1 Introduction: How to Make Sense of Complexity

This is a short and provocative Element on the 'state of the art' of theories that highlight policymaking's complexity. Our aim is to explain complexity in a way that is simple enough to understand and to use. Our primary audience is policy scholars seeking a single authoritative guide to studies of 'multi-centric policymaking' (Box 1). We bring together, compare and synthesise this literature to build a research agenda on the following questions:

1. How can we best explain the ways in which many policymaking 'centres' interact to produce policy?
2. How should we research multi-centric policymaking?
3. How can we hold policymakers to account in a multi-centric system?
4. How can people engage effectively to influence policy in a multi-centric system?

By focussing on simple exposition and limiting jargon, we also speak to a far wider audience of practitioners, students and new researchers seeking a straightforward introduction to policy theory and its practical lessons.

We show that multi-centric policy theories are *more accurate* than simplified accounts, such as the classic model of the policy cycle derived from the United States, and popular understandings of politics – often summed up by the 'Westminster model' – which focus on a small and powerful group of elected leaders. However, they are also *less accessible* to researchers seeking conceptual clarity and to practitioners looking for useful knowledge of policymaking. By clarifying the meaning of multi-centric policymaking, we make sense of a wide range of studies that challenge the idea that policymaking power is concentrated in a single place such as a central government.

Many theories embrace the notion of complex, polycentric or multi-level governance. They recognise that a focus on a single central government, consisting of a core group of actors making policy in a series of linear stages, provides a misleading description of the policy process. Instead, policy-making occurs through multiple, overlapping and interacting centres of decision-making containing many policymakers and influencers. An image of kaleidoscopic activity should replace the misleading image of a single circle associated with the policy cycle.

However, while this more accurate literature often appears to have advanced theoretically and empirically, it remains unclear and jargon-filled, making it difficult to assess and to compare approaches, or to sell its value to audiences

Box 1 Key Terms and Their Meaning

Multi-centric policymaking. The term we employ to sum up a collection of concepts used to explain many 'centres' (or no centre) of policymaking, including multi-level, complex and polycentric governance.

Multi-level governance. A description of power diffusion from central government, vertically (to other levels such as global, supranational, devolved, regional and local) and horizontally (to other types of policymaking bodies at the same level of government).

Complex government or systems. A description of policy practices and outcomes that seem to 'emerge' from complex policymaking systems in the absence of central government control.

Polycentric governance. A description of many sources of policymaking centres with overlapping authority; they often work together to make decisions, but may also engage in competition or conflict.

Decentred policymaking and decentring analysis (Bevir, 2013). Many studies describe 'decentred' government empirically, as a trend or an outcome (the central state is losing or has lost its power). Some apply decentring as a form of *analysis* to argue that too many studies assume or assert that powerful central governments exist.

Policy cycle. A simple 'top-down' model of policymaking via a linear set of stages, including agenda setting, formulation and implementation.

Westminster model. A classic source of the description of why power may be concentrated in the hands of a small number of people at the centre of government. Plurality elections exaggerate a single-party majority, the majority controls Parliament, the cabinet government leads the majority and the prime minister appoints the cabinet.

Bounded rationality. The profound limit to the ability of policymakers – as individuals or part of organisations – to process information relevant to policy problems.

Policymaking environment. The context in which policymakers operate but do not control.

beyond a small number of scholars. Few scholars explain complexity in a parsimonious way. If we cannot describe the world concisely, we struggle to research the phenomena we seek to study. Convoluted descriptions also undermine our ability to present realistic advice on how to assess and to engage in the policy process. For both reasons, to aid scholars *and* practitioners, we need to clean up this conceptual sludge.

We show the benefit to scholars of expositional clarity by taking forward the 'practical lessons from policy theories' agenda, designed to turn important but often unclear theoretical programmes into simple narratives with lessons for academics and practitioners. We argue that we can assess and improve the state of knowledge in the policy literature by explaining key concepts and insights to a wider audience and by demonstrating their practical lessons:

> We challenge policy theory scholars to change the way we produce and communicate research: translate our findings to a wider audience to gauge the clarity and quality of our findings . . . Policy theories have generated widespread knowledge of the policy process, but the field is vast and uncoordinated, and too many scholars hide behind a veil of jargon and obfuscation . . . If we succeed, we can proceed with confidence. If not, we should reconsider the state of our field. (Weible and Cairney, 2018: 183)

Our aim is to identify and to compare approaches describing complex, multi-level or polycentric governance, to extract their key insights, to place them in the wider context of policy scholarship and to ask if they can offer good advice on how to understand, research, evaluate and engage effectively within political systems. These insights help scholars to understand current scholarship *and* help actors to adapt pragmatically to multi-centric governance. To set this agenda, we provide lessons on four main topics.

How to Describe the Dynamics of Many Policymaking Centres Accurately and Concisely

Section 2 is our main section. It shows how to describe key policy theory insights without too much dispiriting jargon undermining clarity. First, we tell a simple story of this field as a whole. Our main thesis is that very few modern policy theories adhere to the idea that there is a single source of policymaking authority in political systems. Rather, policymaking power is dispersed through a combination of:

- *Choice*, especially in political systems with a balance of powers between multiple venues, recognised in a written constitution.
- *Necessity*, as a consequence of the inability of policymakers to pay attention to, or to control, more than a tiny proportion of their responsibilities.

Scholars describe these dynamics in various ways, using jargon specific to particular fields. It is very difficult to accumulate insights and to generate an overall sense of the policy process from such accounts, at least in a way that more than a handful of specialists can understand. So, in this section, we

consolidate the key insights on multiple centres of policymaking from a wide-ranging literature, including approaches that:

- *Address this concept directly*, including multi-level governance (MLG), the institutional analysis and development framework (IAD), the institutional collective action (ICA) framework, the ecology of games framework and complexity theory.
- *Engage more indirectly as part of a wider discussion of policymaking*, including punctuated equilibrium theory, the advocacy coalition framework, multiple streams analysis, policy community and network approaches, statecraft theory and 'blame game' studies.

In particular, this section identifies the connection between complexity, polycentricity and the extent to which central government policymakers can control the policy process and its outcomes. We show that conceptual clarity can help us to make better sense of academic debates on the power of 'the centre', contributing to subsequent discussions on how to research policymaking power, hold policymakers to account and engage in the policy process.

How to Analyse and Assess Multi-Centric Governance

Section 3 examines approaches for analysing multi-centric governance, recognising the challenges of assessing these complex systems given the diversity of actors and interactions that collectively shape policy outcomes. To help guide such analyses, this section explores the value of research frameworks and the potential for different analytical tools – including in-depth field studies, document coding, network analysis and agent-based modelling – to identify and measure actors, their authorities, their interactions and their policy outcomes in multi-centric systems. To complement these approaches, we describe how counterfactual analysis can help avoid potentially inaccurate inferences, about the performance of multi-centric governance, that can arise when we are unable to assess empirically how multi-centric governance would compare to centralised systems.

We do more than identify a shopping list of potential methods and decide that 'anything goes'. Instead, we show how qualitative and quantitative methods relate to each other and can be combined to produce a coherent research agenda.

How to Hold People to Account in Multi-Centric Governance

One major obstacle to the uptake of multi-centric governance ideas is that they often appear, at first glance, to describe undemocratic processes. Normative

models of politics are often built on the value of public voting to produce legitimate policymakers who can be held accountable via regular elections, more frequent legislative and media scrutiny. This normative ideal is summed up in phrases such as 'if we know who is in charge, we know who to blame.' Therefore, in our brief Section 4, we show how to justify multi-centric governance in that context and provide other ways to assess democratic policymaking.

We show how complexity theorists address democratic issues and the often-limited extent to which some advice (e.g. 'let go and allow local actors to adapt to complex environments') is feasible when elected policymakers have to tell a convincing story about how they should be held to account. We also discuss how multi-centric governance can be designed to be cooperative, problem oriented and as transparent as traditional electorally driven accountability procedures. It is impossible to assess multi-centric processes in *exactly* the same ways as assessments of individual and political party conduct in electoral systems, but we can at least provide greater clarity on the terms of debate.

How to Engage Effectively with Complex Multi-Centric Policymaking

The problem with many simple accounts of policymaking, such as the policy cycle or the Westminster model, is that they provide misleading advice for people trying to engage in policymaking (Cairney, 2018). These myths are popular but unhelpful. Practitioners and non-specialists need an account of policymaking that is accurate and clear enough to pick up and to use.

In Section 5, we engage with the language of 'evidence-based policymaking' to make this point. For example, its advocates will quickly become dispirited if they do not know how policymakers understand, translate and use knowledge for policy (Cairney, 2016). We describe recommendations for actors trying to engage more effectively in the real world, rather than waiting for its mythical replacement to appear (Cairney and Kwiatkowski, 2017).

In Section 6, this Element's conclusion, we summarise the results of our approach and encourage other scholars to review and to translate their chosen literature in this way. Our introduction has made the case for this approach. The conclusion describes the payoff – to scholars *and* practitioners – from our use of it.

However, in many ways, our Element marks the beginning of a research agenda which is often limited to the analysis of a small part of global policymaking. The literature on which we draw tends to originate from studies of the

United States, the European Union and its member states, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Individual literatures, such as polycentric governance studies, provide more international coverage, but we should not exaggerate the global applicability of these theories, particularly when our analysis shifts away from the study of systems containing regular free and fair elections. Therefore, Section 6 compares the 'universal' nature of our insights – when they are abstract enough to apply in all cases – with the inevitable variations when we identify detailed case studies of country-level experience.

2 Insights from Multi-Level, Complex and Polycentric Governance Studies

Many policy theories, frameworks, models and concepts help us to understand the complex world of policymaking, and some provide additional insights for practitioners (Sabatier, 1999, 2007a, 2007b; Eller and Krutz, 2009; Sanderson, 2009; Cairney, 2012a, 2015a, 2016; John, 2012; Weible et al., 2012; Sabatier and Weible, 2014).

Good theories take us beyond too-simple models, such as the policy cycle model, criticised for assuming that power remains in the hands of central government actors who make key decisions in discrete stages (Sabatier, 1999; Cairney, 2016). Instead, policymaking power typically is spread across levels and types of government, and the process plays out in messy policy-making environments in which it is difficult to identify a beginning and an end.

Good theories capture this policymaking complexity in a parsimonious way. Many efforts to develop accurate descriptions are vague and convoluted, which can impede empirical work. If we cannot describe the world concisely, we struggle to operationalise the phenomena we seek to study, undermining our ability to develop common research questions or agendas.

Therefore, our aim in this section is to identify and to compare approaches describing complex, multi-level and/or polycentric governance, and to explain multi-centric governance in a concise way. First, we tell a simple but accurate story of making policy in a complex world, as an alternative to the simple but inaccurate story of the policy cycle. A convincing story needs to provide a model of individual action and to describe how people interact in their policymaking environment. Most theories build their 'model of the individual' on a discussion of bounded rationality (Schlager, 2007) and identify the following aspects of their environments (Cairney and Heikkila, 2014: 364–365; Heikkila and Cairney, 2018):

1. *actors making choices*, across multiple levels and types of government
2. *institutions*, or the rules that influence individual and collective behaviour

3. *networks*, or the relationships between policymakers and influencers
4. *ideas*, or the role of ways of thinking in the policy process
5. *context*, or the wide array of features of the policymaking environment that can influence policy decisions
6. *events*, including routine elections and unanticipated incidents, such as perceived crises.

Second, we compare three approaches that provide the same overall message but often appear to describe policymaking's complexity in different ways, or with an emphasis on different aspects of policymaking:

1. *Multi-level governance* describes the diffusion of power across many levels and types of government, and shared responsibility for policy outcomes between governmental, quasi-governmental and non-governmental actors.
2. *Polycentric governance* describes a system of government in which many 'centres' have decision-making autonomy but adhere to an overarching set of rules to aid cooperation.
3. *Complexity theory* describes complex systems in which behaviour seems to 'emerge' at local levels and to defy central control.

Third, we compare these approaches with theories and concepts that discuss complexity and polycentricity without using the same language, including punctuated equilibrium theory, the advocacy coalition framework, multiple streams analysis, policy community and network approaches, statecraft theory and accountability and 'blame game' studies. This extended discussion allows us to compare studies of multi-centric governance with the wider field, to identify the extent to which there is a common story about the ability of 'the centre' to control policy outcomes. Throughout, we note that the salience of this question varies across political systems: in federal systems, it may seem to reflect choice; in unitary systems, it may seem more like necessity.

This approach helps us to link theoretical and empirical studies of policymaking to normative discussions of the relationship between central government *control* and democratic *accountability.* To identify accountability, normative studies make empirical claims or hold assumptions about the extent to which policymakers control policy processes and outcomes: if people know who is responsible, they know who to praise or who to blame. In that context, we find two competing stories in the literature: elected policymakers in central government are in control, and know how to use governance mechanisms to their advantage, or they are not in control, and do not know the impact of their decisions.

By comparing such accounts, we find that high levels of control refer, for example, to the ability to influence governance networks, set the policy agenda and tell a convincing story of governing competence, rather than the ability to direct the public sector as a whole or to minimise the gap between policy aims and actual outcomes. In other words, the success of the centre relates more to the government's cultivation of its image, and its selection of issues over which it has relative control, than its ability to secure substantive and enduring policy change (McConnell, 2010; Hay, 2009).

2.1 One versus Multiple Centres of Authority

Our story begins as the rejection of the story of central control. Perhaps with the exception of extremely authoritarian or small policymaking systems, there will not – or cannot – be a single policymaking centre controlling the policy process and its outcomes, for two main reasons: choice and necessity. Choice refers to an explicit balance of powers between multiple venues, such as when recognised in a written constitution, formal agreement between levels of government or arrangements in which – to all intents and purposes – there is no attempt to impose central control on a sub-central organisation. Necessity refers to the many consequences of the inability of policymakers to pay attention to more than a tiny proportion of their responsibilities or to control their policymaking environment.

Sharing Power As Normative Choice

In many systems, there is a formal division of powers, such as between executive, legislative and judicial branches, and/ or between central and subnational governments. The classic federal model divides power between the three branches, and grants powers and rights to subnational governments in a written constitution. Ostensibly, it contrasts with the unitary state model in countries like the United Kingdom and Spain, in which the central state can abolish or modify the role of subordinate governments. However, many examples of unitary government are actually 'quasi-federal' arrangements, with the centre sharing power with supranational and territorial governments (Newton and van Deth, 2010: 107–115). In each case, devolution from the centre is justified with reference to the need for more local policymaking to supplement general choices by 'a distant centre of government' or to recognise territorial and social cleavages 'based on language, ethnicity, religion, culture or history' (111–113).

In nearly all political systems, central policymakers share power with various key actors. These actors typically include elected policymakers at

other levels of government, and unelected policymakers such as civil servants inside government. They may also include delivery bodies outside government, quasi-public bodies such as quangos, which elected policymakers sponsor but do not control, and perhaps even the service users who co-produce or help to 'tailor' services to their needs.

As a result, many actors share the responsibility and the blame for policy choices and outcomes. Yet there are several competing narratives of accountability. A primarily electoral imperative – summed up by Westminster-style democratic accountability – suggests that we hold central governments responsible for policy outcomes. A more pragmatic imperative, which recognises the need to share power, suggests that we need several more practical ways to ensure that we give some amount of responsibility to the actors making key decisions. Examples of accountability include *institutional* (e.g. hold agency chief executives to account for performance), *local* (local elections grant legitimacy to non-central policymakers) and *service-user* (policymakers co-produce policy with the people who use and help to design public services) (Durose and Richardson, 2016). However, the dynamics between their respective narratives of accountability remain unresolved. There is a tendency for elected policymakers to make sporadic decisions to shuffle off blame in some cases but to intervene in others, producing confusion about the role of central governments in policymaking systems (Gains and Stoker, 2009).

Sharing Power As Empirical Necessity: Bounded Rationality and Complex Environments

Elected policymakers in central government share responsibility with a large number of other actors because 'no single centre could possibly do everything itself' (Newton and van Deth, 2010: 105). Any description of the possibility of *complete* central control only exists in an ideal-type world in which policymakers can be 'comprehensively rational'. This includes the ability to produce all knowledge relevant to their responsibilities and aims, and to anticipate all of the consequences of their proposed actions. Such action takes place in an orderly and predictable process whereby policymakers can make choices via a cycle of well-defined and linear stages, including problem definition and formulation, legitimation, implementation, evaluation and the decision to maintain or to change policy (Cairney, 2016: 16–19).

In the real world, all policy actors face 'bounded rationality'. That is, they are limited in their cognitive capacity to process the vast amounts of information they receive, and are only able to pay attention to a small proportion of their

responsibilities at any given time (Simon, 1976; Jones and Baumgartner, 2005). They also are surrounded by a non-linear policymaking environment over which they have limited understanding and minimal control (Cairney and Weible, 2017). These conditions create uncertainties and difficulties in interpreting problems, yet policymakers still need to act to achieve their goals (Kingdon, 1984; Baumgartner and Jones, 1993).

Simon (1976) argued famously that policymaking organisations deal with bounded rationality by employing heuristics or 'good enough' ways to deliberate and to act. Modern policy studies, drawing on psychological insights, suggest that individual policymakers use cognitive shortcuts to process enough information to make choices. They combine ways to (a) set goals and to prioritise high-quality information with (b) their beliefs, emotions, habits and familiarity with issues (Cairney and Kwiatkowski, 2017; Kahneman, 2012; Haidt, 2001; Lewis, 2013; Lodge and Wegrich, 2016).

One could argue that such cognitive and organisational limitations could be managed quite effectively if we had the right tools to analyse and to disaggregate the policy process. Indeed, foundational policy scholarship sought to describe policy as a set of essential functions and to emphasise the need to analyse those functions using systematic policy analysis (Lasswell, 1956). These functions now tend to be described with reference to a policy cycle with clearly defined and linear stages. Such an approach is often used to suggest that we know how policy *should* be made: elected policymakers in central government, aided by expert policy analysts, make and legitimise choices; skilful public servants carry them out; and policy analysts assess the results with the aid of scientific evidence (Jann and Wegrich, 2007: 44; Everett, 2003: 65; Colebatch, 1998: 102; Cairney, 2015b).

Yet few policy texts or textbooks describe the policy cycle as a useful depiction of policymaking (notable exceptions include Althaus et al., 2018; Howlett et al., 2016; Wu et al., 2017). Most texts focus on other concepts and theories, many of which – most notably the advocacy coalition framework (ACF) and the multiple streams approach (MSA) – are based on a rejection of the explanatory value of the policy cycle (Sabatier, 2007a; Cairney, 2012a, 2018). As a result, the idea of a stepwise, analytical policy cycle has become largely an initial reference point to describe what does not happen. Or the cycle sometimes exists as a story for policymakers to tell about their work, partly because it is consistent with the idea of elected policymakers being in charge and accountable (Everett, 2003: 66–68; Cairney, 2015a: 25–26; Rhodes, 2013: 486). Even the *idea* that there should be a core group of policymakers making policy from the 'top down' and obliging others to carry out their aims faces