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The Idea of Policy Generations

2.1 Introduction

The argument in the previous chapter was that the idea of well-balanced public policies does not comprise an adequate representation of real policy processes and the changes therein. In practice, policies do not change because the actors involved try to balance the different demands such policies face. Rather, the emphasis on one aspect will be continually replaced by emphasis on another aspect. Furthermore, the dominance of the priority of each of the demands follows a fixed sequence through time independent of the policy area involved. At one moment, the policy-makers will address only short-term goal achievement, then long-term effectiveness, subsequently the policy process, and after that efficiency. As such the theory fits within the theories on policy change as described in the first chapter. The theory acknowledges the existence of conflicts, or the battle over priorities, as crucial in pluralist theory, as described by Schattschneider (1960), and that policies involve choices over goals and priorities, as aptly discussed by Baumgartner and Jones (1996; Jones and Baumgartner 2005).

This chapter first argues that the changes in the emphasis and dominance of the demands come about simultaneously within every policy area. This allows us to talk about policy generations. Each policy generation is is distinct from preceding and succeeding ones because of the dominant opinion about the specific criterion with which the new policies first and foremost have to comply. We distinguish the generation of trouble-shooters that predominantly proceeds according
to the maxim ‘You have a problem today. We have the solution tomorrow’. In their opinion, a policy is adequate if it poses a quick solution for the most urgent problems. Next, there is the generation of caring technocrats, whose leading principle is to search for coherent structural solutions in the long run. For them the prime idea of an adequate policy is that it provides fundamental solutions for structural and latent problems. Third, there is the generation of politicized spenders, who deem a policy to be especially correct if it takes into account the wishes and demands of all those involved. Finally there is the generation of efficient managers who prefer those policies that engender as few costs as possible; ‘The fewer costs involved the better the policy’ is their adage.

Second, the theory outlined below postulates that policy generations and policy change have a fixed and cyclical course. As such this theory fits in a tradition of economists such as Kondratieff with his 50-year cycles of growth and recession, Skowronek’s study on American presidency (1988), Schlesinger’s cycles on alternating periods of reform and conservatism (1986), Truman’s wave theory on group mobilization (1951), Huntington’s theory on cycles of content and discontent with American government (1977), Hirschman’s theory on shifting involvements (1982) and McFarland’s theory on interest group cycles and critical pluralism (1987, 2004, 2007). What is unique about the theory on policy generations is that it claims to be able to predict the sequence in which the four policy generations succeed one another. Furthermore, the theory predicts a recurring pattern to this succession. When the four generations have all gone through their lifespan, the cycle repeats itself.

The advantage of this theory, if it is corroborated, is that one is able to predict the emphasis in policy-making in the subsequent period and one can anticipate such changes. This theory postulates that all one has to know is which aspects of policy-making and current policies are most emphasized at present and which features are neglected the most and for the longest period.

Emphasis and neglect go hand in hand. Nevertheless, in theories on the policy process, there has been very little attention paid to neglect. In this book, neglect is the central concept. Policy change is viewed as being induced by neglect. The longer something has been neglected, the greater are the odds that it be considered important in new policy agendas.