideas. (Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier 1993a: 179)

This picture results partly from a focus on the role of ideas in policy-making—actors may be influential because they articulate important ideas, not simply because they can exercise power. It focuses in particular on the importance of belief systems: many

actors may be influential because they share a set of beliefs with a large number of others; translating those beliefs into policy decisions and outcomes is a common project. Beliefs are the “glue” that keeps a large number of actors together. There are three main types:

- *Deep Core Beliefs.* These regard an actor’s “underlying personal philosophy,” often expressed as a point on the left/right-wing continuum (Sabatier 1993: 30). Examples include: beliefs on whether people are evil or socially redeemable; how we should rank values such as freedom and security; and whose welfare should count the most (Sabatier, 1998: 103).
- *Policy Core Beliefs.* These regard “fundamental policy positions.” Examples include: the proper balance between government and market and the proper distribution of power across levels of government (Sabatier 1993: 31; 1998: 110).
- *Secondary Aspects.* These relate to the funding, delivery, and implementation of policy goals (1993: 31).

Core beliefs span most policy areas and are the least susceptible to change in light of empirical evidence (“akin to a religious conversion”—Sabatier 1993: 31, 36). They are too broad to guide policy-specific behavior. Instead, policy core beliefs are employed within particular subsystems. Although policy core beliefs are more susceptible to change, they are generally stable within the period of study (over the period of one policy cycle of a “decade or so”—Sabatier and Weible 2007: 193). Any “enlightenment function” may take place over decades because beliefs are “primarily normative—and thus largely beyond direct empirical challenge” (Sabatier 1993: 44). In most cases, change refers to “secondary aspects,” when beliefs on the routine delivery of specific policies are refined according to new information (1993: 31, 221).

Coalitions interact within policy subsystems, defined simply as a broader “set of actors who are involved in dealing with a policy problem” (Sabatier 1988: 138). It includes varying number of coalitions (usually from one to four), policy “brokers,” whose role is to minimize conflict and produce workable compromises between coalitions, and a “sovereign” or “government authority” to make policy decisions and oversee the policy-making infrastructure. Although there is generally more than one coalition, it is not unusual for one coalition to dominate the subsystem for long periods or for a negotiated settlement to favor the beliefs of one coalition. Further, although brokers and sovereigns are separated analytically, it is often difficult to know where coalitions end and policy-makers begin, since governmental organizations may often appear to hold, and act on, beliefs consistent with those of a particular advocacy coalition.

Policy subsystems exist within a wider system (Figure 33.1) that sets the parameters for action and provides each coalition with different constraints and opportunities. It includes:

- factors that are “relatively stable” over the time period generally studied (a “decade or more”), such as “social values” and the broad “constitutional structure”;

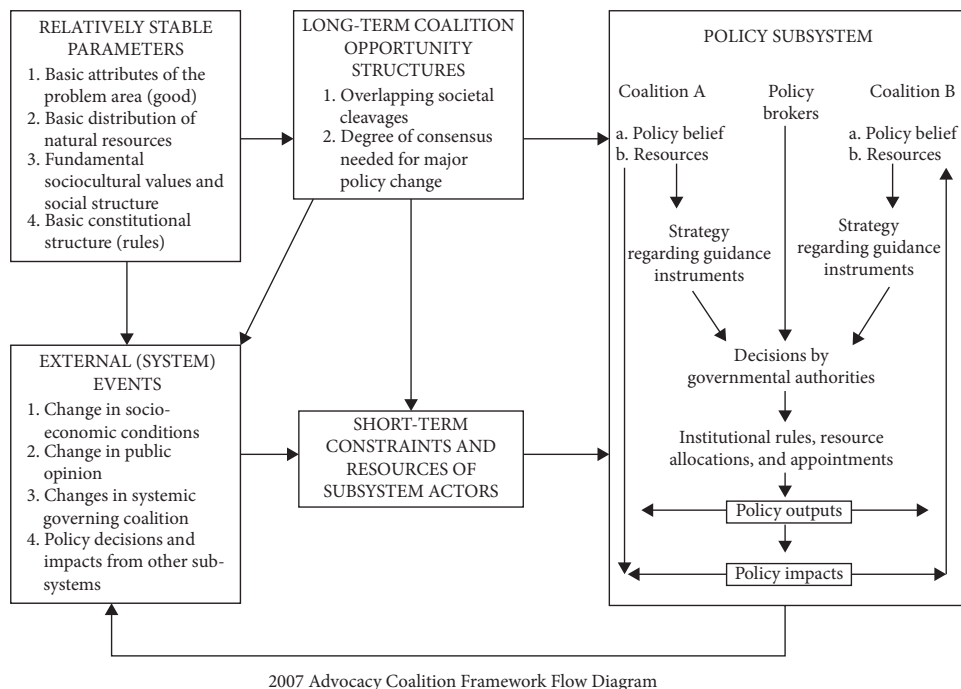


FIG. 33.1 The ACF Flow Diagram (2007 version)

Source: Weible et al. 2009: 123

- the “long term coalition opportunity structures” related to the nature of political systems—e.g. are there multiple, open venues or a small number of centralized processes? Do governments control majorities or need to cooperate with other parties?; and,
- “external (system) events,” such as socioeconomic change, a change in government, or the impact from decisions made in other subsystems.

Although the ACF is built on a critique of the “stages heuristic” (to be discussed shortly), it still focuses on change over a “decade or more” to allow (albeit notionally) for a full policy cycle. Coalitions interact, a decision is made, institutions are set up or modified, the impacts of policy outputs are evaluated, and the information is interpreted differently by each coalition learning from previous decisions and adapting their strategies (in line with that new information and external events) during the next cycle.

There are two main sources and types of change in this framework (if we exclude major changes to coalitions following an “enlightenment function” that may take decades to occur). The first is relatively minor policy change that takes place within subsystems: coalitions engage in policy learning, adapting the secondary aspects of their belief systems in light of new information. Learning has a particular meaning

in the ACF (compare with other forms of learning described by Bennett and Howlett 1992). It takes place through the lens of deeply held policy beliefs; coalitions learn on their own terms—selecting the information they hold to be most relevant and acceding only to change which does not undermine the coalition's main source of cooperation.

Coalitions also engage in a form of learning to adapt to the beliefs of another coalition, particularly when its views become “too important to ignore” (Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier 1993b: 43). However, they do not simply accept the arguments of other coalitions and adopt their preferred policies. Learning is a political process and “not a disinterested search for ‘truth’” (Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier 1993b: 45; Sabatier 1988: 151). Information on the success of policy is limited and subject to framing by each coalition. In some cases, there are commonly accepted ways to measure policy performance. In others, it is a battle of ideas which takes place in the context of a tendency of coalitions to “exaggerate the influence and maliciousness of opponents” (Weible 2007: 99). Technical information is often used “primarily in an ‘advocacy’ fashion” (Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier 1993b: 45; Sabatier 1988: 152) and a dominant coalition can successfully challenge the data supporting policy change for years (Sabatier 1998: 104). This process generally does not produce major changes in policy or the balance of power between coalitions. Rather, coalitions interpret and frame new information in line with their core and policy beliefs. In most cases, learning follows the routine monitoring of policy implementation, as members consider how policy contributes to positive or unintended outcomes and whether their beliefs regarding the best way to solve the policy problem are challenged or supported by the evidence.

The second is relatively major change prompted largely by external events. Events may set in motion “internal” or “external shocks” to subsystems, with the potential to alter coalitions and the balance of power between them. An internal shock relates to the effect of major external change on a coalition's belief system, akin to a crisis of confidence. The event prompts a coalition to revisit its policy core beliefs, perhaps following a realization by many actors that existing policies have failed monumentally, and their consequent departure to a different coalition. An external shock has the added element of coalition competition—another coalition uses the experience of a major event to reinforce its position within the subsystem, largely by demonstrating that its belief system is best equipped to interpret and solve the policy problem. In other words, the major event is not enough to cause an external shock; it also has to be exploited successfully by a competing coalition which is better equipped to learn and adapt. Such processes may vary, from the election of a new government with beliefs that favor one coalition over another, to a “focusing event” such as an environmental crisis that undermines the ability of a coalition to defend current policy or allows another coalition to successfully redefine the policy problem and seek new solutions. In each case, some coalitions may be a source of stability and there is a process of mediation within subsystems. While many of these external factors—such as global recession, environmental crises,

and demographic changes—appear to have an independent causal value, coalitions influence how sovereigns understand, interpret, and respond to them. External events provide new resources to some coalitions. It is then up to those coalitions to use them.

In other words, coalitions have to exercise power effectively to maintain or improve their positions within subsystems. This regards a mix of resources available to them—resources to gather and interpret information, the weight of public opinion and their ability to rally active public support, their funding—and the skillfulness of their leadership (Sabatier 1993: 29; Weible 2006: 99–100; Sabatier and Weible 2007: 201–3).

## ACF EXPANSION AND REVISION

The ACF is based on a “Lakatosian” approach to science (Jenkins-Smith, in correspondence, 2010; Cairney 2012: 219). In effect, the ACF as a scientific project resembles an advocacy coalition: secondary aspects are amended in the light of empirical testing, while the core remains relatively insulated and the policy core is unlikely to change in the absence of a monumental failure to explain its object of study (Cairney 2013). As in an advocacy coalition, its main authors are unlikely to reject the ACF as a broad understanding of the policy-making system, but they are more likely than most policy scholars to revise certain aspects of their theory in the light of experience. There is a difficult balance to maintain: a “Popperian” attachment to falsifying hypotheses derived from the theory operates alongside a theory that is revised to maintain its value.

This revision process has taken place regularly since 1993 and the ACF flow diagram in Figure 33.1 differs markedly from the original model derived from studies of the US (in areas such as environmental policy). Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith’s review sought to clarify:

- the role of administrative organizations (as potential members of coalitions but also relatively subject to belief-change following a change of government) and “hierarchically superior jurisdictions” which may, in rare cases, override subsystem policy in the face of opposition from the dominant coalition (1993: 217; Sabatier 1998: 119);
- the impact of technical information on policy (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993: 219);
- the difference, within policy core beliefs, between “normative precepts” that are unlikely to change, and “precepts with a substantial empirical content” that are more likely to change in the light of new evidence (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993: 220–1); and,

- that an external event will not cause subsystem change unless at least one coalition has the skill to exploit its new opportunity (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993: 222).

Further revisions were prompted by the rise in ACF applications to countries other than the US. For example, the relative subsystem stability may only apply to “mature” subsystems and they may not yet have developed in “nascent” subsystems (Sabatier 1998: 110–14; Sabatier and Weible 2007: 192). Sabatier and Weible (2007: 199) also sought to address wider criticisms:

that it is too much of product of its empirical origins in American pluralism. It makes largely tacit assumptions about well-organized interest groups, mission-oriented agencies, weak political parties, multiple decision making venues, and the need for supermajorities to enact and implement major policy change.

The ACF diagram was revised to reflect: (a) the generally higher “degree of consensus needed to institute a major policy change” in political systems with proportional representation elections and a norm of minority or coalition government (Sabatier 1998: 121; Sabatier and Weible 2007: 200); and (b) the often-lower availability of multiple, open venues in “corporatist” systems characterized by centralized decision-making, restricted to a small number of leaders of business groups and unions (2007: 200). Both factors combine to produce the relatively new “long-term coalition opportunity structures” box in Figure 33.1. The main authors also generally advise caution when applying the ACF to countries in which we might make different assumptions about, for example, the role of the civil service (only some countries have politically appointed bureaucrats), the relationships between levels and types of government (not all countries have a US-style constitution setting out their respective responsibilities), and the balance of power between political parties (Sabatier 1998). A combination of such factors suggests that subsystems, as the main focus of analysis, can be defined in quite different ways in different systems (Cairney 2012: 214).

A further major revision by Sabatier and Weible (2007: 204–7) identified two sources of policy change: the distinction between internal and external shocks, already described, and “alternative dispute resolution”, which refers to the conditions (including a widespread recognition of stalemate, a process that includes stakeholders who respect a neutral chair, and an ability to resolve issues empirically) in which major policy change can result from negotiated agreements between “previously warring coalitions” (2007: 205–7). More recent revisions include attempts to provide better descriptions of the role of public opinion, from simply being subsumed under “socioeconomic conditions” as a source of external constraint, towards treating it as a resource to be used and manipulated by coalitions (Jones and Jenkins-Smith 2009: 39).

## HOW THE ACF HAS SHAPED THINKING AND RESEARCH

According to John (2003: 481), the ACF was one of two approaches (alongside punctuated equilibrium theory) to mark a “punctuation” in thinking about public policy.” Its most famous exposition (Sabatier and Jenkin-Smith 1993) has been cited over 2,200 times and several related works have been cited from 1,200 to 1,870 times in the last 15–20 years. It has produced over 80 applications in publications by the authors, their colleagues, and other inspired scholars (Weible et al. 2009) and is now an almost-automatic inclusion in textbooks and overviews of the policy literature (including Birkland 2005; Cairney 2012; John 2012; Smith and Larimer 2009). It has been used regularly to explain policy-making outside the US: in the European Union and some member states; in countries such as Canada, Australia, Sweden, and Japan; and, in fewer cases, Africa, South America, and Asia (Sabatier and Weible 2007: 217–20; Weible et al. 2009: 125). Some of the most cited examples include: forestry policy (Elliott and Schlaepfer 2001a, 2001b); drug policy in Switzerland (Kübler 2001); California marine protected area policy (Weible 2006), and the US President’s National Economic Council (Dolan 2003).

However, such applications have been limited in two main ways. First, most ACF case studies “remain within environmental and energy policies” (Weible et al. 2009: 125) which could exaggerate, for example, the importance of the European Union (environmental policy is the most Europeanized, compared to areas such as health and education with often-minimal EU involvement) and international cooperation or international organizations (Litfin 2000).

Second, the ACF is often applied in a rather loose way, often without adopting the methods, recommended by its main authors (Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier, 1993c), that tend to be used by authors who became closely associated with the ACF (e.g. see Weible 2007: 104; Zafonte and Sabatier 2004). The ACF may be used, as part of a desktop exercise, to provide one of many conceptual perspectives on an empirical case study that has been produced relatively independently of the ACF method (Cairney 2013: 9). Case studies may be “ACF-inspired” without testing any of its hypotheses (Weible et al. 2009: 128)—a limitation that may seem particularly problematic for a framework designed to generate hypotheses to allow confirmation or revision.

That said, many of the 80 studies covered by Weible et al. (2009) confirm that a major external event is a necessary but insufficient condition for major subsystem change (18 studies) and that it often, but not always, prompts a significant number of members to defect to other coalitions (13 studies). Others (20 studies) broadly confirm that policy learning across coalitions tends to be more likely in less contentious areas with relatively high potential to resolve issues empirically. In other words, despite these limitations, the ACF has still been subject to an unusually high amount of testing in a field



(political science and public policy) that has not produced many studies in which people examine the world using a common framework organized by a small number of scientists (other examples include the Policy Agendas Project (PAP), <<http://www.policyagendas.org>>, and the Institutional Analysis and Development Framework (IAD), Poteete et al. 2010).

## The ACF and Science

A further aspect of the ACF's influence is that represents not only an approach to the study of contemporary public policy but also a set of ideas about how we should practice science. The ACF itself was generally modeled on a "Lakatosian" approach to science and Paul Sabatier (1999, 2007) in particular sought to use some of these ideas about the scientific study of policy-making to set the agenda for the evaluation—and possible combination or rejection—of the most popular theories of public policy.

Sabatier (2007b: 330; 1999) highlights three main advantages to the use of multiple theories: it provides "some guarantee against assuming that a particular theory is the valid one"; it shows us that "different theories may have comparative advantages in different settings"; and, the knowledge of other theories "should make one much more sensitive to some of the implicit assumptions in one's favoured theory." He then outlines a set of principles that can be used to decide how useful a theory might be in general or in particular situations. A similar approach was used by Eller and Krutz (2009) in a special issue of the *Policy Studies Journal*.

It is important not to enforce this set of criteria too strongly. For example, Cairney (2013: 10) combines their (Sabatier 2007b; Eller and Krutz 2009) arguments to produce a simple set of principles for scientific comparison:

1. A theory's methods should be explained so that they can be replicated by others.
2. Its concepts should be clearly defined, logically consistent and give rise to empirically falsifiable hypotheses.
3. Its propositions should be as general as possible.
4. It should set out clearly what the causal processes are.
5. It should be subject to empirical testing and revision.

As stated, these principles are difficult to live up to fully (indeed, it is debatable if even the ACF lives up to them—Cairney 2013: 10). They have the potential to present a misleading picture of scientific research, ignoring the extent to which studies are generally *not* replicated (we accept a large number of findings on trust); people follow different rules and engage on different terms when discussing research (without a way for us to decide which terms are the most appropriate); and a complex world does not allow us to falsify hypotheses in a straightforward way (if at all). In other words, there is an inescapably subjective element to scientific research in which we pursue our beliefs, and confirm or deny the value of theories, by using criteria that do not allow us to validate

one claim and reject another unproblematically (Cairney 2013: 11–12; see Parsons 2000: 129 for stronger criticisms). On this basis, people like Radaelli (2000: 134) present important objections to the unquestioning adherence to these principles, calling for a balance between our needs to generalize (to explain a small part of all cases) and to be more specific (to explain a large part of particular cases).

Yet we can infer Sabatier’s attitude to science in more than one way—although he makes a public commitment to certain principles, he does not necessarily use them in an overly narrow or too punitive way. Take, for example, the use of these principles in a rather hard way to question the value of the “stages heuristic” (a focus on the policy cycle as it follows certain stages, including agenda setting, formulation, legitimation, implementation, evaluation, and maintenance/termination). Sabatier (1991: 147) argues strongly that it “has outlived its usefulness and must be replaced, in large part because it is not a causal theory.” This argument is outlined in greater depth in texts such as Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier (1993a, 1994), but with a combination of criticisms based on scientific principles (it “does not provide a clear basis for empirical hypothesis-testing”) and an argument, that can be found in the wider literature, about its descriptive limitations (which have already prompted a whole series of alternatives to stage-based research— Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier 1994: 177–8; Cairney 2012: 41). In other words, this is a combination of a specific attachment to scientific principles with a broader (and perhaps more openly subjective) focus on the extent to which an approach is valuable. Further, Sabatier (1999) proved, at least temporarily, able to humor the approaches of which he did not approve (also note Sabatier’s (1986) earlier engagement with the implementation literature) and we can see the same mixed attitude towards multiple streams analysis in Sabatier (1991, 1999, 2007b).

In other words, if we read the language used by Sabatier (2007b: 8–10), it often appears softer on scientific criteria; establishing a commitment to them but being reasonably open to challenge. For example, “Each framework must do a *reasonably good job* of meeting the criteria of a scientific theory” and “be the subject of a *fair amount* of recent conceptual development and/or empirical testing” (2007: 8, emphasis added). Further, Sabatier (2007: 8) uses rather subjective criteria for the inclusion of theories in his edited books, including a statement that could just as easily have been made by Fischer (2003): “A number of currently active policy scholars must view it as a viable way of understanding the policy process” (Sabatier 2007: 8).

Indeed, Sabatier’s own reflection on his scientific bent (2000: 137) describes perhaps an impish description of his position—“presuppositionist neo-positivist”—and a more serious, broad commitment to good communication between scientists, summed up by the Popper-like phrase “be clear enough to be proven wrong.” As Jenkins-Smith (2013) describes, “it was fine to be wrong as long as you were *clearly* wrong (and hence could learn from it) ... clarity begets clarity, mush begets mush.” This broad attitude is appropriate in scientific fields where we rely on the knowledge of others, we seek ways to communicate and learn from each other, we need to decide who to listen to (and who to ignore), and we want to avoid fruitless debates at cross purposes (Cairney 2013: 15).

We may also want to discourage people from stretching their theories too much to match the evidence rather than seek a more convincing theory. For a “Lakatosian” approach to science, this is an incredibly tricky balancing act: between adapting your theory continuously when you admit you are wrong (risking the criticism that you are changing your ideas too much), and making sure that you are adapting to be more right rather than simply to protect the core of your argument (which includes, for the ACF, the identification of “non-trivially coordinated coalitions based on belief-systems,” the “relative autonomy of subsystems,” and the importance of focusing on policy change over a full cycle—Jenkins-Smith, in correspondence, 2010). The irony for the ACF is that it may be built on a relatively open, honest, and dynamic approach, but have the potential to look otherwise.

## CONCLUSION: THE ACF’S LEGACY ON, AND LINKS TO, THE WIDER WORLD OF PUBLIC POLICY

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There are not many policy frameworks or theories that try to provide an overview of the entire policy process; to try to explain the interaction between “the five core causal processes . . . institutions, networks, socioeconomic process, choices, and ideas” (John 2003: 488). For example, although it perhaps remains most relevant to the study of US politics (in some policy areas), it also became useful as a way to restate the importance of policy subsystems in countries like the UK facing an alleged stagnation of policy networks research (see e.g. Dowding, 1995: 147–50). Further, although it was by no means the first policy framework to discuss the important role of ideas (it owes much to the work of Majone 1980, and came after Kingdon’s 1984 influential book), it treats their importance as part of a wider explanation, perhaps reducing the potential for critics to suggest that ideas are given explanatory value independent of their acceptance and use by actors within coalitions. It is difficult to get this balance right, but the ACF often succeeds:

Raw political power may carry the day against superior evidence, but the costs to one’s credibility in a democratic society can be considerable. Moreover, resources expended—particularly in the form of favors called in—are not available for future use. Thus those who can most effectively marshal persuasive evidence, thereby conserving their political resources, are more likely to win in the long run than those who ignore technical arguments. (Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier 1993b: 44–5; compare with the similar tone in Majone 1989: 2; Kingdon 1984: 131–3; Hall 1993: 291–2).

Similarly, it goes some way to address the charge, made against previous systems and socioeconomic theorists (from Easton (1953) to Dawson and Robinson (1963)

and Hofferbert (1974)) that external factors determine, or largely explain, outcomes (Cairney 2012: 113). External factors are important, and may prompt major change, but “shocks” refer largely to the ways in which coalitions compete to adapt to, and interpret, such events. The ACF has a less developed view about the role of institutions—although its focus on a myriad of actors and organizations, at multiple levels of government, helps us understand institutions as forms of behavior linked to rules and norms accepted or challenged by different coalitions (Sabatier 1993: 25; Sabatier and Weible 2007: 194; Cairney 2012: 217). Finally, there is much less of a focus (than in most other accounts of policy-making) on “bounded rationality” (Simon 1976) as the starting point for considering how policy-makers consider and make choices, partly because issues about how someone might articulate and pursue their interests is subsumed within a consideration of the construction and operation of belief systems (Cairney 2012: 215–16; 282–3).

This degree of conceptual coverage and academic ambition may be the key to its potential longevity in the policy literature. Like the PAP and IAD, the ACF is one of a small number of approaches in policy studies linked, initially and very strongly, to a small core group of authors, before it became established as an approach that could be used without the involvement of its founders.

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