

Charting the policy agenda: rational, incremental and punctuated equilibrium models and a new long focus model of policy dynamics explained using a salience-wickedness matrix

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Abstract:

This paper develops an understanding of policy dynamics using empirical investigation of 505 policies of the New South Wales Government between 1979–2010, covering 16 environmental issues. In charting these issues I found patterns supporting rational, incremental and punctuated equilibrium models. However, over half the issues reflected a different pattern, and suggest a new *long focus* model of policy dynamics. Characteristics of this model include continued policy activity over long timeframes involving slow or fast policy change depending on the operation of accelerators or dampeners. Stability is rare and short. The long focus model of policy dynamics became typical of environmental policy from the 1990s onward. This is because governments' response to issues became more complex, involving multiple components, revisions and complementary initiatives, and implementation formed part of the announced policy. Issues stayed on the agenda for a long time, even over a decade. A salience-wickedness matrix is developed to explain both the fit of issues to the four models and the relationships between the models. However, fit to the models changed over time for some issues. Policy-makers may influence policy dynamics by redefining salience and wickedness through framing and policy choices. This means policy dynamics reflects the way in which policy is made as well as being inherent in an issue.

Selected Stream:

Public Policy or Natural Resources and Politics