

Policy Accumulation and the Democratic Responsiveness Trap

The responsiveness to societal demands is both the key virtue and the key problem of modern democracies. On the one hand, responsiveness is a central cornerstone of democratic legitimacy. On the other hand, responsiveness inevitably entails policy accumulation. While policy accumulation often positively reflects modernization and human progress, it also undermines democratic government in three main ways: First, policy accumulation renders policy content increasingly complex, which crowds out policy substance from public debates and leads to an increasingly unhealthy discursive prioritization of politics over policy. Secondly, policy accumulation comes with aggravating implementation deficits, as it produces administrative backlogs and incentivizes selective implementation. Finally, policy accumulation undermines the pursuit of evidence-based public policy, because it threatens our ability to evaluate the increasingly complex interactions within growing policy mixes. We argue that the stability of democratic systems will crucially depend on their ability to make policy accumulation more sustainable.

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Preface

This book brings together insights from three generations of projects that compiled large sets of data capturing laws and regulations in the context of environmental policy, social policy, and morality policy. The CONSENSUS Project, funded under the European Union Commission's Seventh Framework Programme, aimed to improve our understanding of trade-offs and synergies between economic, environmental, and social aspects of sustainable development. Initially it focused on the period between 1975 and 2005, but it was later extended in a second project period capturing regulatory developments in environmental and social policy until 2013. The MORAPOL project focused on the change and convergence of moral regulation in Europe and was funded by the European Research Council (ERC Advanced Grant No. 249388).

These projects each pursued a specific and unique analytical interest. Yet this book was driven mainly by our interest in what has been learned across these different projects rather than within the individual projects themselves. Although, as scholars of comparative public policy, we are trained to look for variation in all aspects of political life, one outstanding similarity across these policy sectors and across the wide variety of different countries struck us as most remarkable. This similarity concerned the steady expansion of policy portfolios, with more and more policy instruments directed at more and more policy items. By systematically and comparatively capturing this process of policy accumulation across these different policy sectors, we were able to substantiate this impression and to explore its roots and consequences within this book.

While we were working on this book, Donald Trump became president of the United States, the United Kingdom decided to leave the EU, the right-wing *Alternative für Deutschland* entered the German Bundestag, and in Italy the populists of the Five Star Movement and the nationalists from *Lega* formed a government coalition. As a result of

these and many other similar developments, political science has been focusing strongly on the rise of right-wing nationalist populism as the most central contemporary threat to democratic governance in recent years. For instance, in their highly popular book *How Democracies Die: What History Reveals About Our Future*, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (2018) make the case that democracies die slowly and calmly, as their open structures invite enemies of democracy to attack its very foundations from within the established institutions. Levitsky and Ziblatt's book is only one particularly prominent example of a wide range of recent academic work that addresses the emergence and consequences of nationalism, authoritarianism, and populism for the sustainability of democratic institutions (e.g., Diamond et al., 2016; Galston, 2018; Puddington & Roylance, 2017).

All of these authors zoom in on a certain ideology as an important factor that potentially destabilizes democratic political systems. Yet, we argue in this book that there are less visible, rather long-term, policy-related problems democracies face, and we doubt that these are any less important for the effectiveness and legitimacy of democratic governance than the ideology of certain political actors. While we share the concern that nationalism, authoritarianism, and populism increasingly threaten the core foundation of democratic political systems around the globe, our book should be understood as a warning that democratic political systems are not only under attack by external forces but also destabilize themselves through a process of continuous policy accumulation. In short, we argue that democracies suffer from an in-built responsiveness trap. Democracies must be responsive to citizen demands in order to uphold their legitimacy, but this inevitably leads to an accumulation of policies. The longer policy accumulation continues without attempts to strengthen the democratic infrastructure, the more difficult it will become for democracies to communicate, implement, and evaluate the policies they produce.

If democracies prove unable to address these challenges resulting from policy accumulation, we are concerned that they might provide fertile ground for populist actors. This concerns all three major challenges policy accumulation entails: communicating, implementing, and evaluating public policy. First, populists thrive in environments in which they can present themselves as the only ones who speak the people's language. If policy accumulation increases the complexity of

existing policy portfolios, public debates are increasingly unable to cover this complexity, which works to the benefit of those who give the simple answers. Second, populists thrive where people feel abandoned by the state because it appears no longer able to properly implement its own policies. Frustration over selective and ineffective implementation can easily translate into frustration over the state in general. Finally, populists benefit if the effects of public policies are increasingly difficult to determine due to policy accumulation. If an objective truth about cause-and-effect relationships becomes increasingly difficult to establish, “alternative facts” become easier to disseminate. While we are far from arguing that the recent rise of nationalism, authoritarianism, and populism in established democracies is solely driven by policy accumulation, we believe that policy accumulation at the very least has not helped to slow down this trend.

The patterns of policy accumulation we describe and analyze in this book are universal. Policies accumulate in highly different policy areas, the pattern can be found in (almost) all democracies, and we have little reason to assume that policy accumulation is about to come to a halt anytime soon. Since these patterns are so widespread and entail significant challenges for democracies, we hope our book fuels a debate on how to strengthen our democratic systems in order to enable them to cope with the challenges we describe. We propose a range of measures that could potentially help to absorb the negative effects of policy accumulation for democratic legitimacy to a certain degree. However, we are far from claiming exhaustiveness. On the contrary, we think that the problems we address in this book require a broad societal debate on how to solve them, and it is our sincere hope that our book also inspires its readers to pore over the challenges we describe.

Our work would not have been possible without the enormous support of the Center for Advanced Studies of the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, which took us in as a researcher-in-residence group for a whole year. In this context, we were able to invite renowned researchers whose work was relevant to the topics of this book as fellows and to convene an international workshop in the wonderful atmosphere of the Center for Advanced Studies. We would like to extend our gratitude to all support staff in the center. In

particular, we want to thank Annette Meyer, Julia Schreiner, Isabella Schopp, and of course Christof Rapp for their support and help.

Furthermore, we owe thanks to Peter John, Frank Nullmeier, Fritz Sager, and Esther Versluis for their time, advice, and help with the book. We are also grateful to André Bächtiger, Carmine Bianchi, Isabelle Engeli, and Katharina Holzinger as well as Adrienne Héritier and B. Guy Peters for their support and their critical yet very constructive feedback. Finally, we want to thank Christian Breunig, who, as a fellow at the Center, not only helped us in our book workshop but was also willing to thoroughly engage with our manuscripts at early stages in the writing process.