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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Policy Conflict Framework

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Abstract This essay introduces a Policy Conflict Framework to guide and organize theoretical, practical, and empirical research to fill the vacuum that surrounds policy conflicts. The framework centers on a conceptual definition of an episode of policy conflict that distinguishes between cognitive and behavioral characteristics. The cognitive characteristics of a policy conflict episode include divergence in policy positions among two or more actors, perceived threats from opponents' policy positions, and unwillingness to compromise. These cognitive characteristics manifest in a range of behavioral characteristics (e.g., framing contests, lobbying, building networks). Episodes of policy conflicts are shaped by a policy setting, which consists of different levels of action where conflicts may emerge (political, policy subsystem and policy action situations), interpersonal and intrapersonal policy actor attributes, events, and the policy issue. In turn, the outputs and outcomes of policy conflicts produce feedback effects that shape the policy setting. This essay ends with an agenda for advancing studies of policy conflicts, both methodologically and theoretically.

Keywords Policy conflict · Policy process theories · Technical debates · Policy analysis and evaluation · Political analysis · Public policy

One of the most important phenomena underlying studies of politics and public policy is conflict. Within any government, public policy decisions have the potential to involve conflicts of varying degrees of intensity. Yet, a definitional and theoretical vacuum surrounds the concept. Current theories and frameworks of policy and politics typically treat

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conflict as a background concept where it is assumed to exist, detached from explanations of its sources and effects, and measured indirectly as political mobilization, political activities, or competing values.

This essay moves conflict from a background concept to a foreground concept by introducing a Policy Conflict Framework (PCF). PCF is designed to advance both localized and generalized knowledge about policy conflicts. Localized knowledge refers to specific insights about the sources, extent, and effects of policy conflicts in one or more policy settings. Generalized knowledge refers to insights about the nature of policy conflicts, which can be applied and tested across policy settings. The framework centers on a conceptual definition of *an episode of policy conflict*, where two or more policy actors express certain cognitive and behavioral characteristics over a short or long period of time.[1]

The framework depicts episodes of policy conflict as shaping and being shaped by a *policy setting* that is organized into four conceptual categories. The first category is levels of action, which include political systems, policy subsystems, and policy action situations. The second category is the policy actors involved in policy conflicts and their intrapersonal and interpersonal attributes. The third category is the policy issue, which is the topic of policy conflicts. The fourth category of the setting is events, such as disasters or elections. Episodes of policy conflicts result in both *outputs* and *outcomes* that feedback to affect the policy setting.

Policy conflicts have been a part of many existing frameworks and theories of public policy and politics. The Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) describes and explains coalitions, learning, and policy change in intense policy conflicts (Jenkins-Smith et al. 2014a). PCF draws heavily from the ACF's approach for studying policy processes as well as its insights on policy conflicts. Yet, under the ACF, policy conflicts are indirectly conceptualized and measured through an underspecified combination of value differences, polarized networks, and the "devil shift", which is a tendency for policy actors to demonize opponents by exaggerating their power and maliciousness. The concept of policy conflict is important, yet underdeveloped, in many other policy theories and frameworks, such as the Institutional Analysis and Development Framework (Ostrom 2005), Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (Jones and Baumgartner 2012), and Social Construction Theory (Schneider and Ingram 1997).

In the political science literature, the concept of conflict is studied in association with politics but with mostly implicit links to public policy. A good illustration is Schattschneider (1960), who focuses almost exclusively on politics and the "contagion of conflict" yet public policy is not directly explored. Cobb and Elder (1972) identify some of the elementary concepts integral for studying policy conflicts in agenda setting, but their ideas never developed into a research program. Knight (1992) examines conflicts as anticipated distributional effects of institutional change but without defining the term directly or examining its theoretical or practical significance. Matland (1995) incorporates the policy conflict concept as a causal driver in implementation but leaves unexplored its sources as well as its role in other facets of policy processes. A number of political scientists explore the general idea of conflicts through the polarization of public opinion (Iyengar et al. 2012; Clawson and Oxley 2017), divergence in framing policy success and failure (McConnell 2010), different ethical and moral underpinnings in policymaking (Welch 2014), gridlock and partisanship (Krehbiel 1998), cooperation (Axelrod 2006),

[1] Policy actors are those individuals actively involved in a policy issue. They may be affiliated or unaffiliated with any type of organization.

power (Lukes 2005), and pathways of policymaking (Conlan et al. 2014). In each of these examples, however, policy conflicts remain in the theoretical background and primarily serve to support the explanations of other phenomena. Similarly, in the field of international relations, political scientists delve deeply into the study of conflicts but focus on the nature of the politics underlying international conflicts and the factors that foster or inhibit conflict resolution and management, keeping public policy on the periphery (Fearon 1997; Hensel 2001; Huth and Allee 2002; Blum 2007; Hensel et al. 2008; Mattes 2016). Work by Tilly and Tarrow (2007), which draws from sociology and political science, offers important insights into contentious politics, but their emphasis on social movements poses theoretical limitations for policy scholars.

Alternatively, conflict resolution and alternative dispute resolution literatures concentrate on strategies for resolving or mitigating intergroup conflicts through facilitation and consensus-based approaches (Susskind and Cruikshank 1987; Lewicki et al. 2003; Putnam and Wondolleck 2003; d'Estree and Colby 2004; Forester 2009). The conflicts identified in this literature often deal with public policies, but emphasize processes of decision-making in conflict resolution venues and overlook policy conflicts in other kinds of venues, as well as in policy subsystems and political systems.

To bring the concept from the background to the foreground of public policy theories and frameworks and to fill the vacuum that surrounds policy conflicts, this essay introduces the PCF as a guide to theoretical, practical, and empirical research on policy conflicts.

PCF: scope and assumptions

Frameworks function as platforms for guiding research around a common set of questions or objectives by providing a shared vocabulary, categories of concepts, general relationships among those concepts, and prescriptions on how to apply the framework in diverse settings toward theoretical insights. The scope of the PCF centers on understanding and explaining episodes of policy conflicts over time that exist on a spectrum from low intensity policy conflicts (i.e., policy concord) to high-intensity policy conflict. The study of policy conflicts and policy concord also entails their policy setting, characteristics, outputs, and outcomes. The PCF can be applied across or within any stage of the policy cycle as well as across different policy settings. Its purpose is to support contextually appropriate theoretical descriptions and explanations about policy conflict.

We identify the following assumptions as foundational for communicating, understanding, and applying the PCF.

Policy conflicts may occur across three polycentric levels of action: political system, policy subsystem, and policy action situations. The broadest level where policy conflicts can be observed is the *political system*, which governs a territory and exercises generic authority across a range of policy issues. While a political system typically exists only at the national level of a government, it can also exist at sub-national levels, as found in federal systems. The intermediate level of analysis is the *policy subsystem,* which is any partition of a political system that focuses on a policy topic, a locale, and the actors involved.[2] The

[2] We adopt the ACF's definition of policy subsystems (Jenkins-Smith et al. 2014a) because it is flexible enough to describe similar phenomena including policy regimes (May and Jochim 2013), issue networks (Heclo 1978), policy networks (Adam and Kriesi 2007), and policy space (Krehbiel 1998). It is also useful because the wording "subsystem" denotes the appropriate imagery of being a subset of a political "system."

narrowest of these levels is the policy action situation.[3] Drawing from Ostrom (2005), we define policy action situations as the diverse arenas within political systems and policy subsystems that include formal and informal venues where policy actors engage, debate, and attempt to address problems around policy issues.

These levels of action exist in a polycentric structure where overlapping forms of authority and power affect outputs and outcomes. Each of the three levels of action provides a different lens on policy conflicts. The decision to focus on one or more levels of action is determined by both the policy conflict itself and the research objectives and questions. For example, research on the effects of conflict mitigating institutions on single policy decisions might focus on one or more policy action situations. In this scenario, one policy decision might affect another policy decision across different policy action situations over time. Research on the effects of online framing debates among policy actors might focus on the policy subsystem. Sometimes at the policy subsystem level of action, political behavior focuses less on any single policy proposal and more on drawing public attention to the general risks and benefits associated with an issue, thereby affecting several relevant policy action situations. Alternatively, research at the political system level might occur when a policy issue becomes a salient position demarcating party platforms in a national election or when a policy conflict escalates to attract nation-wide news media attention and reach the agenda of national-level policy action situations, such as Congress in the U.S.

Model of the Individual As a theory for analyzing conflicts, PCF adopts a version of methodological individualism and assumes policy actors face cognitive constraints in terms of their ability to access, process, and interpret information. As assumed in other public policy frameworks and theories, people adapt to their constraints through selective attention, biased assimilation, emotional conditioning, and disproportionate views of probabilities in political wins and losses (Kahneman and Tversky 1979; Jones 2002; Jenkins-Smith et al. 2014a). Additionally, we draw from theories of group dynamics and social identity in assuming that individuals tend to have positive attitudes toward members of their groups and more negative attitudes toward members of other groups (Tajfel et al. 1971; Billig and Tajfel 1973). Because different policy settings involve distinct groups of actors, we also assume that policy actors can exhibit different cognitive and behavioral traits across various policy settings.

Policy conflicts are integral—but neither good nor bad—in shaping the outcomes of governance and politics of any society Conflicts are not inherently unhealthy for individuals or a society. Indeed, some intensity of conflict is normal and healthy for group dynamics at any level of action. However, one of the enigmas in studying government, politics, and policy is gauging the sources, intensity, and effects of policy conflicts. The question, then, is not whether conflict is good or bad, but under what settings do policy conflicts emerge, endure, and subside and which forms have what consequences?

The conceptual structure of policy conflicts

A flow diagram of PCF is presented in Fig. 1 and definitions of the concepts are shown in Table 1. The characteristics of policy conflict episodes are both cognitive and behavioral. Cognitive characteristics indicate the intensity of policy conflicts, which link to the

[3] We adopt the action situation concept from Ostrom (2005) to connect PCF to decades of research on how institutional arrangements structure actor interactions and the outputs and outcomes of these interactions.

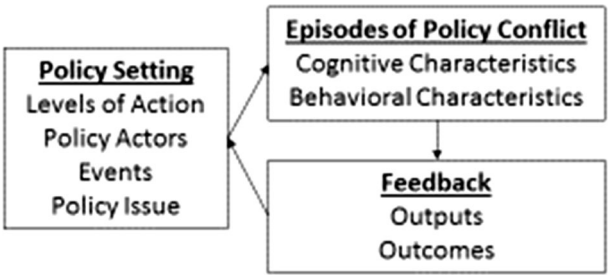

Fig. 1 Flow diagram of the Policy Conflict Framework

Table 1 Categorical concept definitions of the PCF

Policy setting	
Levels of action	
Political System	Often the broadest scope for governing a territory and exercising generic authority across a range of policy issues. A political system can exist at the national or sub-national levels (in a federal system) of country
Policy subsystems	A subset of a political system focused on a policy-related issue over an extended period of time. The territory of a subsystem may be the same or a subset of a political system
Policy action situations	The diverse arenas within political systems and policy subsystems, which include formal and informal policy venues, where actors engage, debate, and attempt to address problems around policy issues
Attributes of levels	The constitutive elements and their interactions that define and structure any of the three levels of action including, but not limited to, institutional, socioeconomic, and physical conditions
Policy actor attributes	
Intrapersonal	Attributes of individual policy actors (e.g., deep core beliefs, knowledge, and risk/benefit perceptions, personal resources)
Interpersonal	Attributes of groups of policy actors (e.g., network relations, organizational relations, and collective resources)
Policy issue attributes	
Morality	The degree to which an issue is perceived as involving fundamental values about what is right or wrong or the way society ought to be
Complexity	The degree of difficulty and ambiguity of understanding and responding to an issue
Event attributes	
Proximity	The topical and geographic proximity of the event to the policy issue
Complexity	The difficulty in understanding and responding to the event based its causality, the breadth and to the size of the event, and the temporality
Characteristics of policy conflicts	
Cognitive characteristics of policy conflict	
Divergence in policy positions	The degree to which actors express differences on the formation, adoption, or implementation of public policies

Table 1 continued

Degree of perceived threats from policy positions of others	The degree to which actors believe that the policy positions of others will impose costs, harm, or other negative consequences to themselves or society
Unwillingness to compromise	The degree to which policy actors are willing to change their views on a policy position
Behavioral characteristics of policy conflict	
Political strategies or tactics	Efforts by individuals to directly (e.g., lobbying, voting) or indirectly (e.g., narrative debates, forming coalitions, organizing protests) influence outputs and outcomes and how those efforts are conducted
Feedback effects of policy conflicts	
Outputs	Changes or deliberate continuations of public policies, institutions of policy action situations, or actors holding elected positions of a political system, a policy subsystem, or policy action situations
Outcomes	Effects from outputs and policy conflict characteristics on a policy setting

behavior characteristics of policy conflicts. Policy conflicts are conditioned by a policy setting, which include four interactive conceptual categories: levels of action, policy actors, events, and the policy issue. The feedback effects in Fig. 1, through outputs and outcomes, symbolize the continuity of episodes of policy conflicts for a policy issue.

As with policy processes in general, temporality matters as episodes of policy conflict endure, with some lasting long time periods and others lasting short time periods. Additionally, given that all policy settings exhibit varying degrees of polycentricity within and across their levels of action, episodes of policy conflict are interdependent and can occur both simultaneously and sequentially. The result is episodes of policy conflict that are interdependent within a policy setting and over time. For instance, in a given policy setting, one policy conflict might last for extended periods of time at the policy subsystem level, with multiple interdependent short-term policy conflicts intermittently emerging and subsiding at the level of policy action situations over the formulation and adoption of public policies.

Three dimensions of cognitive characteristics of policy conflicts

Divergence in policy positions

Divergence in policy positions is defined as differences between policy actors on what government should or should not do in relation to a societal issue (Tilly and Tarrow 2007). Tilly and Tarrow argue that contentious politics arise when public policy claims on government have the potential to affect the lives of other people, leading to mobilizations and counter-mobilizations. Divergence of policy positions within the PCF is closely related to policy core policy preferences by Jenkins-Smith et al. (2014a), ideas by Kingdon (1984), and Putnam's "what must be done" (1976; p 115), which he described as the most central belief component for integrating or separating policy actors.

Most policy conflicts can focus both on general goals and the means of one or more policy positions. Depending on the policy setting, divergence in policy position can be on a specific policy (or proposed policy), a general policy, a bundle of policies, or some

combination of these, all of which vary in their temporality and may occur at any level of action. Policy positions by a particular actor or group may also be implied through the positions actors take on an issue. Similarly, divergence in policy positions might happen in any stage of the policy cycle. Depending on the stage in the policy cycle, policy conflicts might be studied as framing contests in affecting what proposals reach government agendas; as the political strategies taken to overcome opposition in formulating and adopting laws in legislatures; as divergent discourse over how to implement and deliver public services among public managers and non-government entities; or in the competing narratives about the success or failure in evaluating a government program, which often shape ideas of policy proposals for future government agendas. Bridging differences on any given policy position for any particular stage of the policy cycle does not necessarily resolve high-intensity policy conflicts because divergent policy positions often shift and reemerge on different attributes of the policy issue later in time.

Threats from policy positions

This second dimension relates to the extent that policy actors perceive threats to themselves or society from the policy positions of their opponents. Underlying this dimension is the argument that policy conflicts are unlikely to exist or persist if policy actors do not feel threatened by their opponents' position. This dimension of policy conflict relates to the ACF's devil shift concept, where policy actors exaggerate the power and maliciousness of opponents. However, this concept is manifested in perceived threats of policy positions of opponents. This dimension is consistent with Knight (1992) and Tilly and Tarrow (2007), who argue that conflict emerges when a policy position of one set of policy actors puts potential costs on the interests, values, or identities of other actors. Threats from policy positions also relate to the perceptions of loss and the stakes involved (Cobb and Elder 1972). Estimation of these losses and stakes are rooted in emotional cognitions and fear and can be learned over time through experiences of loss (Kahneman and Tversky 1979; Jones 2002).

Unwillingness to compromise on policy positions

The third dimension involves an unwillingness to compromise by policy actors on policy positions. Unwillingness to compromise is a necessary component of policy conflicts because conflict would not exist if policy actors were willing to compromise on what government should or should not do. Existing theories, such as the ACF, emphasize the importance of concepts of belief change and learning in overcoming political disputes. We argue that to find convergence on policy positions does not necessarily require belief change, but rather often a willingness to cooperate with opponents in reaching a negotiated solution (Susskind and Cruikshank 1987).

Intensity of policy conflict characteristics

One of the most important attributes of conflict is its intensity. The relative presence or absence of the cognitive characteristics among policy actors define their degree of conflict intensity, as illustrated in Fig. 2. Figure 2 is an abstract illustration of how the three cognitive dimensions characterizing policy conflict interact. The horizontal arrows in

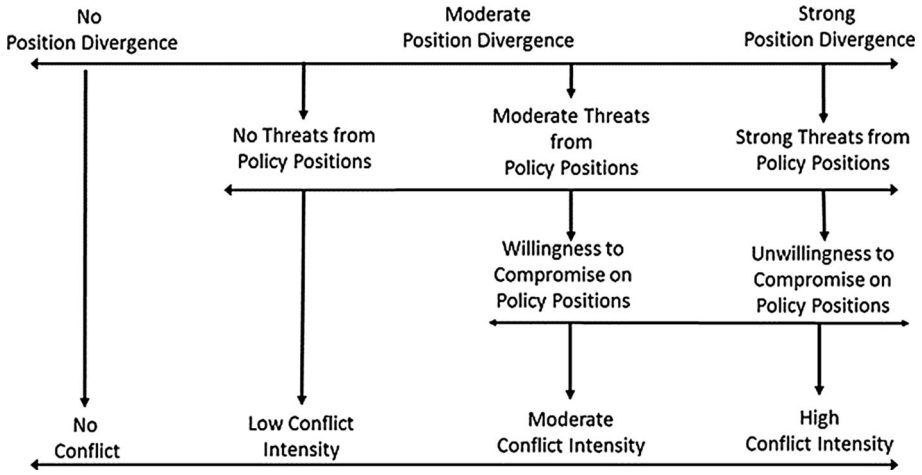

Fig. 2 Intensity spectrum of policy conflicts

Fig. 2 are symbolic of the range per concept. The vertical arrows are illustrative of the potential interactive effects of the cognitive conflict characteristics.

An individual policy actor exhibits high-intensity policy conflict when she has a high degree of divergence in her policy positions, perceives threats from opponents' policy positions, and an unwillingness to compromise. On the other extreme, a policy actor will exhibit high policy concord intensity in the absence of divergence in policy positions. Policy actors with high policy concord have low divergence in policy positions and perceive no threats and, hence, no need to compromise. Policy actors with moderate conflict intensity exhibit divergence in policy positions, threats from opponents' positions, and, yet, a willingness to compromise.

Figure 2 offers a way to conceptualize the degree of conflict intensity from individuals to their aggregate at any level of action. For example, within a policy subsystem, policy actors might vary in their degree of conflict intensity. The aggregation of these individual policy actors will form different distributions of intensities of policy conflict at the policy subsystem level of action. A skewed distribution of individual cognitive characteristics of policy conflict toward no conflict intensity denotes policy concord at the subsystem level. Conversely, a skewed distribution of individual cognitive characteristics of high-intensity policy conflict signifies a policy subsystem of intense policy conflict. A normal distribution of individuals on the policy conflict spectrum signifies intermediate policy conflict at the policy subsystem level of action.

Behavioral characteristics of policy conflict

Behavioral characteristics of conflict are what we see when observing what some scholars label as conflicts (e.g. see Wolf et al. 2003; Heikkila and Schlager 2012; Eck 2012), or what we might view as flash-points in a conflict. For instance, in studying international conflicts, we might observe behaviors such as fighting at a particular time, in a specific location, between militaries or communities. In policy conflicts, such behaviors may not be as overt; instead they involve efforts to promote their own policy positions toward adoption or prevent those they oppose from achieving their policy positions. In this regard, the

behavioral characteristics of policy conflict include exertions of different faces of power, such as coercive efforts to keep issues off government agendas or attempts at shaping values, beliefs, and policy positions (Lukes 2005). Because these behaviors play a key role in shaping policy processes, scholars have explored them from a variety of perspectives (e.g. see Baumgartner and Leech 1998; Howlett and Ramesh 1998). Among these behaviors, PCF emphasizes political strategies and tactics and how those strategies and tactics are conducted.

Strategies and tactics

Policy actors will engage in one or more political strategies or tactics to influence public policy decisions in achieving their goals at one or more levels of action. The number of strategies or tactics that policy actors might utilize is unwieldy and fall under various categories and descriptions (Lasswell 1971; Tilly and Tarrow 2007). We categorize policy actor strategies and tactics as being inside or outside of government (Gais and Walker 1991; Baumgartner et al. 2009). "Inside" categories relate to attempts to directly influence government officials who have authority over policy decisions, including but not limited to policy adoption and administration. Examples of these inside strategies include sending letters, venue shopping (Schattschneider 1960; Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Pralle 2006), disseminating information to elected officials, issue campaigns (e.g., referendums), pressuring public managers and street-level bureaucrats, participating in a rule-making process, and testifying in government hearings. "Outside" strategies are activities that indirectly influence decisions of government often through mobilizing the general public, building and maintaining advocacy coalitions, litigating, orchestrating social media campaigns, engaging in framing and narrative debates, electoral campaigns, and organizing and participating in protests and demonstrations.

How actors engage in strategies and tactics

In a policy setting, the tenor of the behavioral strategies and tactics that actors engage in vary widely. For instance, as Dahl (1963) suggests, strategies may be coercive, where actors force their policy positions on others; cooperative, where actors are willing to compromise on policy positions; and competitive or adversarial, where actors use tactics to block the strategies of others. The choice to engage in more adversarial versus cooperative behaviors is usually conditioned by the intensity of the cognitive characteristics of a given policy conflict, the policy setting, and previous instances of policy conflicts (Jenkins-Smith 1990; Howlett and Ramesh 1998; Weible 2008). At the same time, the tenor of these behaviors can play an important role in shaping the outcomes of policy conflicts. More competitive or coercive behavioral strategies or tactics may undermine interpersonal relations among actors, and in turn reinforce perceptions of perceived threats among actors in a conflict.

Policy conflict settings and their attributes

Three levels of action

Policy conflicts appear within and across three interactive levels: political systems, policy subsystems, and policy action situations. The attributes of the levels shape how the

cognitive and behavioral characteristics of policy conflict emerge and the outcomes. These attributes may include, but are not limited to, the socioeconomic conditions, the biophysical setting, and the institutional arrangements of these three different levels. While all of these attributes may be important in shaping the policy setting, policy scholars often emphasize the institutional arrangements structuring a particular level of action that can escalate or de-escalate conflicts (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; McAdam et al. 1996; Pralle 2006). For example, the institutions that structure policy action situations may create opportunities for policy brokers to facilitate agreements (Jenkins-Smith et al. 2014a; Ingold and Varone 2012) and learning (Heclo 1974; Bennett and Howlett 1992). Alternately, the institutions that structure policy action situations may also shape the institutional composition of public policies considered for adoption and implementation. Thus, institutions affect both the dynamics of policy conflicts at any level of action as well as the design of their policy outputs. These two effects evolve over time, within and across levels of action. For example, institutions that establish regulations for monitoring and enforcing behaviors of target populations in a policy subsystem can, in turn, affect future instances of cognitive concord or conflict in the same or different level of action (Ostrom 2005).

Policy actor attributes

Policy actor attributes are divided into the intra- and interpersonal. The *intrapersonal attributes* of actors include the fundamental mental models and cognitive features of individuals that shape their policy positions, perceived threats, or willingness to compromise on a policy issue, as well as their behavioral policy conflict characteristics on a given policy issue. The intrapersonal attributes that may be critical in shaping policy conflict characteristics will vary by the policy setting. We identify three categorical intrapersonal attributes for analyzing policy conflicts, but recognize that these may not be the only attributes of import. These attributes serve as a check list to assess their presence or absence and role, if any, in contributing to policy conflicts.

We borrow from the ACF its definition of deep core beliefs, which are fundamental normative or ontological orientations and are typically resistant to change. These orientations affect the types of policy positions people take, and the degree to which individuals might be willing to compromise. In addition, the ACF and other theories recognize that fundamental normative orientations serve as deep-seated drivers of human behavior (e.g. Ajzen 1991; Stern et al. 1999; Lasswell 1971), which include the types of strategies or tactics policy actors employ in conflict. There are multiple dimensions to deep core beliefs (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1999; p 133), which both ACF and non-ACF scholars highlight. These include ideology (Grossman 2014), identities (Tilly and Tarrow 2007), fundamental interests (Nohrstedt 2010), and cultural orientations (Jenkins-Smith et al. 2014b).

Another major source of conflict characteristics is a policy actor's policy-relevant knowledge about the policy issue (Luskin 1990). Such knowledge may be based on the experience, expertise, or training on the policy issue. One reason why knowledge can be a source of conflict is because academic disciplines represent cognitive lenses that emphasize or de-emphasize various attributes of a policy issue (Snow 1959; Kuhn 1970; Barke and Jenkins-Smith 1993; Weible 2008).

Policy issues, whether they involve choices about the provision of public goods and services, protection or use of natural resources, or public health and safety, all involve some degree of potential societal benefits or risks. Perceptions of risks and benefits associated with a particular policy issue arguably shape conflict characteristics. For instance, when policy actors perceive the degrees of risks or benefits that diverge from

other policy actors, they may tend to take more divergent positions or feel more threatened and unwilling to compromise.

The *interpersonal attributes* of policy actors refer to the interconnections among people and organizations. The importance of the various kinds of interpersonal attributes will vary by policy setting. As part of these interpersonal attributes, we include policy actors' base network relations and organizational affiliations. Base network relations represent the network contacts of policy actors that can be utilized and potentially mobilized as information sources, sharing of resources, and development of shared advocacy as in a coalition. The base of network relations among policy actors from which advocacy coalitions emerge are informal or formal, not necessarily political, and possibly interconnected within and across levels of action (McAdam et al. 1996; Tilly and Tarrow 2007). These base network relations are not always mobilized for every policy conflict but serve as a reservoir of relationships that may be activated for any given policy conflict. In addition to networks, any understanding of politics requires understanding the organizations where policy actors are involved (Bentley 1908; Baumgartner and Leech 1998). Organizations attract certain types of policy actors and provide direction for both conceptual and behavior characteristics of conflicts. For example, material and economic interests might motivate private organizations more than values and purposive rationales of non-profit organizations (Jenkins-Smith et al. 2014a). Policy actors working for government organizations might be constrained by formal rules or informal norms in how they express their policy positions and behave in policy conflicts.

Other interpersonal attributes include *political resources,* which are the means by which groups of policy actors can utilize to influence public policies (Dahl 2006). Scholars identify several categories of political resources (Mitchell and Mitchell 1968; Dahl 2006; Jenkins-Smith et al. 2014a). We adopt the ACF's typology of political resources: access to formal or legal authority, support of public opinion, information, mobilizable supporters among the general public, financial resources, and skillful leadership (Jenkins-Smith et al. 2014a; p 205). In any political system, resources will be unevenly distributed and, hence, perceptions of threats from others and behavioral characteristics will vary as do their effect on public policy (Dahl 2006). Political resources, however, do not determine behavior but, along with other policy setting attributes and the cognitive characteristics of policy conflicts, constrain or enable choices of behaviors. Mobilization among the general public is instrumental in shaping the contours of policy conflicts, especially when mobilization matches pre-existing societal cleavages (Nohrstedt 2010).

Policy issues

Policy scholars have explored how particular types of issues may spark policy debates (Lasswell 1971; Meier 1994; Ostrom 2005). Given the model of the individual, the depiction and understanding of the attributes are rooted in the nature of the issue, the institutional design of the proposed policies, and how the issue and proposed policies are constructed by policy actors in policy conflicts. As a result, the attributes of an issue are somewhat malleable due to the shifting understanding and learning of policy actors as well as framing and narrative debates in policy conflicts. Two key attribute categories of policy issues include complexity and morality.

Complexity of a policy issue refers to the difficulty and ambiguity of understanding and responding to the issue. Complexity is affected by (1) the degree of multi-faceted, unknown, and uncertain pathways that cause an issue; (2) the breadth and diversity of people and entities (e.g., natural resources or the built environment) affecting or affected

by an issue, both positively and negatively, and with various degrees of magnitude; and (3) its temporality with respect to how the causes and effects interact and feedback with time (e.g., in the short or long term). With some issues there are immediate effects on concentrated populations (as is often the case with issues associated with "not in my backyard syndrome") and for other issues the effects are in the distant future on unknown populations. Still other issues vary in their temporalities, resulting in differences in perception of urgency in responding.

Morality of a policy issue refers to the degree to which actors perceive the issue to include fundamental values about what is right or wrong or the way society ought to be. These issues are widely seen as conflictual, particularly in comparison with policy issues that are deemed more instrumental in nature (Knill 2013). Meier (1994) argues that they are similar in some ways to distributional policy issues because the policy positions posed by one set of actors to address these morality issues will "redistribute" their values onto other actors. The morality of a policy issue may motivate particularly intense conflicts by increasing perceived threats and unwillingness to compromise. At the same time, the behaviors of policy actors to engage in framing strategies and the effects of those strategies can play a role in influencing the extent and construction of morality in relation to a policy issue (Mucciaroni 2011).

Events

All policy issues and the related policy conflicts are affected by and sometimes create events, which produce disorder when compared to the normal conditions of a policy setting (Nohrstedt and Weible 2010). Events include a range of potential disturbances including, but not limited to, crises and disasters, critical elections, war and terrorist acts, instances of technical or human failures, etc. Events are neither good nor bad but rather opportune moments of a policy setting that possibly provoke an episode of policy conflict and new outputs and outcomes. Additionally, events by themselves are not a source of policy conflict. Rather it is how policy actors interpret and respond to events that produce conflict. There are two important attributes of events. The first is *complexity* of the event which refers to the difficulty in understanding and responding to the event based on its causality, breadth, magnitude (e.g., number of people or entities affected and scale of the effects), and temporality (e.g., acute or chronic or episodic). The second attribute is the topical and geographic *proximity* to the policy issue (Nohrstedt and Weible 2010).

Outputs and outcomes of policy conflicts

Policy conflicts have consequences or effects that shape the policy setting and future policy conflicts. Outputs of policy conflicts are public policies, particularly those that target the substantive area of an issue, changes in the institutional arrangements structuring policy action situations, and changes in officials holding positions in government. These outputs lie on a continuum from direct to indirect impacts on an issue. For instance, changes in public policy that substantively target a policy issue more directly affect an issue compared to changes in the institutional rules governing a policy action situation, and compared to changes in the policy actors holding positions in government.

Outcomes refer to the measurable changes or deliberate continuations in a policy setting. Although outcomes refer to potential impacts on a policy setting, the outcome box in

Fig. 2 is separated to emphasize its importance. Outcomes lie on the relative continuum from more immediate or short-term effects (e.g., intrapersonal learning and shifts in interpersonal political resources) to more long-term effects (e.g., physical changes in the attributes of an issue). Additionally, outcomes from policy conflicts may flow from the cognitive and behavioral characteristics of policy conflicts. For example, framing and narrative conflicts may prompt learning or changes in the base network relationships among policy actors independent of a policy output. Finally, in some scenarios, an output or outcome may spark an event, leading to changes in other policy settings and future policy conflicts.

Primary dynamics of policy conflicts

The purpose of a framework is to identify the key conceptual categories and their general relationship for studying a phenomenon across settings. Given a particular setting, patterns will emerge from which contextually based theories could be developed, tested, and refined. Yet, without speculating some basic relationships among its concepts, a framework becomes a static list of concepts and directionless in the type of theories it might support. We encapsulate some of the basic relationships into a set of primary dynamics of policy conflicts. These dynamics reflect current knowledge about policy conflicts as viewed through the PCF lens.

1. *The intensity in cognitive characteristics of policy conflict will correspond with behavioral conflict characteristics.* While this general relationship is implied in our definition of policy conflict characteristics, we make it explicit because most *c*oncepts in the social sciences have an ontology or embedded theory about the underlying constructs that constitute the concept (Goertz 2006). We do not posit how the three cognitive characteristics might correspond with specific behavioral characteristics, but recognize that this may be a fruitful area for building and testing hypotheses and theories, as based on particular attributes of the policy setting.
2. *Variation in policy conflict characteristics will condition and be conditioned by the policy setting.* This dynamic is depicted in Fig. 1. The underlying logic of this dynamic is that context (i.e., the policy setting) matters. While the policy setting shapes policy conflicts, policy conflicts also affect policy settings through feedback from outputs and outcomes of conflicts.
3. *The internal components of a policy conflict setting* (*level of action, policy actors, events, and policy issue*) *have interactive effects.* PCF does not assume independence among the factors that shape policy conflicts. For instance, policy actor interpersonal attributes (e.g., associations) may influence certain policy actor intrapersonal attributes (e.g., policy-relevant knowledge) and levels of action are interactive in their polycentric structure.
4. *Episodes of policy conflicts are interdependent and evolve over time through various feedback effects from outputs and outcomes.* Policy conflicts endure sometimes simultaneously and in sequence through a continuous evolution of replacement, displacements, or reinforcement of divergent policy positions within and across the polycentric structures of a policy setting. Thus, for example, the choice of policy actors to mobilize resources to stop the adoption of a public policy in one episode of a policy conflict may be conditioned by other episodes of policy conflict, either current or future. Alternately, addressing one divergent policy position in an episode of policy

conflict will not necessarily resolve future policy conflicts involving the same policy issue because new divergent policy positions may emerge. Similarly, policy conflict behaviors evolve as new activities emerge, old activities are deemed less effective, and cognitive conflict characteristics change (Tilly and Tarrow 2007). The outputs and outcomes of policy conflicts accrue over time, changing the policy setting from the memories of policy actors to the actual or perceived risks and benefits associated with a policy issue. The resulting patterns could be escalation or de-escalation in the intensity of policy conflict episodes.

Prescriptions for methodological and theoretical advances under the PCF

The purpose of the PCF is to guide researchers in the development of theoretical and empirical insights into policy conflicts, with the hope that such insights can contribute to the betterment of society. To be useful, theories and hypotheses must be grounded by the policy setting. For instance, a hypothesis that policy-relevant knowledge is a critical causal driver in episodes of policy conflicts is limited in its utility because it does not incorporate aspects of the setting and the nature of the relationship between policy-relevant knowledge and episodes of policy conflicts.[4] The better strategy is to ask under what conditions of a policy setting does policy-relevant knowledge matter in policy conflict episodes? In addition to contextually relevant theories and hypotheses, the PCF encourages researchers to place emphases on both the policy setting and the characteristics of policy conflicts to allow for empirical advances that are temporally and contextually based.

The emergence of useful theories and hypotheses must also coincide with the creation and deployment of common methods and best practices of data collection and analysis. This may require appropriate theoretical adjustments and consideration of tradeoffs associated with different research approaches. For example, one viable source of data for comparing policy conflicts over time and across policy settings, especially across countries, is news media. Although news media come with methodological limitations (e.g., biases in interpretation of events by reporters), they also come with methodological advantages (e.g., longitudinal data that can be compared across policy settings). Capitalizing on the strengths, recognizing the limitations, and utilizing different forms of data collection in analyzing policy conflicts is critical for gaining intellectual traction on such intractable issues as policy conflicts.

In advancing empirical methods, data may be collected through any source including, but not limited to, surveys, interviews, and automated and manual document coding. While data collection often starts with observations of individuals, the data can be aggregated to organizations, and aggregated to different levels of action. Researchers may also observe the attributes of individuals, other aspects of a policy setting, and outputs and outcomes, through data sources such as laws, policies, news media, or existing data.

[4] See for example, Heikkila and Weible (2017), who applied the PCF to understand the intensities of policy conflicts in unconventional oil and gas development in Colorado. Even though their work is just one case study, Heikkila and Weible (2017) underscore the importance of the policy setting in shaping policy conflict and the expected diversity of policy conflicts in both description and explanation.

Conclusion

Rarely are conceptual ambiguities unequivocally resolved in the social sciences, especially when dealing with concepts as complex as policy conflicts. Yet, it is possible to learn about ambiguous or complex phenomena and to gain localized and generalized knowledge about them. A pragmatic foundation for dealing with conceptual ambiguity begins with developing a clear definition of underlying constructs of the concept. From there, conceptual ambiguity can be addressed by identifying relationships among those concepts, and providing guidelines for data collection, analysis, and comparisons. This essay provides a framework for analyzing policy conflicts, to gain knowledge about the phenomena, and, hopefully, help people navigate policy conflicts.

The contributions of this framework are several. First, PCF places the concept of policy conflict at its center and is the only framework to do so. Other approaches often treat policy conflicts as a background concept and focus instead on other phenomena, such as agenda setting, policy change, or implementation. The PCF is not meant to discount these other efforts or to subsume them. Rather, the purpose is to develop a lens focused on policy conflicts. We envision this framework as complementary and compatible to many of the existing frameworks and theories of public policy.

By focusing on policy conflicts, the second contribution of the PCF is to offer conceptual clarity to the concept, particularly the distinction between cognitive and behavioral characteristics. Such clarity enhances the validity of the conceptualization of policy conflicts, which allows for more precise and accurate measurement. While other literatures have viewed conflict as existing when there are divergent positions on a policy issue, such divergence is not tantamount to conflict. There could be differences in policy positions without threats from such differences or there could be a willingness to compromise in bridging the differences. Through clear conceptualization, policy conflicts can be better understood comparatively. Furthermore, we incorporate the idea that policy conflicts evolve and endure over time as the divergence of policy positions shift and mutate.

The third contribution of PCF is its attention to the relationship among factors in a policy setting. The PCF assumes a modified version of methodological individualism whereby people with interpersonal and intrapersonal attributes interact at different levels of action (policy action situations, policy subsystems, and political systems) that surround a policy issue and sometimes in relation to events. The integration of these relationships in a single framework is novel in understanding the sources, characteristics, and effects of policy conflicts over time. This contribution is a synthesis of existing knowledge about the factors associated with policy conflicts.

The focus of PCF on policy conflicts offers not only academic contributions but also potential insights into how we handle our politics and policy issues over time. These practical benefits include comparing the relative intensity of conflicts and developing strategies for navigating and potentially mitigating policy conflicts. Given that policy conflicts are ubiquitous in political systems, the goal is to identify norms of political behavior such that policy conflicts can lead to positive effects over time. Doing so requires understanding patterns of policy conflicts and identifying the conditions under which these patterns lead to decision-making that deals with societal maladies so that our policy conflicts today do not lead to debilitating conflicts in the future.

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