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## The argumentative turn in public policy revisited: twenty years later

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This essay outlines and extends the discussion of the ‘argumentative turn’ in public policy as it has evolved since 1993 and points to possible future directions of argumentative policy analysis. First emerging in 1993, the contributions over these two decades include a focus on deliberation and deliberative democracy, discourse and discursive institutionalism, social constructivism and interpretation, rhetoric and semiotics, post-structural policy analysis, participatory and collaborative policy analysis, and more. In this contribution, the role of language and ideas in policy-making are underscored, the challenge posed to neopositivist policy analysis by the complexity of today’s ‘messy problems’ and the role that deliberative argumentation can play in dealing with such problems.

**Keywords:** policy argumentation; language; postpositivism; messy problems; deliberation; citizen participation

### 1. Revisiting the argumentative turn

The concept of the ‘argumentative turn,’ introduced in a book edited by Frank Fischer and John Forester in 1993, called for a new direction in planning and policy analysis. The book advocated a turn away from the dominant empirical approach to policy inquiry to make way for the recognition of language and argumentation as fundamental aspects of both theory and analysis in policy-making and planning. The volume helped to stimulate and advance a large body of new scholarship in the fields of policy analysis and planning in the United States and Europe over the following decades. Since its appearance, the focus on argumentation has converged with other new theoretical and methodological developments in the political and social sciences, in particular, deliberation, discourse, interpretive methods, and social constructivism. The new book, *The Argumentative Turn Revisited* (2012), examines these developments in an effort to further promote the argumentative approach in policy inquiry.<sup>1</sup>

Significantly influenced at the outset by the critical theory of Jürgen Habermas, especially his critique of scientism and technocracy, as well as his theory of communicative action, the ‘argumentative turn’ presented an alternative approach to policy investigation. It did this by bringing ‘postpositivist’ epistemology together with political and social theory in the search for a relevant methodological approach, theoretical as well as practical. Initially, the orientation focused on policy judgment, practical argumentation, frame analysis, rhetorical analysis and policy narration, among other approaches new at the time. In the early 1990s, this work matured into an important component of the study of public policy and policy-making (Gottweis 2006). As the influential policy theorist Guy Peters (2004) has written, the post-positivist approach has emerged as one of the competing theoretical approaches.

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The argumentative turn has not sought to offer a systematic theory of argumentation and discourse in the policy process, but rather to open the door for others to go through. And over these past two decades that has happened. The orientation to language and communication has expanded to include work on deliberative politics and deliberative democracy, discourse analysis, policy expertise, governance, citizen juries, participatory inquiry, local knowledge, collaborative planning, the role of media, interpretive methods and critical policy studies generally. Although these research orientations are scarcely synonymous, they share attention to communication and argumentation, in particular the processes of mobilizing, utilizing and evaluation of communicative practices in policy analysis and policy-making.

The argumentative turn has, from the outset, sought to confront the fact that mainstream policy analysis was widely judged by practitioners to be of little use to policy-makers (Lindblom and Cohen 1979). At the root of the challenge was the misbegotten idea that policy analysis can and should be a value-free, technical project (Fischer 1980). Whereas neopositivist methods have traditionally emphasized a technically based, rational model of policy-making – an effort to supply value-free, empirically verified answers to the questions related to policy-making – the argumentative perspective rejects this conception of policy analysis as a relatively straightforward application of scientific methods and techniques. Rather than a restricted emphasis on a quantitative evaluation of inputs and outputs, the argumentative turn adopts the policy argument and argumentation as the starting point of inquiry. Without neglecting empirical realities, the argumentative approach labors to understand and analyze the linkages between the empirical and the normative claims as they play out in policy argumentation and deliberation. As such, it is interested in the validity of empirical claims, but moves beyond the conventional empirical focus to examine the ways in which such findings are combined with normative criteria in the policy process.

This approach is particularly significant for an applied discipline. Given that policy analysis emerged to assist in policy-making, the discipline needs to be relevant and useful to those whom it seeks to assist. The argumentative perspective, in this respect, analyzes policy to inform the ordinary everyday language policy argumentation, especially as reflected in the deliberation of politicians, public administrators and citizens. Instead of interpreting policy argumentation through the imposition of scientific frameworks, this theoretical shift embraces an understanding of social and political action as embedded in and symbolically mediated by political and cultural contexts.

As we explained in the book, recognizing that policy-making is ‘constituted by and mediated through communicative practices, the argumentative therefore attempts to understand both the process of policy-making and the analytical activities of policy professionals on their own terms’ (Fischer and Gottweis 2012, p. 2). Rather than turning to abstract models, as do neopositivist analysts do, the argumentative approach seeks ‘to understand and reconstruct what policy analysts do when they do it, to understand how their research results and advice are communicated and how such advice is understood and employed by those who receive it.’ This requires, then, paying close attention to social constructions, in particular the frequently conflicting normative policy frames of the policy participants engaged in struggles over power and policy.

## **2. The argumentative turn and today’s turbulent world**

Such concerns take on particular significance in an increasingly turbulent world. Many policy problems today are more complex, uncertain and riskier than when many of the theories and methods of policy analysis were first put forward. Frequently lacking clear

definitions, such policy problems can be described as ‘messier’ than earlier policy issues and problems (Ney 2009). The challenges of climate change, transportation and health care, for instance, present problems for which adequate solutions are missing – particularly when one searches for technical solutions, despite all of the efforts to identify them. In short, traditional approaches – often technocratic in nature – have proven insufficient and often have failed to address such problems.

For such messy problems, scientific knowledge has in fact frequently compounded the task, as it has itself become a source of ambiguity and thus uncertainty. As a consequence, science has tended to generate or exacerbate social and political conflicts related to policy-making rather than serving to assist in the search for workable solutions. In a messy world in ‘generative flux,’ social science methods that presume a stable and fixed reality only waiting to be uncovered are of little use, as they are frequently prone to misinterpretation and error (Law 2004).

Virtually nothing, we have argued, ‘has contributed more to this uncertain, unpredictable flux than the contemporary transformation of the political and economic world that we now confront.’ One of the first policy problems to call attention to these new dimensions has been the ecological crisis. Reaching across local and global domains, ecological problems have not only identified the complicated connections of such policy issues, but also the increasing degrees of risk and uncertainty they bring to the fore.

In addition, the unanticipated demise of the Soviet Union profoundly restructured the global political realm. Whereas the end of the cold war and the advance of neoliberal capitalism promised steady worldwide economic growth, coupled with the spread of democratic government, a dramatically different political context emerged. The fact that this new system failed to appear has underlined the nonlinear, unpredictable and frequently contradictory character of modern-day politics.

Rather than the envisioned political order, we find ourselves saddled with new and unpredictable varieties of capitalism – often statist in character – the renewal of nationalist movements, bitter ethnic tensions, destabilizing patterns of migration, new forms of terrorism, a return of worries about nuclear weapons, rapidly emerging dangers associated with climate change and not least, the near-collapse of the worldwide financial order in 2008. Such ambiguity, unpredictability and unexpected outcomes have emerged as the central features of the turbulent era in which we find ourselves.

To be sure, the most serious consequence of such failures has been the near-global economic depression created by the deceptive, manipulative practices of the financial industry, Wall Street in particular (Bremmer 2010, Roubin and Mihm 2010). The behavior of these bankers largely defied the logics of the economists’ models of rational behavior, which few members of the profession managed to appreciate (Friedman 2009). The problem, from this perspective, was thus theoretical in nature rather than practical. The large majority of the members of the economics profession simply failed to foresee the breakdown of the banking industry in 2008 and the near-collapse of the global economic order, a crisis that could only be diverted by enormous bailouts by politicians in the United States and Europe. Indeed, many were still celebrating the neoliberal economic order right up to the crash. In all ways, it was a setback for the ‘rational model’ of policy-making.

As a number of economists have subsequently pointed out, economic analysis and prediction have required individual economic behavior to conform theoretically to the structures and processes of problematic models rather than real-world behaviors (Colander *et al.* 2009, Friedman 2009). Resting on the misbegotten belief that ‘individuals and the

economist have a complete understanding of the economic mechanisms governing the world,' these models have convinced economists to 'disregard key factors – including heterogeneity of decision rules, revisions of forecasting strategies and changes in the social context – that drive outcomes in asset and other markets. In short, the complex real-world workings of the modern economies, at both the domestic and the global levels, have been ignored or neglected, often to suit the requirements of analytic precision. As Colander *et al.* (2009, p. 2) and his colleagues conclude, 'In our hour of greatest need, societies around the world are left to grope in the dark without a theory.' It represents 'a systemic failure of the economics profession.'

These limitations now extend beyond the discipline of economics to the social science generally. A large number of political scientists have adopted and adapted the same or similar rational models to predict and explain political behavior. Indeed, in the United States, the rational choice theory imported from the economics profession has emerged as the most popular orientation in political science, with many subscribers in sociology as well. As a neopositivist attempt to supply political analysis with empirical–deductive, value-free modes of explanation, as illustrated by the influential advocacy coalition approach to the explanation of policy change (Sabatier 1987), it has mainly failed on its own terms to supply important, policy-relevant findings to policy decision-makers. Moreover, it has neglected or driven out an appreciation of the role of the subjective and ideational components' essential political and social understanding (Cohen 1999).

One does not need to turn to the critique of the rational model of decision-making to discover the limitations of the technical approach to policy research. This is also evident from its neglect of the role of ideas, values and culture. Readily at hand is the illustration of the Iraq War and its profoundly tragic consequences for both the citizens of Iraqi and US foreign policy. One can identify the failure of Bush administration policy advisors to take into consideration of the cultural realities of Iraq and the Middle East more generally, as anthropologists and other Middle Eastern specialists have pointed out. These policy-makers only looked at Iraq from the American cultural and value perspectives. In short, they observed what they wanted to observe. One can also point to Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005 or the British Petroleum (BP) oil spill in 2010 and the Fukushima nuclear disaster to identify many other examples of similar failures.

The catastrophic BP oil blow out in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010 was, in important ways, a result of the failure to understand the uncertainties and risks of drilling for oil in deep sea waters. The policy-makers adhered to the regulatory requirements of an outdated administrative culture, relied on unreliable environmental studies and accepted the company's self-serving reassurances without questioning the motives behind them.

All three of these examples of policy failure, as we put it in the book, show the ways that 'complex and uncertain problems that do not lend themselves to traditional models of policy-making and the kinds of technical analysis that have sought to inform it.' In each case, the policy problem itself required a better definition, a process for normative interpretation rather than just empirical inquiry. Interpretive analysis, however, has to be adopted on its own terms, not just to assist in hypothesis formation for empirical research. There has been movement in this direction in recent years. Numerous social scientists now acknowledge the necessity for interpretive-oriented qualitative inquiry (King *et al.* 1994). But many of them still subordinate interpretive research to empirical inquiry. Interpretive and empirical methods, in short, need to coexist on equal terms.

Policy analysis, for such reasons, can no longer limit itself to simplified academic models of deductive explanation. As we have argued, 'such methods fail to address the nonlinear nature of today's messy policy problems.' They are unable 'to capture the

typically heterogeneous, interconnected, often contradictory, and increasingly globalized character of these issues.’ As ‘wicked problems,’ most of these complex problems not only have no clear-cut solutions, they lack rigorous conceptualization. Workable solutions to such policy issues must be discovered with the assistance of informed deliberation capable of bringing about an exchange of competing views of governmental officials, politicians and the members of civil society.

The literature on the argumentative turn offers a compelling case for the role of discursive reflection and critical argumentation. It not only helps to forge our understanding of the dynamics of policy-making in general, but also to improve our knowledge related to the practices of policy analysis in particular. In terms of methodology, it has demonstrated the limitations of hypotheses-based neopositivist investigation in search of empirical generalizations with a contextually grounded approach to policy inquiry that focuses on normatively situated policy constellations (Clarke 2005). Such an investigation, often employing ethnographic methods, stresses the multifaceted dimensions of social action which cannot be reduced to and dealt with as quantifiable variables, while understanding human behavior as culturally influenced, communicatively oriented, emotionally grounded and socially or politically motivated.

In short, it is obvious that the dominant empirical approach in the social and policy sciences cannot sufficiently grasp a more complex and uncertain social phenomenon characterized by interconnected arrangements that blur both the boundaries and interpretations that organize our social and political arenas. Focusing on argumentation and processes of dialogic exchange, coupled with interpretive analysis, we can better discover how competing actors construct contending policy narratives in their efforts to make sense of and grapple with such messy challenges. In the book, we have thus argued that we can develop innovative policy solutions capable of dealing with these challenges ‘only through a dialectical process of critical reflection and collective learning.’ Such processes have to be supported by a constructivist understanding of the ways argumentation functions, as well the role played by scientific expertise. Both empirically valid and normatively legitimate, such an understanding is essential to building a consensus that can carry us forward in policy deliberation and public problem-solving.

### 3. A new agenda for policy studies

The argumentative turn starts with the recognition that public policy, formulated through language, is the outcome of argumentative processes. Such argumentation, moreover, is a basic feature of all phases of the policy process (Majone 1989). Policy politics is understood here to be a continuing discursive struggle over the problem definitions and the framings of policy problems, the public’s awareness and understanding of the issues, the shared meanings that undergird policy responses and criteria for policy evaluation (Stone 2002).

Policy arguments take place within major political/ideological discourses – that is, arguments are encapsulated by or subsumed within discourses (Hajer 1995). Such argumentation is basic to the political process: it is what political actors primarily engage in – they mainly advance arguments, not discourses *per se*, although they and their arguments are shaped by discourses. The argumentative turn thus begins with the recognition that the formal models of deductive and inductive reason *misrepresent* both the scientific and the practical modes of reason. It does this by focusing on the policy argument as a complex blend of factual statements, interpretations, opinions and evaluations. As such, the argument provides the *links* connecting the relevant ideological context with the relevant data and

information and to the conclusions of an analysis. The task becomes one of establishing the interconnections among the empirical data, normative assumptions that structure our understanding of the social world, the interpretive judgments involved in the data collection process, the particular circumstances of a situational context (to which the findings or prescriptions applied) and the specific conclusions (Fischer 2003).

The acceptability of the conclusions depends ultimately on the full range of interconnections, not just the empirical findings, which can be illustrated graphically (Fischer 2006). The researcher still collects the data, but now has to situate them in the interpretive framework that gives them meaning – that is, a multi-methodological perspective that combines empirical and normative inquiry. The reasons in support of alternatives marshal evidence, organize data, apply explanatory criteria, address multiple levels of argumentation and employ various strategies of presentation.

In the process, complexity and uncertainty prohibit reliance on simple criteria or judgments. The reasons given to support one theory over another seldom, if ever, offer definitive proof of the validity of a competing alternative. Through processes of deliberation, a consensus emerges among the community of researchers concerning what will be taken as a valid explanation, based on interpretations rather than the data alone.

In terms of the policy literature, the argumentative turn thus addresses the classical concept of ‘bounded rationality.’ Originally introduced as an aid to policy-making – rather than a hindrance – it is a way to explain how and why policy-makers and analysts typically bite off more manageable segments of a problem, rather than take a comprehensive view, seen to be beyond our intellectual capabilities. Unlike conventional policy analysis – which follows an overly simplistic empirical–deductive logic in a quest for objective certainty – deliberation can expand our ability to be reasonable, if not entirely ‘rational’ in an idealized sense.

Because both our imaginations and empirical–analytic capabilities are limited and therefore easily prone to errors, deliberative argumentation makes it possible for politicians, policy decision-makers and citizens to expand their thinking beyond their own familiar, limited understandings and outlooks. Deliberative engagement offers the advantage of the gaining of knowledge, abilities and experiences from other participants which, can lead to ideas that individual participants would not have brought to the fore. It does this by permitting the inclusion of negative feedback – defined as ‘the ability to generate corrective adjustments when a system’s equilibrium is disturbed’ and to facilitate ‘coordination across different problems’ which helps to avoid solving policy problems in one area only to create different problems in other areas (Dryzek 1987, p. 54).

Governance, from this perspective, requires designing institutions that expand the opportunities for equal and full participation by citizens as they seek to clarify and rethink social understandings and values in collaborative problem-solving. The scope of such an expansion is a matter for political struggle – it could be deliberation among managers and limited number of stakeholders or extended to a larger public.

In the argumentative turn, the role of the public servant can be reconceptualized as a *facilitator* of public engagement (Forester 1999). Following Feldman and Khadermian (2007), the public administrator here should *become the creator* of ‘communities of participation.’ The challenge for those working in the public sector is to interactively combine policy knowledge and social perspectives from separate spheres of knowing – the technical, local/experiential and political. Shaping more inclusive participatory governance means inventing arenas in which the representatives of these forms of knowing can deliberate across their perspectives in collaborative problem-solving. Beyond obtaining and disseminating information from these different ways of analyzing and

understanding policy issues, such an approach means translating arguments and communicating ideas in ways that forge mutual understandings among the participants.

The goal is the discursive forging of a synthesis of perspectives that assists in promoting different ways of knowing and thus a more informed action-oriented consensus that allows the participants to move forward. Such an approach, following Dewey (1927), has been described as ‘public enlightenment,’ rather than problem-solving per se (Weiss 1977). This enlightenment task of the policy analyst is to assemble and present the analytic findings to the public (or relevant participants) in ways that connect the findings with their normative implications for political decision-making. The emphasis should be placed on analyzing competing definitions, questionable explanations, contestable claims and contentious research findings. This focus needs to include an examination of both the theoretical and political assumptions that undergird political deliberation and the ways they influence the perception and comprehension of policy alternatives, and thus shape the decision choices (Hawkesworth 1989). The emphasis here is more on what is overlooked or obscured than on what is established or taken as given (Dryzek 2000). Focusing on the underlying assumptions, the analyst seeks to anticipate and draw out the multiple interpretations that structure a policy problem (Yanow 2000).

From this perspective, a deliberative policy analyst acts as a mediator interpretively operating between the available analytical frameworks of social and policy science and competing local perspectives. The goal is the development of a set of consensually accepted criteria derived from the confrontation of perspectives. Such criteria are used to organize and facilitate a dialectical exchange among policy experts and lay citizens in which the cognitive boundaries of both are extended through a deliberative confrontation of competing arguments. In this understanding, interactions among policy analysts, citizens and policy-makers are structured as a deliberative exchange involving a larger number of perspectives. The objective is to expand the scope of decisions through a better grasp of the various aspects of a policy controversy, including the influence of tacit assumptions, without attempting to decide what should or must be done. In short, the ‘judgment’ of the policy expert can never substitute for the desires and choices of the political community and its citizens. The postempiricist ‘argumentative turn’ therefore advances a participatory/deliberative practice of democracy. There is little participatory democracy in our world; the argumentative turn is thus one of many efforts – in a larger political struggle – to bring it about.

### Notes on contributors

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## Note

1. This short essay is designed to introduce and facilitate the following discussions pertaining to the argumentative turn. As such, it closely draws on the introductory chapter of *The Argumentative Turn Revisited* (2012). A number of new issues are presented in the latter part of the text.

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