



Policy Content and Governance: A Perspective

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Abstract

In the scholarship and teaching of public policy, policy content has often been a neglected area, despite the fact that policy content is an important mediating factor in policy implementation, governance, structural arrangements, and coordination, among others. This, despite the presence of complex problems in the complex 21st century, requires multiple policies, in multiple governance arrangements, to solve these policy problems. This perspective article discusses the importance of studying these issues, in complement to other approaches, from a policy content perspective to allow for more precise analysis and examination of policy implementation and governance with the possibility of a more nuanced understanding of governance. From a policy design-as-content perspective, it is possible that hidden insights can emerge beyond studying policy as a ‘single dependent variable’, whilst the disaggregation of policy content into components, and interacting components across policies, could provide important insights for public administration scholarship and public administration and policy education.

Keywords

policy content, policy design, policy components, policy mix, policy analysis.

1 Introduction: The need for a policy content perspective

Policy content has been the focus of study in public policy for decades. For Lasswell (1951, 3), the historic mission of policy sciences is to “improve the concrete content” of public policies. Historically, and from an analytical perspective, policy content became a focus of study in the 1980s with the conceptual split between the actual process of public policy making and the abstract concept of policy design as content (Linder & Peters, 1988, 742). This distinction was refined by Howlett and Rayner (2018, 390), who characterized policy design as a *verb*, as a process of creating a policy configuration, and a *noun*, which is the actual product or artifact. In addition, the design, as the verb, can be situated within the realm of policy formulation. In this orientation, the focus is on the “choice of policy instruments, as well as the individual, societal and contextual factors that influence the instrument choice” (Siddiki, 2020, 1–2). Policy design as policy content is essentially the output of the designing process in which the decisions taken in the formulation process are reflected in the content of the policy, which is embedded in the actual text.

Policy content can be conceptualized as the policy text, which is the “content or substance of the public policy” (Schneider & Ingram, 1997, 2) that are text-based designed outputs or artifacts of the policy process. Empirically, these are wordy, formal texts such as legislation, guidelines and policy documents (Sager & Thomann, 2017), from which central components can be extracted, including the different nested elements and their interaction. According to Capano and Howlett (2021), policies are composed of different parts, which interact with each other to change behavior and alter a given situation to achieve the aims of a government. Improved understanding and specification of policy components, embedded in the policy content, is a critical element for policy effectiveness (Howlett et al., 2023).

Despite the advancements in understanding policy content and design, the use of policy content to study and teach governance, with other policy theories such as Punctuated Equilibrium, Social Construction Framework, Policy Feedback Theory, Advocacy Coalition Framework, Narrative Policy Framework, and so on, has been limited. However, it has been used more extensively in Institutional Analysis and Development Framework theory (Weible & Cairney, 2021), that inspired the Institutional Grammar (Frantz & Siddiki, 2022). These are dominant theories of public policy (ToPP) textbooks, including the latest *Handbook of Teaching Public Policy* (Denny & Zittoun, 2024), which do not explicitly have a focus on policy content, even though the textual content of policy is an important mediating factor for effective policy implementation with various roleplayed (Lejano & Park, 2015). Siddiki (2020) adds that policy design as content has received limited attention in the literature, despite the increasing value of thinking about policy design as content, as theorizing and research on policy as content is relatively limited.

This perspective reviews the progression in the science of policy design-as-content, the various areas of focus, the development in the study of these areas, and methods and measures to study these areas. The perspective provides theoretical, analytical, and some practical insights into the usefulness of policy design-as-content approaches for their potential in terms of generating more nuanced and hidden insights of policy content as an analytical lens to make sense of governance and policy implementation. To this end, the paper is divided into four key sections, first, the understanding of policy content and how the science has progressed, two, the inter-temporal nature of policy content and its co-evolution with context, three, the various approaches to study policy content and potential insights; and finally, some insights in the discussion section providing a policy content lens to governance with implications for education.

2 Understanding policy content: Progression in the science

In the study of policy content, Hall’s (1993) seminal work, which disaggregated public policies into three different components, formed the basis of understanding the composition of policies. By deconstructing policy content into three policy elements, namely, paradigms, tools, and tool calibration, the dominant view in the policy scholarship of conflating all the policy elements into a “single dependent variable” (Howlett et al., 2024, 2) was challenged. This work was a critical development in the progression of policy design scholarship, “facilitate[ing] greater conceptual and empirical work” (Cashore, 2022, 1). Later, Hall’s (1993) model was expanded by Cashore and Howlett (2007) to include aims and means at three different levels of specificity (see Figure 1), which comprised a taxonomy of nested policy design components. The levels included a high *macro* level of abstract goals and means, middle or *meso* level policy objectives and policy instruments, and *micro* level of policy settings and calibration. Thus, three more policy components were added (Howlett et al., 2024, 3).

Figure 1. Modified taxonomy of policy components (from Hall, 1993)

		Policy Content		
		<i>High-Level Abstraction</i>	<i>Program Level Operationalization</i>	<i>Specific On-the-Ground Measures</i>
Policy Focus	<i>Policy Ends or Aims</i>	HIGH-LEVEL POLICY GOALS What General Types of Ideas Govern Policy Development?	PROGRAM-LEVEL POLICY OBJECTIVES What Does Policy Formally Aim to Address?	OPERATIONAL SPECIFICATIONS or POLICY GOAL TARGETS What are the Specific On-the-ground Requirements of Policy?
	<i>Policy Means or Tools</i>	GOVERNING INSTRUMENT LOGIC What General Norms Guide Preferences?	POLICY TOOL CHOICES What Specific Types of Instruments are Utilized?	CALIBRATIONS OF POLICY TOOLS What are the Specific Ways in Which the Instrument is Used?

Source: Howlett et al. (2024, 3)

The taxonomy of policy components model allows for conceptual disaggregation of the policy content, providing for a better understanding, description, and investigation of the internal complexity of the policy components and their impact in real-world policy making. This body of work focuses on what exactly comprises a policy and how these components fit together (Capano & Howlett, 2021). Cashore (2022, 1–2) traces the evolution of the model in different works, citing it as “components of public policy”, “policy elements”, “components of a policy mix”, as the literature advanced.

The policy components outlined in *Figure 1* can also be described in more detail by considering the example on housing, which is described by Howlett et al. (2024, 4) as:

... policy objectives are operationalised goals, for example, ‘eliminating homelessness’ can be a paradigm goal, deciding to achieve it through the construction of housing apartments is an ‘objectives’. The specifications are the actual targets expected to be achieved, for example, 10 000 units over the next 10 years.

Howlett et al. (2024, 4) continue that the same logic can be applied to policy means, where at a “macro-level, governance or instrument logics are the counterparts of ideational paradigms that express overall governance preferences, like preferring state driver or state-led policy efforts opposed to market driven ones”. Preferences are operationalized in the choices of the tools made to implement the goals and objectives, for example, choosing tax credits for developing social housing, rather than council or state housing, in which the private sector and initiatives are favored. At the micro-level, these tools are operationalized in terms of decisions about “how much or how little credit to provide or which agency will be used to monitor or implement it” (Howlett et al., 2024, 4).

The revised model has been used in many studies across the policy literature; however, the focus on the different components has been critiqued for being focused on unevenly (Capano & Howlett, 2021). Focusing on the “micro-dimension” of policy design (thus, specification and calibration in *Figure 1*), it criticized the existing literature. Many studies focus on the abstract

level of goals or paradigms (Hogan & Howlett, 2015), with extensive literature on governance and bundles of aims or ideas (Peters et al., 2022) or “meso-level” studies, which focus on policy tools (Howlett, 2022) and policy objectives (Petek et al., 2022). The focus on specificity and calibration “on-the-ground” (micro), in the literature has been sparse, “despite these components of policy design typically being the key ones affecting the world of policy practice” (Capano & Howlett, 2021, 160).

It is important to bear in mind that studying policy content is an important analytical focus when studying policy in a disaggregated manner to move away from conflating policy as a “single dependent variable” as there are various insights that might emerge from studying policy based on its various dimensions. Focusing on policy content allows for understanding how and why policies might fail or succeed, as it provides an analytical focus for understanding and explaining policy design in terms of the policy components (goals, objectives, tools), policy dynamics (means-end interaction), and potentially, the policy practice and outcomes or policy integration. In addition, policy content is an important analytical locus of the policy sciences as it is linked to governance activities, implementation outcomes, and outputs.

3 Study of policy content as various policy components

In the study of policy design and policy analysis literature, policy content has been studied in the main through the conceptualization and categorization of policy components. This conceptualization and progression in the literature have also deepened the understanding of the specifics of the policy components and their relations to policy effectiveness, policy change, or the inter-temporal nature, policy mix interaction, as well as their implications for policy coherence, integration, and coordination. These are important insights that can be studied through the lens of policy content.

3.1 Policy goals, objectives, and specifications: A continuum perspective

At the highest level of abstraction, the policy level, according to *Figure 1*, are the *policy goals*. Policy goals have been considered central components for defining public policy, as well as being a constitutive part of policy analysis in seminal and more recent literature (Howlett, 2010; Cashore & Howlett, 2007). In addition, policy goals have been the focus of study in much of policy literature as a key vision or embedded in the political ideology or worldview of what the overall aim is, translating political party policy to government policy. A recent work by Petek et al. (2022), however, critiqued the idea that policy goals “comprise a single-lined hierarchy” in which they suggest policy goals can be measured based on a continuum, according to their technical dimensions. Petek et al. (2022) provide a more precise conceptualization of goals and their technical dimensions, based on empirical policy goals and responding to terminological inconsistencies on policy goals in the literature. As a result, different types of goals were derived, including broad, mode-centered, actor-centered, direction-centered, semi-structured, and structured (see for a detailed explanation: Petek et al., 2022, 732). Adding to existing studies, the focus on the technical dimensions of policy goals has the potential to provide important insights drawing on policy content. For example, Petek et al. (2022) argue that more complex and specific goals are not lower goals. The focus on technical types of goals to achieve policy implementation correlates with policy success and failure, “serving as a basis for more practical advice for policy planning” (Petek et al., 2022).

3.2 Policy instruments

At the level of means or tools, policy instruments have proven to be an important “pillar in policy studies, they are essential heuristic devices for understanding and explaining policy dynamics” (Capano, 2024, 1). Policy instruments are “an identifiable method through which collective action is structured to address a public problem” (Salamon, 2002, 19), or the means that governments use “to deliberately affect the nature, types, quantities and distribution of the goods and services provided in a society” (Howlett, 2000, 415). Policies adopt specific instruments to achieve the expected (more or less shared) objectives, central to the policy-making process for achieving outcomes. Of importance is that policy instruments are designed for and represent the content of the policy, which are the “real outputs of policymaking” (Capano, 2024, 3). Stated differently, policy instruments are embedded in policy designs, which are captured in the content to change a specific situation through the implementation of the policy instruments, through which they change behavior to affect the initial situation.

The instrument logic deals with choices between guiding principles on instruments, for example, the state, market, and/or collective governance. In the study of policy instruments, based on how they are captured in the content of policies, they can be placed at various analytical dimensions, including coercion, behavioral assumptions, and governmental resources (see Capano & Engeli, 2022). At the meso-level, there are also different typologies of instruments to induce behaviors such as expenditure, regulation, information, and taxation as outlined by Capano and Toth (2023). Focusing on the policy design content allows for a better understanding of the decision-making of policy and measuring policy change. Studying policy instruments embedded in the policy content is complex but is “promising for improving our understanding of the main drivers and characteristics of policymaking” (Capano, 2024, 5). In the new policy design literature, it has also become clear that policies often deploy more than one policy instrument, and their interaction is also important, which is studied based on policy content, for policy integration for their trade-offs and synergies (Knill et al., 2021).

3.2.1 Micro-dimensions: Specification and calibration

As these policy instruments must also be operationalized, this can be investigated at the micro-dimension, which is the calibration of the different tools being used on-the-ground. This is a very understudied and undertheorized area, which is now receiving the much-needed attention for a more precise understanding of policy performance, content, change, and outcome. The micro-dimension of policy designs deals specifically with policy specifications (targets) and tool calibrations, which is glossed over “in the mainstream policy sciences” (Howlett et al., 2023). However, neglecting this component of policy content creates challenges for fully understanding the impact and potential linkage between different policy aspects and the related outcomes. The micro-dimension of policy content provides analysts with a more precise understanding of what an intervention entails, and what differences it makes, as inadequate answers to these questions makes it difficult to gauge policy performance (Capano & Howlett, 2021).

In addition, delving into the micro-dimension of the policy component can help elucidate the specifications, answering the *what*, *who*, *when* questions, while calibration provides the answers for the *how* question, “how the specified goals are to be achieved on the ground” (Howlett et al., 2024). Scholars found that focusing on the policy content using the micro-dimension as the locus of analysis helps “grasp the real content of policy design” (Capano & Toth, 2023, 7), allowing for finer-grained comparison with respect to the content of policy (Howlett et al.,

2023), assessing the drivers of policy performance based on disaggregating the content of policy design and how the micro-dimension contribute to changes in policy performance (Capano & Toth, 2023).

However, these policy components, albeit being placed at various levels of specification and abstraction, have to work together to gain the intended policy ambitions. The disaggregation of policy content also allows for presenting and understanding the policy dynamics. Policy components interact to achieve outcomes. For example, to achieve policy specific goals, answering the *what*, *who*, *when*, the on-the-ground tool calibration are important as they interact and answer the *how* question, and “should match like two pieces in a jigsaw puzzle [...] where one is the potential outcome [...] and the other is a real or actual administrative allocation” (Howlett et al., 2024, 16). The interaction between these components also allows for comparative analysis between policies in terms of the policy components as embedded in the policy content. Recent studies focusing on the policy content or components also allowed for the study of policy adaptation in terms of its robustness, such as static and dynamic robustness (see Howlett & Ramesh, 2022) and policy adaptability (see Siddiki, 2020).

3.3 Inter-temporal nature: Policy change

Following on, an understanding of policy dynamics is an important consideration as policy design “evolves over time as the context in which it is situated changes” (Siddiki, 2020, 2). This is an important insight as the inter-temporal nature of policies in their context also affects policy effectiveness. Lejano and Shankar (2013) argue in congruence that design is dialectic between (social) construction and (ecological) adaptation of policy. Lejano and Shankar (2013) suggest that text must complement the context, drawing on evidence from the “stock Structural Adjustment Programmes in different countries failed because the policy design failed to match the complexity of the real work context” (Rapley, 1997, 84).

From a policy content perspective, it is important that policy designs are compatible with their environment and context in which the “process of policy de-composition is useful analytically as it allows for each component changes on its own to be better observed [...] as well as the interaction between them which determines the overall nature of policy dynamics visible over time” (Howlett et al., 2024, 2). Focusing on the policy design content, Ambrose et al. (2024) studied policy evolution (change) of Net-meters using the policy language captured in the provisions and how they changed over time.

Synthesizing literature on policy change, including understanding policy layering, which includes patching (new statements without readjusting previous policy), packaging (layering new statements while terminating others to readjust previous policy), and calibrating (making changes to text within the statements (Ambrose et al., 2024). Using a policy content analytical approach, policy evolution could be better observed in terms of targets, namely, those who implemented and tracked policy change based on the micro-dimension over decades. The study of policy evolution, according to Ambrose et al. (2024), allows for precise observation of the nuances regarding to whom policies apply and how they should be implemented. This provides important insights for policy effectiveness as policy patching has been demonstrated to increase tensions within policies (Howlett & Rayner, 2013), and this can be observed “when added statements introduce intra-policy inconsistencies” (Ambrose et al., 2024, 8). This explains a process where policy elements are restructured, which often leads to inconsistent, incoherent, and incongruent elements in a policy mix, often resulting in sub-optimal policy designs (Howlett, 2014). The analysis of policy components for policy dynamics enables analysts to

investigate issues of policy compatibility, interactions, policy change, policy conflict, policy adaptability, policy resilience, and robustness that emerge in the inter-temporal nature and evolution of policies.

Although there has been a focus on single policies or intra-policy compatibility for some time now, it has been recognized that to deal with complex policy problems, single policy instruments do not suffice. The idea of policy mix is an important part of policy content as it contains the bundles or portfolios of policy instruments (Howlett & Rayner, 2007; Capano & Howlett, 2020), which must be synergic and not counterproductive, as counterproductive interactions undermine policy effectiveness. Policy mixes interaction has also been conceptualized as a system of interconnected elements susceptible to interaction, which can be multi-level, cross-sectoral (Goyal & Howlett, 2022). As these policy mixes can have varied results, understanding the nature of their interaction is important.

3.4 Policy mixes and interaction

Focusing on policy mixes has also opened the door for inter-policy compatibility, which occurs when multiple policies address complex issues. Focusing on policy content requires an analysis of the individual policy component level (dimensions) as well as their interaction. In addition, Howlett and Rayner (2007) suggest the need to consider interactions among the structure and content of related policies. This has become important in two ways. Firstly, the focus on individual components allows for a clear focus on calibrations and related specifications, which offer a lens for inter-sectoral comparison (Capano & Howlett, 2021). Secondly, it allows for the study of policy coherence, integration, and coordination. For example, it is understood that a lack of policy coherence amongst different policies implemented in different policy subsystems might lead to fragmented action, unintended outcomes, or where one policy undermines or duplicates the efforts. Policy coherence, for example, refers to “how well policies with similar objectives go together” (May et al., 2006, 382). Policy product (content) integration focuses on the integration and consistency of cross-cutting policies in relation to other policies and sectors (Knill et al., 2021).

Policy integration and coherence are seen as the antidote to fragmented government action (Cejudo & Michel, 2017). In addition, the importance of policy content interaction is motivated by Peters et al. (2022, 39), who argue that coordination and policy integration are fundamental challenges of policy design, as effectiveness is assessed by how well policy components are integrated and coordinated (Peters et al., 2018). Moreover, policy mixes research has been used to study policy coherence, indicating the importance of policy coherence for alignment, how policies are coordinated at the organizational level (between agencies, ministries, and departments), how policy content (provisions and directives) *creates* interactions such as horizontal and vertical coordination in multilevel governance situations, and overcomes policy fragmentation.

Policy content and the disaggregation of the policy components as an analytical frame can be seen as a *lynchpin* in policy design studies, as it is central in the analysis of public policy. Policy documents are enacted, and they provide authority over “what governments do, why they do it, and what difference it makes” (Dye, 1976). Therefore, in any study of public policy, the policy content is important. The decomposition of the policy content based on Hall’s (1993) work allows for moving the analytical locus beyond a single dependent variable. It creates a precise analysis of policies based on the various levels of policy components. The inter-temporal nature of policies is investigated through their content, including inter-policy interaction through

studying policy mixes and how various policies interact to solve complex problems. Beyond the analytical focus, approaches and methods for the study of policy content have been developed, albeit that the “theorising and research on policy design (content) is relatively limited” (Siddiki, 2020, 3).

4 Approaches and methods for studying policy content

Policy content is studied in the policy design literature and linked to governance activities, policy outcomes, and outputs, with the aim of improving policy performance or effectiveness. The approaches have provided methodological advancement to study the nuances of policy design in an attempt to improve the policy output. For example, Siddiki (2020) developed a multi-level analytical framework in which she “systematically organised these policy design approaches according to the scope of policy that serves as the analytical basis (unit of analysis)”. Central to these approaches is studying policy content, investigating the information actually conveyed within the public policy, attempting to “ascertain whether common patterns observed in policy text are consistently associated with particular political and policy dynamics” (Siddiki & Curley, 2022, 122–123). As a result, this work (Siddiki, 2020) pulls together various waves of methodological development in this policy design orientation, focusing on linguistically oriented approaches and analyzing structural features such as statements, provisions, directives, or, collectively, textual content at various levels of analysis, which can be categorized into micro-, meso-, and macro-approaches.

Macro-level approaches: These approaches “treat whole policies as the focal unit of analysis”, which include classifying whole policies of a particular type based on design features, function, and relationship to context (Siddiki, 2020, 22). They are referred to as policy typologies, which focus on dimensions of policy that serve as the basis for generalizing different policies and linking them to different policy domains. Briefly, there are six approaches that are situated in the *typology* category. These include distinguishing between substantive and procedural policy; material or symbolic policy or as Ostrom (1962) focuses on constitutional, collective, operational authority, inducements/incentives, and so on. Or, as per Lowi (1964), classify policies as regulatory, distributive, and redistributive policies. For policy content, these approaches are important as they categorize policies fundamentally on two bases, namely, function and allocation of resources, which are tied to policy design. A crucial point to note is that without the evaluation of content, such classifications could not be made. Finally, these approaches focus on the structural features of policy design content based on generalizable features, allowing policy makers, citizens, and stakeholders to understand the functional properties and/or how the government will allocate resources among applicable policy targets.

Meso-level approaches: These approaches “focus on individual directives as a whole, or configurations of policy directives, which convey policy related meaning” (Siddiki, 2020, 25). Their attention is on particular directives embedded within policies, including statements, clauses, and provisions, which convey what specific actors must or may do under specific conditions. Among these approaches is the work of Schneider and Ingram (1997), who found elements in policy, including policy goals, targets, populations, implementation agents, policy tools, and operational rules. The second approach is that of Ostrom (2005), which focused on the formal identification of individual directives comprising public policies, and subsequent assessment of “functional properties of each and accordant classification” (Siddiki, 2020). Schneider and Ingram’s (1997) approach allows for insight into the implicit logic of reflected

in the policy design content, focusing, for example, on how certain targets' behavior through chosen instruments will result in the attainment of a policy's goal. Ostrom's (2005) work is premised on the idea that to understand governing rules, the analyst must consider how the different elements in the policy content are linked to guide the behavior of the intended target. Based on the content, these approaches require some level of organizing and distinguishing between policy elements embedded in the content, conveying distinctive information of how policies might affect governance and induce certain behaviors.

Micro-level approaches: These approaches focus on “individual policy directives as the unit of analysis [...] treating directives as constitutive of generalisable sub-elements that are also assessed as part of the analyses” (Siddiki, 2020, 28). These approaches dissect policy content and classify policy directives in generalizable categories. Chief among these are the linguistically oriented approaches developed by Crawford and Ostrom (1995), focusing on parsing the individual directives constituting governing rules in accordance with a generalizable syntax. This is the “Grammar of Institutions” with the analytical technique, namely, the Institutional Grammar Tool (Siddiki et al., 2011). The idea is that directives have common structural elements, with each element conveying certain semantic meaning relevant to understanding how directives are intended to affect behavior (see Siddiki, 2020, 28). Based on the syntactic structure of these individual policy directives, information is provided on who the policy targets are, who the people are that should implement the policy, and what the governing outcomes are, including analyzing behavior outcomes like compliance.

The use of these approaches in the study of policy content, for example, the social construction and IGT can provide a rich understanding of public policy and the stakeholders involved. The macro-level and meso-level approaches are critiqued for their lack of methodological guidance (Frantz & Siddiki, 2022). Most prominent amongst these approaches are the micro, with the Institutional Grammar Tool, and the most recent Institutional Grammar 2.0. Focusing on policy content as an abstractable unit of analysis, various research questions are studied and their linkage to governance activities as synthesized in recent meta-reviews of the IG scholarship (see Dunlop et al., 2019; Siddiki et al., 2022; Frantz & Siddiki, 2022). These insights include understanding how policy actors coordinate and compete or engage in conflict (Schlager & Cox, 2018), interactions among actors in response to rule configurations (Olivier, 2019), how institutions (policies) influence individual and collective behavior and systematic outcomes (Frantz & Siddiki, 2022, 299), and, rule legitimacy or levels of compliance/non-compliance (e.g., Angulo-Cazares, 2018). This allows for identifying specific role-players responsible for an action and the specificity of the target, both those to implement and the beneficiaries of the policy.

5 Discussion: A policy content perspective to governance

In the 1980s, governments were faced with increasing complexity, socio-economic problems, and governability, which gave rise to the proliferation of ‘governance’ as a concept (Capano, 2020; Peters & Pierre, 2008) in the ‘governance turn.’ The argument is that with the increase of complex problems that transcend traditional single-purpose departments that created fragmentation, the increase in government spending on the ability of the government to deal with these complex problems and contended with these issues through the distribution of the administrative burden of strategic and operational complexity by involving multiple role players through networks and collaboration (Agranoff & McGuire, 2003). *Governance* triggered the substantial shift in the policy studies because of the government overload and increasing social

complexity radically impacted policy making and how collective problems are defined, how to deal with them and how social expectations are met, and how policy outcomes are achieved (Capano, 2020, 14).

The various approaches to studying public policy allow for students and scholars to study the nature of the policy, to identify or classify policies based on their content and design, such as being distributive or redistributive, as Lowi (1964) did. Additionally, at the meso-level, it allows for policies to be studied based on their content to identify who the target population is, to elucidate who the people are to policy will be affecting or policy goals, tools, the implementation agent (Schneider & Ingram, 1997). Additionally, at the meso-level, Ostrom (2005) has suggested that to understand governing rules, the analyst must consider how the different elements in the policy content are linked to guide the behavior of the intended target. At the more micro-level of individual policy content, the idea is that directives have common structural elements, with each element conveying certain semantic meaning relevant to understanding how directives are intended to affect behavior (see Siddiki, 2020, 28), by dissecting policy content and classifying policy directives in generalizable categories. Focusing on policy content as an abstractable unit of analysis, various research questions are studied and their linkage to governance activities. One can study the coordination and engagement of the role players in public policy by identifying the rules of configurations, the potential conflict based on the implementation agents and their different budgets and departmental objectives, or how the policies influence the collective behavior of implementing agents. This has especially been useful in studying the compliance/non-compliance by the members involved in the policy or street-level bureaucrats. These are important insights for governance and how content links or provides insights at a granular level to these governance aspects.

To deal with complex policy problems, governments tend to create more policies to address different targets of the problem, often leading to a fragmented policy landscape in which the interaction of these policies might undermine each other or can even be counterproductive. These multiple policies and their interaction create a policy landscape (de Wee & Ramolobe, 2025) in which these policies interact. In our paper, we discuss the importance of using policy content methodologies to map the policy content and analyze it in the larger policy landscape (de Wee & Ramolobe, 2025), which is akin to the macro-causal theory of the policy (studying single policy theories in relation to each other) (Cejudo & Michel, 2017). As such, we suggest that “the policy landscape also provides an additional layer of analysis in policy designing as new policies and their content can be evaluated *ex ante* based on how they ‘interact’ with the existing policy landscape” (de Wee and Ramolobe, 2025, 16). This is an attempt to improve policy integration and coherence to decrease fragmentation.

This is important as fragmentation often leads to duplication and even contradictory policies (Weitz et al., 2017). For example, the problems of climate change emission reduction can be dealt with by various ministries, including energy, forestry, and agriculture. In another paper I used the IPA methodology to study the content of policy, based on the statements in three Nigerian policies aligned to nutrition, and I found that there are various degrees of interaction, which can be counter-productive, reinforced, causal orphans and accidental interactions (de Wee, 2025, 10). This type of analysis can help practitioners and students understand where there are conflicts between policies, and it allows for studying retrospectively where and or how conflicts emerged with the policy change or evolution. These are important insights into understanding the trade-offs often between policies and how they impact policy integration, coordination, and policy outcomes in governance.

The problem, however, is that to deal with these problems, governments tend to create more policies to regulate them without understanding or considering the various costs of fragmented policy growth. The inter-temporal nature of policies, from a policy content perspective, can help study the content and pinpoint exactly which parts of a policy have changed. This is important because often we see policy layering, or policy accumulation, which adopts an aggregate perspective on sectoral policy, which is defined as “the result of a continuous addition of new policy elements to existing policy portfolios without the compensatory reduction of already existing policy elements.” (Adam et al., 2019)

Policy growth is a concept that focuses on policy complexity, where individual policies are added to an increasingly dense network of existing policy provisions, and the potential interactions between them increase considerably (Hinterleitner et al., 2024, 647). Some of these consequences include overburdening the bureaucracy with additional policies while maintaining existing resources for implementation, thereby reducing resources for existing policies (Hinterleitner et al., 2024, 647), duplication of services to different policy targets, and conflicting interactions between different policy instruments. This is important to understand, as generally, policy growth and accumulation inevitably lead to administrative burdens and austerity in the public sector. The ability to study policy growth and accumulation through the evolution of policy content will provide valuable insights into how to better manage and decrease the possibilities of austerity because of the plethora of policies duplicating work. Studying policy content is important in these cases as it allows for analysis of administrative burdens and the changing of policy, and how they might interact. Policy content provides avenues to evaluate these, as even if policies are well-crafted or integrated initially, they degenerate through successive rounds of change, and according to Migone and Howlett (2024), better understanding how mixes are initially composed and how they evolve are key questions for analysts and practitioners alike.

This paper, like Lejano and Park (2015), makes a case for the focus on content because studies tend to neglect the fact that implementation is mediated by policy text. The idea is that implementation (or governance problems) can be derived from the nature and action of policy texts. The policy text is the intervening text that mediates action in the public sector. In policy integration, various policies and their interactions create relations between role-players in various policy subsystems and their directed actions. This idea is supported by Mettler’s (2016, 3) work on *policyscapes*, arguing that the political landscape is densely clustered with policies, and these policies define how state power is organized and how governmental operations are carried out, which establishes the context in which these officials must operate and govern. From this paper, the argument is that propositions are written to construct new situations or existing action situations, and they may correspond to an observable action situation/implementation. These observable actions or outputs serve as measurable results produced by the public policy, which links the public policy to the desired outcomes and serves as a proxy indicator for the outcome (Koontz & Thomas, 2012). This argument also draws on the work of May and Jochim (2013), who argued that governance systems are interconnected action situations where the various policies create a governance landscape that has many action situations (individual sub-systems in various ministerial jurisdictions and at various levels of government) that structure the governance arrangements. These implementation structures allow for mechanisms to address collective problems through collective action, including coordinating authorities, intergovernmental and other partnerships, networks of private and public entities, and contractual relationships (see May & Jochim, 2013, 435). Role players embedded in the text of a policy in different policy statements can also be identified, and their different actions.

6 Concluding remarks

This perspective aimed at providing a policy content perspective to the analysis of governance and possible advancements in public policy education. The paper argues that, because policy content is an important mediating factor for policy implementation, structural arrangements, and coordination in governance, amongst others, it is important to take stock of the existing knowledge on policy design-as-content and its contributions to the study of governance. The 21st century is plagued with complex problems that require multiple policies, in multiple governance arrangements and administrative jurisdictions, and the focus on policy content provides an additional and complementary approach to the study of these governance processes. Based on the review of the literature, a focus on policy content prepares for a more precise analysis and examination of policy implementation and governance, with the possibility of a more nuanced understanding of governance, through the disaggregation of policy content into components and interacting components across policies, could provide important insights for public administration scholarship and public administration and policy education.

Policy content is an important aspect in the study of policy designs in the larger policy sciences. Howlett (2014, 190) emphasizes that it is “necessary to advance our understanding of both designs themselves” and associated processes. Central in this advancement has been the taxonomy model of policy content, disaggregating policy content into different components, overcoming the dependent variable problem. This also expanded the analytical locus in policy design (content) to multiple variables and understanding the nature of these dimensions of the policies and their impact on governance activities, policy dynamics, policy outcomes, and effectiveness. This, in turn, allows for more in-depth and nuanced approaches to the study of policy integration, which is important for effective policy making (preventing policy conflict and undermining instruments and objectives) and governance.

The progression in the policy design literature indicates the evolution from the early work of Hall (1993) to the expansion by Cashore and Howlett (2007). From a policy content perspective, the model admitted important insights into policy change, now studied at the micro-dimension extensively. The introduction of policy mix research also opened important doors for the complexities of modern-day governance, where multiple policies across sectors in multi-level governance exist, developing key areas such as policy coherence, integration, and their impact on policy coordination at an agency, departmental, or organizational level.

However, beyond the policy components as variables for investigation, various methodological advancements have been made for studying policy content. Despite this, more work is needed to investigate patterns in policy content to draw generalizable insights to continue developing “valid and reliable measurements of policy design [...] as the basis for conceptual insight” (Siddiki & Curley, 2022, 122), especially in terms of policy coherence and integration and mapping policy inter-compatibility. Such methodological advancements can provide key insights into the policy mixes, their interaction, synergy, and counterproductivity, as well as the nature of integrated and coherent policies.

Finally, it is important to set an agenda to purposefully integrate the study approaches for the various levels of policy design-as-content when focusing on public administration, policy, and governance research. It should also be used in complement to other theories in the Theories of Public Policy textbooks, to focus on the policy content using the various methods of analysis, at the appropriate level, to advance possible understanding and fill gaps left by the existing dominant theories. Policies are central in sanctioning governance in the public sector, and therefore, it is our responsibility to advance our understanding and strengthen the analytical links between policy content theory and governance.

Acknowledgment

This paper is an accumulation of research the author has conducted over the past five years that has culminated in various other articles, which are summarized here. The paper can be seen as a consolidation of ideas, observations, and insights that developed over the time of research policy design.

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