

Overview of the PhD project

Policy learning is an important factor of policy change. Policy learning involves relatively enduring alterations of thought or behavioural intentions which are concerned with the attainment or revision of the precepts of the belief system of individuals or of collectivities. Up to now, research has focused on the meso-level or contextual factors (such as a catastrophe) which prompt individuals to learn. This complementary PhD project analyses the individual factors which influence policy learning. In such a way, the organizational and institutional conditions of policymaking which are conducive to policy learning in consequence of their relation with individual factors, will be better identified. This research is conducted in Belgium on the policies implementing the European liberalization of network industries.

Research question

What are the relations between the characteristics of individual actors and their policy learning, as well as the interactions between these relations and the characteristics of the subsystem which policy learning occurs within?

Important concepts (adapted from the Advocacy Coalition Framework)

A **policy subsystem (C1)** is a set of actors who are involved in dealing with a policy problem such as air pollution control, mental health, or energy.

An **advocacy coalition (C2)** includes people from a variety of positions (elected and agency officials, interest group leaders, researchers, etc.) who share a particular belief system – that is, a set of basic values, causal assumptions, and problem perception – and who show a nontrivial degree of coordinated activity over time.

Individuals are characterized by their **beliefs (C3)**. *Deep core beliefs* are the fundamental normative and ontological axioms of the actors. They are very difficult to change and part of basic personal philosophy. They apply to all policy areas. They determine *policy core beliefs*, which consist of the fundamental policy positions concerning the basic strategies for achieving deep core beliefs within one policy subsystem. Deep core beliefs relate to the nature of man, the relative priority of various ultimate values or the basic criteria of distributive justice. Some of these beliefs, such as the propensity to compromise or the inclination toward self-interest versus general interest, are suspected to influence policy learning.

Policy learning (C4) involves relatively enduring alterations of thought or behavioral intentions which are concerned with the attainment or revision of the precepts of the belief system of individuals or of collectivities. It can be characterized by its topics (what do the alterations concern?) and by its deepness (are the alterations important or not?), which are important to measure because they eventually determine policy change.

Individuals are also characterized by their **personal characteristics (C5)**. These include the gender, the age, the education, and any other characteristic susceptible to influence policy learning.

Analytical framework

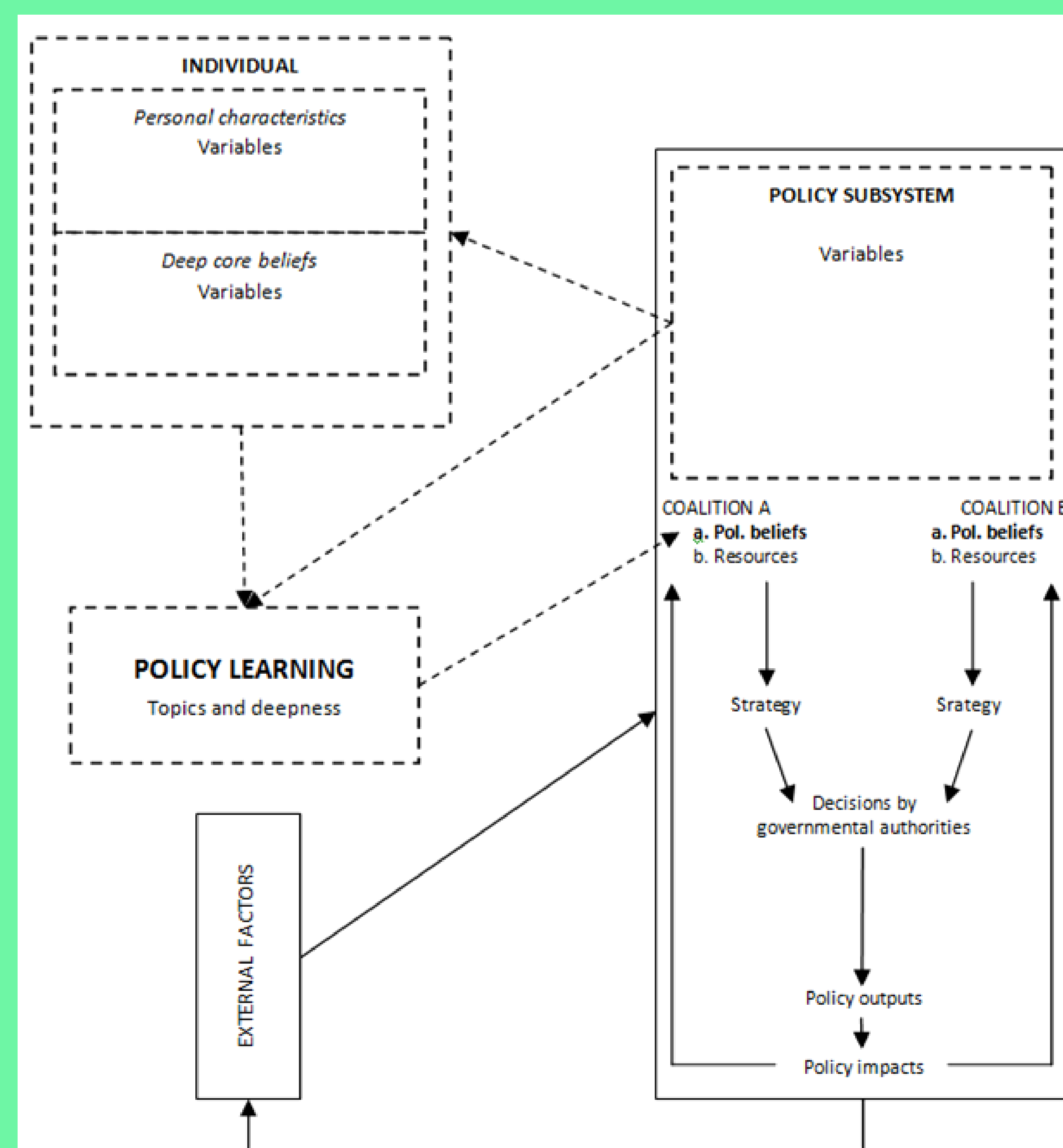
This research is based on the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF). ACF is a theory of policy change. In a policy subsystem (C1), each advocacy coalition (C2) of actors tries to influence decisions by governmental authorities in such a way that these decisions fit with the policy core beliefs and deep core beliefs (C3) of the coalition. In order to influence decisions, the coalitions implement strategies and mobilize their resources. The decisions produce policy outputs and impacts (policy change). This process is influenced by three types of factors. The external factors influence more than one subsystem and relate to the institutional, political, legal, socio-economical, cultural, and natural context as well as to the impacts of other subsystems. At the level of the subsystem, factors such as the number of coalitions or the age of the subsystem also influence the process of policy change. At the individual level, policy change depends upon the extent to which actors learn (C4). **This research** (dotted lines) explores individual factors of policy learning, including the personal characteristics (C5) and the beliefs (C3) of the actors, as well as the extent to which these individual factors influence the impact of subsystem-level factors on policy learning.

Research plan

The project is composed of **7 steps**. **First**, existing relevant literature is compiled (1. literature review: 10/2009 – 03/2010). **Second**, a model the influence of individual factors on policy learning is elaborated (2. model of analysis: 04/2010 – 10/2010). **Third**, the policy decisions on which the model will be tested are identified (3. cases identification: 11/2010 – 04/2011). **Fourth**, a questionnaire on policy learning and individual factors is constructed (4. questionnaire: 05/2011 – 08/2011). **Fifth**, the questionnaire is submitted to the actors of the identified policy decisions (5. survey: 09/2011 – 02/2012). **Sixth**, the data are analyzed (6. Analysis: 03/2012 – 08/2012). **Seventh**, the results are drawn up (7. redaction of the dissertation: 09/2012 – 02/2013).

Expected results

A first, **theoretical**, contribution of the PhD will consist of improving the Advocacy Coalition Framework by developing the individual dimension of policy learning. It will put into light the interactions between the individual and subsystem variables to understand the current theoretical predictions at this last level of analysis. It will also identify, at the subsystem level, the characteristics of policymaking processes which are favorable to policy learning. In addition, it will contribute to introduce more psychological theories of the individual in the policy analysis (interdisciplinary). The contribution of the PhD will also be **methodological**. The project will import Anglo-Saxon methods for quantitative, multilevel analysis of public policy processes. It will also import in political science promising research methods developed in the educational sciences. At the **empirical** level, the project will contribute to highlight regularities of the liberalization process in three network industries. In addition, the project will prove to be complementary with a lot of previous researches which applied the Advocacy Coalition Framework. Most of them applied the framework in the environment/energy sector. This research renews the application of the framework in economical sectors. Finally, the project will constitute a new data base, useful for future research.



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