

Zsolt Boda

Policy dynamics refer to the patterns of stability and change of policies. Jones et al. (2019) argue that policy dynamics varies with regime types: policy punctuations, that is, large-scale policy changes are higher and more frequent in non-democratic (or: 'unfree') regimes which they interpret as a sign of a deficiently adaptive system of policymaking. Adaptive policymaking refers to the ability to address relevant policy problems while avoiding “overly large and erratic shifts in policy commitments” (Jones et al., 2019: 9).

Both stability and change are needed in policymaking. Stability provides a reliable institutional background for policy actors – it is not desirable that laws and regulations change frequently because this would bring unpredictability for stakeholders. However, policies sometime do have to be updated or even radically reformulated, because external circumstances change, technology develops, political preferences and values evolve. Therefore, each government develops certain capacities embodied in institutional rules and practices to deal with the dual challenge of policy stability and change (Weaver & Rockman, 1993).

Jones et al. (2019) argue that policy dynamics measured in terms of punctuation is an indicator of the quality of policy making. The empirical case of lower policy punctuation in democracies brings further evidence to those studies which uphold that democratic regimes provide better governance and more adaptive policies (Robinson & Acemoglu, 2012). The question is, which mechanisms realize the effect of the regime on policies.

Jones et al. (2019) present four basic mechanisms: friction, incentives/representation, centralization, and information. Friction is the institutional resistance to change and the authors advance empirical evidence that institutional friction in the policy process is higher under non-democratic circumstances (this finding is corroborated by many other studies, such as Sebők & Berki, 2018). But why is it lower in democracies than in autocracies? The thesis of ‘institutional efficiency’ (Baumgartner et al., 2017) of non-democratic regimes looks just as convincing: the relevant policy actors are much less numerous in autocracies and the lack of political and institutional checks and balances render radical policy reforms easier to implement. Why do 'efficient' autocracies still face larger friction? Incentives, centralization and information provide the explanation.

Incentives are set by democratic accountability in a way that motivates decision-makers to address social problems in an effective way. In a democracy politicians are under the constant scrutiny of the citizens who will decide at the end of the electoral cycle whether to trust them for yet another electoral period or to replace them. Therefore, democratic decision-makers have strong incentives to take signals about policy problems seriously, and to process and, possibly, solve them. Although a certain level of friction and policy punctuation is characteristic of the democratic policymaking process as well,

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these punctuations are more attenuated than in autocracies partly because of these incentives. Autocratic leaders are not subject to popular vote and are, therefore, less motivated to diligently react to the needs, demands and expectations of the people.

Hybrid, or partly-free regimes constitute an interesting problem. Evidence shows that friction is higher in hybrid regimes than in democracies, although lower than in autocracies – because in hybrid regimes public opinion has more clout over political agendas. But the transmission from the identification of problems to the adoption of solutions is still more difficult in hybrid regimes than in democracies, in part because the accountability and the incentives of the decision makers are weaker. Sebók (2019) point to another factor: that hybrid regimes often rely on poll-governed populist decision making, focusing on a few, symbolically and politically important issues, while neglecting a large number of other problems. Spectacular, large-scale policies may be undertaken in terms of the former; no action may be initiated in terms of the latter, but if those problems fester, at one point they may also require significant changes. Both logic increases the likelihood of punctuations in hybrid regimes.

Jones et al. (2019) argue that centralization is another factor which mediates the effect of political regimes on policy dynamics. Generally speaking, more centralized governments cause more severe policy punctuations. Data prove that this is true in democracies, and we may suspect that the stronger centralization of non-democratic regimes may be another factor which leads to higher punctuation. Two mechanisms may be at work: first, as the authors argue, executives like to make changes. Centralization provides a fertile ground for taking major decisions and the power holders often use this opportunity. However, as we discussed above, in autocracies they tend to follow their own agenda instead of the public agenda. Second, we suggest that political centralization increases friction. The features associated with political centralization – such as the relative weakness of autonomous political actors –, the constrained policy venues as well as the hierarchically organized nature of government make it difficult for policy problems to ascend to the decision-making phase.

Finally, Jones and his co-authors argue that the lack of information in non-democratic regimes is also a factor that leads to more severe friction and punctuation. In non-free and partly free regimes media is not operating unconstrained, the civil society is under control or oppressed, the political opposition (if any) has limited possibilities to influence the government. These actors and institutions might be considered as parts of the policy capacities of the society (Boda & Patkós, 2018a), brokering information between society and the government. If they cannot fulfil their role, the flow of policy relevant information is restricted and cannot easily reach decision-makers. In other words non-democratic regimes are struck by informational disadvantage (Baumgartner et al., 2017).

The argument about incentives states that in autocracies decision-makers are not motivated to take policy problems seriously. The reasoning related to information implies that even if the rulers were interested in policy problems, the lack of available information would still hinder adaptive policymaking, therefore increasing the odds of policy punctuations. In this, one can argue friction is, in fact, caused by skewed incentives, centralization and asymmetric information.

[Content, process and discourse](#)

Jones et al. (2019) argue convincingly that (1) the likelihood of policy punctuations and institutional friction is higher in non-free and partly-free regimes; and that (2) this is due to the lack of incentives, the higher level of centralization and a shortage of information characteristic of those regimes. In the following we further break down the above thesis and formulate a number of theoretical expectations

concerning policymaking that we study in the forthcoming empirical chapters. We structure the arguments along three crucial dimensions of policymaking: content, process and discourses.

Bartha et al. (2020) proposed an ideal type of liberal democratic policymaking along these dimensions. In terms of content the ideal type is constructed of a reliance on a relatively coherent set of policy ideas; a central role of policy paradigms supported by area-specific expertise; majoritarian policy preferences constrained by the protection of minority rights; and – in line with Jones et al. (2019) – relatively low policy punctuations and rare large-scale reforms. In terms of procedure it is characterized by a high level of institutionalization with low level of leadership discretion; pluralism, that is, a variety of policy actors having access to the policy process; and public discussions on policy alternatives. In terms of policy discourses it features competing policy discourses with mostly high and positive valence (Bartha et al., 2020).

Research in policy studies have been analyzing each of these elements and how they unfold and interact in producing specific policy-related phenomena, such as outputs, policy change, or policy stability (see Sabatier & Weible, 2014). Throughout its development over the past decades the field of policy studies has produced increasingly sophisticated theories and empirical findings – without, however, moving out of the framework of liberal democratic model of policy making. Our aim here is to extend the external validity of such studies to non-democratic polities.

Content

Policy content refers to the substance of policies under democratic and non-democratic conditions. Are there systematic differences in the composition of policy agendas and ultimately in the policy choices of different regimes? Selectorate theory implies that the size of the ‘selectorate’, that is, the group of people which has an institutionally granted right or norm choosing the government, influences the substance of decisions made by the government (Bueno de Mesquita, Morrow, Siverson, & Smith, 1999; Bueno de Mesquita & Smith, 2011).

In dictatorships the selectorate is small, typically including the leadership of the ruling party or the army. Since the longevity of the dictator’s rule depend on them, he is inclined to make decisions that meet their interests instead of the society in general. Even worse, the dictator might be counter-motivated to make policies beneficial to the wider public, since emancipated, educated people represent a potential threat to his rule. Conversely, democratic rule is dependent on the decision (vote) of a large part of the society, therefore democratic governance tends to provide public goods that potentially increase welfare and the quality of life for many people. That is, the abovementioned democratic incentives mentioned do not only contribute to lower policy punctuations as suggested by Jones et al., but have an effect on policy agendas and the content of decisions.

Empirical findings are less straightforward than theoretical claims, but several studies have demonstrated that democracies do indeed spend more on the provision of public goods including education, health, sanitation, roads and environmental protection (Bernauer & Koubi, 2009; Bueno de Mesquita, Morrow, Siverson, & Smith, 2003; Deacon, 2009; see Lake David, 2001). At the same time Lott (1999) and Mulligan Casey (2004b) found no evidence that non-democracies would spend less on education. As a possible explanation Lott (1999) suggests that autocracies may invest in education in order to indoctrinate the population.

An alternative hypothesis can also be advanced: autocracies cannot rely on input legitimacy in order to ensure the allegiance of their citizens, therefore they need to provide at least some basic outputs

to people. An indirect support to this claim is given by Deacon's (2009) finding: the difference between democracies' and autocracies' performance is smaller in terms of providing safe water than in terms of providing secondary education. Clean water is certainly more essential than secondary education and even autocracies are compelled to secure it. The output legitimacy considerations might especially be important for soft autocracies and hybrid regimes as opposed to hard dictatorships in which rulers use more repression and brutality for maintaining their power.

Related to the problem of public goods is the spending on military and law-enforcement (police, secret service etc.). It is plausible to expect non-free regimes to devote more resources to those forces than democracies (see Brauner, 2015). Related to the distribution of public goods some evidence suggests that the higher spending on public goods by democracies does not necessarily reach the poorest segments of the society (Keefer, 2005). Selectorate theory may offer an explanation to this through the concept of 'winning coalition' defined as those members of the selectorate whose support is essential to keep the incumbent leadership in office (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 1999: 148).

A socially marginalized, politically passive part of society does not form part of a winning coalition: even democratically elected leaders need only the support of the majority of politically active citizens. Conversely, populist autocrats who rely on the poorer segments of the population may advance egalitarian social policies (see Montecino, 2012). At the same time we should note that inequality is smaller in democracies (Dodlova & Gioblas, 2017).

The substance of policies includes not only the extensiveness of beneficiaries from policy decisions or allocation of attention between policy fields but the magnitude of policy changes as well as their quality. As for the formal, the typical pattern of policymaking in liberal democracies consists of incremental changes – although, as punctuated equilibrium theory shows, large-scale reforms also happen (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993, 2009). One of the main reasons for policy stability is the large number of policy actors involved in the decision-making process whose interests, preferences and objectives counterweight each other and support the status quo. If so, one would expect higher policy instability in autocracies. Indeed, both Baumgartner et al. (2017) and Sebők and Berki (2018) found that policy punctuations are higher in autocracies.

Concerning the quality of the policies we assume that it is better in democracies – this is the argument of the 'good governance' literature (e.g. Grindle, 2007; Kaufmann, 2003). This conclusion stems from the accountability argument (democratic leaders are more motivated to make good decisions) as well as from the wider informational basis upon which policies are based (see the next subsection).

In sum, it is a well-founded theoretical claim that democracies and autocracies make different policies in terms of their content. Democracies are expected to provide more public goods and services, to be better at reducing inequalities and to focus less on the military and the police; large-scale policy reforms are less likely while the quality of policies is better; and while the preferences of the majority have a large bearing on policy decisions, the rights and needs of minorities are also taken into account. Although the empirical evidence is somewhat less compelling, data also suggest that democracies follow different patterns in their choices of policies than non-democratic regimes.

At the same, it has to be emphasized that these differences are very much context dependent. For instance, Communist dictatorships have prioritized more the provision of public services due to their radical left ideology. Partly-free (hybrid) regimes may also scrutinize public opinion, since the popular vote does matter; and even autocracies must rely on output legitimacy, therefore they may provide at least basic public services to the people.

Procedures and actors

By procedures and actors we describe formally or informally institutionalized processes that channel policymaking from agenda-setting throughout the whole policy cycle; the venues that provide policy actors access to the process; and the number and composition of policy actors having an influence on policy outputs and outcomes. Procedures employed under different regimes have spurred less academic interest than the content of policies until recently when a number of publications have treated the issue from different angles (Bartha et al., 2020; see Baumgartner et al., 2017; Boda & Patkós, 2018a; Guy & Jon, 2019; Howlett & Tosun, 2019; Sebők & Berki, 2018).

Institutions and actors of the policy process influence the content of policies in a number of ways. If specific actors have access to the policy process they may promote certain kinds of policies – for instance, the presence of green parties in a polity has a positive effect on environmental legislation and environmental quality (Bernauer & Koubi, 2009). Fairness and accountability of the government creates trust which, in turn, helps to accept even costly or unpopular decisions (Hetherington, 2005). That is, studying policymaking procedures under different regimes helps to better understand the differences in their policy choices and outcomes as well.

The most important – and most evident – feature of non-democratic policymaking procedures is the low level of involvement of different kinds of policy actors (Howlett & Tosun, 2019). There are many causes for this. First, in autocracies the political activity of autonomous actors is, by definition, limited, if not plainly banned. Therefore, independent social actors, like parties, trade unions, NGOs, think-tanks cannot flourish; independent political initiatives, such as protests, movements, campaigns, cannot freely organize. From a policy perspective this means that potentially important information about social problems, preferences, needs and implementation failures are not channeled into the policy process.

Second, in autocracies the media and the public sphere are under control. Therefore, existing actors are censored – and self-censorship related to new initiatives is also often at work as a result of the fear from retaliation. One need not subscribe to an idealized Habermasian vision of liberal democracies to see that this is a major difference compared to liberal democratic policymaking in which policy ideas, arguments and proposals can freely circulate in the public sphere. Free communication and the possibility of deliberation have a number of consequences on the policy process beyond the information providing function: they can contribute to the accountability of decision-makers, offer new insights about policy problems and solutions and increase the legitimacy of decisions (we return to the role of policy discourses in the next section).

Third, while in autocracies the ‘supply side’ of policy advocacy and lobbying is limited, the ‘demand side’ is also constrained: non-democratic decision-making procedures are lacking transparency and openness and are dominated by political leadership. That is, the number of meaningful policy venues is limited. Even if institutions and rules exist, they are emptied, purely formal and often circumvented by ‘real’ decision-making processes. For instance, during the era of Socialist autocracy in Hungary two parallel decision-making structures existed: the institutions of Potemkin parliamentary democracy and the State Party. While parliament did make decisions, the important questions were decided by the Party’s leadership.

Howard and Tosun (2019) suggest that two kinds of policy actors may nonetheless play an important role in autocracies: the bureaucracy and public opinion. Autocrats may use the state bureaucracy in order to implement changes and control society (see also Guy & Jon, 2019). This was certainly the case

for the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe where the bureaucracy had even some role in making decisions, beyond sheer implementation (Kulcsár, 2001). At the same time, especially in hybrid regimes, public opinion may exert some influence on decisions: as part of their output legitimacy autocrats may react to popular demands and avoid strongly unpopular reforms (Sebők, 2019).

The weakness of both the 'supply' and the 'demand' side of the policymaking process concerning inputs from policy actors has a number of consequences beyond a bigger likelihood of punctuations. Since autocracies are less open to bottom-up initiatives, their policy agendas are less influenced by other actors' agendas, such as the media or lobby groups. In liberal democracies there are statistically significant associations between the composition of temporarily lagged different agendas as in the case of the media agenda and the symbolic policy agenda (Vliegenthart, Walgrave, Baumgartner, Bevan, Breunig, Brouard, et al., 2016) or the agenda of interest groups and decisions (Gilens & Page, 2014). Researchers posit causality based on the temporal lags between the different types of agendas and the fact of successive thematization. However, as Boda and Patkós (2018a) suggest, under illiberal conditions such associations between agendas may be weak or even non-existent.

Partly-free regimes (and even autocracies) may hold elections, although they are by definition not free and fair but distorted and rigged through both formal norms and informal practices. Still, if there are elections and parties they are often accompanied by manifestos. Yet we expect party manifestos to be shorter and less diverse than in democracies on the one hand; and we expect a lower level of electoral pledge fulfillment as a consequence of limited accountability on the other hand. Finally, the presence of more actors in the policy process – as well as stricter institutional rules – slow down the pace of policymaking in democracies (which – as we discussed above – may have a positive effect on the quality of these policies).

To sum up, policy procedures and the involvement of policy actors in the policy process are expected to be different according to regime characteristics. In democracies a high number of actors are involved in policymaking; there is responsiveness from decision makers towards bottom-up initiatives; procedures are effectively institutionalized; and the policy cycle unfolds slower than in autocracies. In autocracies the venues and procedures may be purely formal and often circumvented, while decision-making is faster, as rulers rely on governing by decree instead of laws.

Discourses

By discourses we mean policy frames, metaphors, narratives and rhetorical strategies that policy actors use. Discourses have received a growing attention from policy scholars because of the varied role they may play in the policy process (Béland, 2009; see for instance Majone, 1989; Roe, 1994). Discourses have a cognitive, descriptive and predictive function: they provide a specific understanding or interpretation of a situation (Schlesinger & Lau, 2000). However, the interpretation they provide is typically more than a neutral depiction: they involve emotions and values and likely have a prescriptive power as well, "accomplishing things with language" (McCloskey, 1985: 14). That is, discourses stabilize knowledge, persuade, create identities or mobilize participants.

The role of discourses in policymaking and policy change is acknowledged by punctuated equilibrium theory as well. Baumgartner and Jones (1993, 2009) argue that policy frames and metaphors influence the way policy issues are perceived and evaluated. Therefore, changes in discourses may lead to changes in policies as well. We find two uses of policy discourses especially relevant for our topic: 'discursive governance' (Korkut, Bucken-Knapp, Cox, & Mahendran, 2015) and legitimation.

The former is related to communication regarding policy objectives even without taking any actual policy decisions. As discursive institutionalist research shows, ideas and discourses can play a formative role in institutional change (e.g. Béland, 2009). Discursive governance may influence people's attitudes, expectations and even their behavior. However, following Korkut et al. (2015) we expect discursive governance to be more prevalent in hybrid regimes and autocracies. In the democratic setting, policy decisions are channeled into formal rules and procedures; and the rule of law limits the widespread use of informal policy practices. People are constrained by the government to follow the law, but nothing more. Autocracies and hybrid regimes may rely less on institutionalized procedures and more on informal, ideological domination (even if this latter might be a meaningful concept in a democratic context as well - see Bloom & Dallyn, 2011).

The second important function is legitimation: value-laden discourses can help to make accept even difficult or costly decisions. Legitimacy, that is securing the allegiance of the population, is a central problem in any political system and both democracies and autocracies rely on the use of discourses that people find worth accepting or identifying with (see Beetham, 1991). However, we expect democracies to use more discourses with a high and positive valence (Cox & Béland, 2013), while adversarial narratives ('us vs. them'), scapegoating and legitimation by crisis are communication tools typically employed by populist, extremist politicians and illiberal leaders (Bartha et al., 2020).

We also expect autocracies to make more use of general political ideas when legitimizing particular policy decisions and democratic policy discourses to stick more to the specific issue or field. For instance, during the period of Socialist autocracy the presentation of virtually any decision could invoke the global fight between Capitalism and Communism; while in a democracy one expects more concrete arguments in favor of a policy measure.

We already referred to the important role of public debates in the policymaking of liberal democracies. In terms of discourses, democracies are characterized by a 'marketplace' of competing policy ideas, frames and metaphors. Why and how some discourses prevail over others is a million-dollar question of policy studies and policy practice. Potential factors range from the identity of the communicator (whether the person/organization conveying the discourse is seen as reliable, authentic, sympathetic etc.), the size of the advocacy coalition advancing the argument, the power of arguments (affective value and/or factual references), the completeness of the discourse (whether it offers a comprehensive interpretation of events), the incidents of key events (like accidents or catastrophes illustrating the point), to the reaction of the media and other policy actors, as well as the social context.

Autocracies, especially hybrid regimes, struggle with similar problems: how to generate political discourses that are convincing, acceptable for large segments of society and which can successfully crowd out competitors. However, autocracies have less limited possibilities to convey their own messages while constraining competing discourses. Autocracies often spend large resources on communication and can spread intensively their messages through many different channels, including public broadcasting. Since competing discourses are suppressed and an ideological discourse is put forth through different channels, we expect less diversity in autocracies' policy-related discourses.

Conclusion

Policymaking is a complex process which is defined by the institutional setting, the formal and informal rules of the polity; in other words, the political system. Extant research has addressed some policy

consequences of different democratic systems (such as presidential vs. parliamentary systems), but, with notable exceptions, the policymaking of non-democratic regimes has not received much attention.

In this chapter we reconstructed the arguments of Jones et al. (2019) on the factors that mediate the effect of regimes on policy dynamics. We argued that policy punctuations are larger in non-democratic regimes because institutional friction is also higher due to the lack of democratic incentives, to governmental centralization and to the informational disadvantage of autocracies compared to democracies. Our empirical expectations concerning the effects of regimes on different features of policymaking concerned three dimensions: the content, the process and the discourses of policies. We apply these concepts to the diverse empirics of the case studies of Part 3 and the discussion of Part 4.

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