

An analysis of health policy dynamics in Greece

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Abstract

How do policy entrepreneurs affect policy change in environments of institutional instability? The literature has predominantly explored policy entrepreneur strategizing in contexts with established institutional settings. In this paper, we argue that under conditions of institutional fluidity and a weak and politicized public administration, venue creation is the more frequently encountered and the more likely successful strategy. We define venue creation as the entrepreneurial strategy of setting-up institutional arrangements of finite duration, predominantly in the form of committees, delegated exclusively with designing reforms. We test our hypothesis in the Greek health policy sector. We explore two policy instances: the unsuccessful attempt at a public health reform in 1992 and the successful introduction of radical policy change for public health in 2003. We employ a process tracing approach spanning thirty years, processing primary data (elite interviews and documents) applying the Multiple Streams Framework (MSF). We find that under conditions of institutional fluidity and administrative weakness, policy entrepreneurs failed in their pursuit of change using venue shopping in 1992 but succeeded through venue creation in 2003, confirming our hypothesis. We conclude with insights for contingent policy entrepreneurship success, the MSF and patterns of policymaking in Greece.

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1. Introduction

How do policy entrepreneurs affect policy change? The voluminous amount of literature on the impact of policy entrepreneurs (Frisch-Aviram et al., 2018; Mintrom, 2019) maintains that they employ several tools to help to bring about policy change. Featuring prominently are strategies: persuading, networking, framing, brokering, and advocating. Using the case of Greek public health policy and embedding our argument within the Multiple Streams Framework (MSF), we argue that the effects of strategy are contingent, depending on policy venue creation and institutional attributes. Under conditions of institutional fluidity and a weak and politicized public administration, policy entrepreneurs will be more successful in influencing policy change when they pursue the strategy of venue creation.

The literature assumes that the aim of policy entrepreneurs is to navigate between favorable and unfavorable institutional venues (Pralle, 2003; Baumgartner & Jones, 1993). Instead, we claim that, in some instances, venue creation is more frequently encountered and is likely to be a more successful strategy because it enables well-connected policy entrepreneurs to steer the process more directly toward desired outcomes. We examine two cases: the unsuccessful attempts at reforming a highly centralized and ineffective Greek health system in 1992 and the successful public health reform of 2003. We chose health policy because it represents a fundamentally important sector, from budgetary and quality-of-life perspectives, with significant interrelations to other sectors. While no one policy sector represents the entire policy process, innovations and changes in healthcare send signals to be studied in other policy sectors as well (Kingdon, 1984). We chose Greece because it is a country of perennial resistance to policy change (Kazakos, 2005). Its health policy community includes a relatively stable number of stakeholders: doctors, private healthcare and insurance providers and the pharma industry (Sisouras, 2012). We chose cases before 2010 because the decade under IMF supervision, from 2010 until 2020, imposed a prolonged intermission from policymaking normality under a regime of external policy conditionality (Spanou, 2020). Hence, to highlight contextually driven entrepreneurial strategizing, one should research major policy developments before 2010.

The article first examines the literature on policy entrepreneurial strategies. We ascertain that studies are predicated on the assumption of institutional stability and that they seek to advance insights by focusing on more fluid contexts. Next, we situate our argument within the MSF and argue that, in cases of weak and politicized bureaucracy and institutional fluidity, the option that is more likely to be successful is venue creation. This involves creating new policy venues with characteristics shaped by policy entrepreneurs. These types of venues are used to install entrepreneurs at the core of the policy process and therefore help to determine the eventual outcome. We then empirically probe the argument by examining two Greek attempts at policy change, 1992's unsuccessful attempt and 2003's successful public health reform. We conclude with implications for arguments of entrepreneurial strategic success, the MSF, and public health policy reforms.

2. Strategies of Policy Entrepreneurs

Policy entrepreneurs are individuals “inside or outside government, but not just looking in” who seek to capitalize on the ambiguity of policymaking and to influence policy outcomes (Kingdon, 1984). They are defined by their willingness and commitment to invest their limited resources in policy advocacy through patterns of strategic action (Herweg, Zahariadis & Zohlnhöfer, 2018). Most of the uses-skills-strategies logic to illuminate the mechanisms through which policy

entrepreneurs influence public policy outcomes (Arnold, 2020; Mintrom, 2019). We focus on strategies because they help to shape the eventual outcome and we show that even the widely used strategy of venue shopping supposes the existence of a menu of venues from which to choose. Research has produced a collection of policy entrepreneur strategies, which we distil here in five categories. *Using and expanding networks* has been shown to facilitate both the origination, and the communication, of ideas for policy change. Operating in cross-jurisdictional networks facilitates developing and extending the appeal of alternatives to like-minded actors through interactions with “outsiders” to the policy subsystem (Mintrom & Vergari, 1998). Moreover, as change is rarely conditional on the interests of a single policymaker, or the institutional authority of a single venue, working inside networks enables policy entrepreneurs to gain access progressively to key stakeholders, to forge alliances, and to wear down resistance to change (Béland & Katapally, 2018). Sub-sets of this category include *working with advocacy coalitions* and *narrative building*. Mobilizing like-minded stakeholders is the key to success (Sabatier, 1988). As long as policy entrepreneurs are able to frame and articulate the preferences of actor coalitions in their policy proposals, they can mobilize a dynamic shift to the prevailing beliefs within policy subsystems, generating large support for policy change (Shin & Lim, 2020; Mintrom & Vergari, 1996). In cases where policy entrepreneurs argue on behalf of coalitions exhibiting some degree of organization, *narrative building* strategies may be employed, portraying how the suppression of the non-dominant coalition’s beliefs have deprived the subsystem of an effective policymaking trajectory (Cartwright, 2017).

Policy entrepreneurs may also *collaborate through entrepreneurial coalition-building*. Although, in early MSF accounts, policy entrepreneurship was predominantly viewed as an individual activity (Kingdon, 1984), scholarship has since shown that policy change is often promoted by “teams and not just one heroic, lonely individual” (Petridou, 2014). Collective entrepreneurship usually comes about when entrepreneurs lack political capital and/or resources (Tang, Cheng & Cai, 2020) and seek collaboration with like-minded entrepreneurs for increased access and influence (Cohen, 2016). Particularly in conflictual policy settings, collective entrepreneurship has been found to contribute to “organizing out” and neutralizing opposition (Johannesson & Qvist, 2020). *Problem framing* is another widely identified strategy in the literature. Policy change often demands installing “a new and unfamiliar” way of thinking about problems (Turner, Alabi & Race, 2020). Therefore, strategically using evidence to construct frames around salient issues may be integral to fostering acceptance of a policy proposal (Petridou & Mintrom, 2021; Mintrom & Luetjens, 2017). The strategy of problem framing is often associated with *venue shopping* and *venue shifting* (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993). These strategies enable the establishment of new policy images: new perspectives to the problems facing a sector and new understandings of available policy options. Strategic success for policy entrepreneurs is conditional on identifying the most accepting and influential venue within the subsystem to promote a new policy image (venue shopping), or identifying an appropriate venue outside the subsystem, through which they can extend or redefine the nature of the problem (venue shifting) (Baumgartner & Jones 1993).

The strategic use of policy space is not limited to venues, however. Particularly in cases of policy initiatives that span jurisdictions, policy entrepreneurs may try to *scale up the change process*, starting with those jurisdictions that pose the least resistance to change and gradually accumulating pressures to expand (Mintrom, 2019; Mintrom & Luetjens, 2017). Furthermore, in promoting the technical feasibility of policy alternatives (Kingdon, 1984), policy entrepreneurs may engage in strategies of *leading by example*. Entrepreneurs who operate in formal political or

administrative roles can opt to lay the foundational work for a large-scale reform, or to introduce elements in a pilot format so as to build up credibility (Petridou & Mintrom, 2021; Bakir & Gunduz, 2020; Cohen, 2012).

Most accounts of policy entrepreneurs' strategic success favour agency over context-driven causal explanations (Petridou & Mintrom, 2021; Bakir & Jarvis, 2017) and assume some degree of institutional stability. *Scaling up* and *leading by example* strategies revolve around building acceptance inside the established institutional setting; meanwhile, *using* and *expanding networks* and *collaborative entrepreneurial coalition-building* aim to penetrate the policymaking space to reach influential stakeholders. Finally, *problem framing* and accompanying venue alternatives (*venue shopping* and *venue creation*) rely on the relative influence of formal venues on policymaking outcomes. Our argument differs in perspective; we focus on a single strategy – venue creation – exploring policy entrepreneurial action under conditions of institutional instability and arguing that strategic success is contingent and context-driven.

3. Policy Entrepreneurs and the Multiple Streams Framework

Most of the insights on policy entrepreneurship have been generated through applications of public policymaking frameworks to the study of policy change (Petridou & Mintrom, 2021). Policy entrepreneurs, as agents driving policy innovation, operate within meso- and macrolevel contexts, where outcomes are determined through the interplay between ideas, interests, and institutions (Hall, 1993). Therefore, placing the study of policy entrepreneurial action within the broader dynamics of policy change provides the requisite context for exploring the enabling conditions of successful strategizing.

We opt to situate our argument within the MSF. Having been the framework through which the notion of policy entrepreneurship was introduced (Kingdon, 1984), the MSF has guided most of the subsequent theorizing on the strategic success of policy entrepreneurs (Béland & Howlett, 2016; Jones et al., 2016). The framework minimizes institutional bias in assumptions because it operationalizes institutions only implicitly (Cairney & Heikkila, 2014; but see Zahariadis, 2016). Compared with the other major policy change paradigms, the MSF lies closest to the epistemological character of chaos and complexity theories, which capture our notion of fluidity (Capano, 2009). Meanwhile, it diverges from the traditional assumptions of uncertainty dominating policymaking (a condition that can be mitigated by boundedly rational policymakers obtaining greater information) and instead is founded on ambiguity, an inherently unmitigable condition, where the instability of preferences continuously renders policymaking outcomes unpredictable (Herweg, Zahariadis & Zohlnhöfer, 2018). As a result, the MSF is bestfitted to navigate the context of institutional fluidity that the analysis explores.

The MSF analyzes public policy change through five structural elements: three independent and ever-flowing streams (problem, policy, and politics), policy entrepreneurs, and policy windows. Using a single central hypothesis, the framework ultimately proposes that policy outcomes are the result of policy entrepreneurs capitalizing on (mostly) randomly occurring policy windows to couple the three streams through strategic action (Kingdon, 1984). Each of the five structural elements is shaped by a set of independent variables. The *problem stream* includes the mobilizing mechanisms that enable certain “non-ideal” social conditions to reach the attention of policymakers (Herweg, Huß & Zohlnhöfer, 2015). These include policy feedback, changes in regularly monitored indicators, and focusing events (i.e., crises, symbols, and personal experiences of policymakers). Problem definition occurs through solutions developed in the

policy stream, as the MSF maintains that “solutions chase problems” (Kingdon, 1984). The *policy stream* consists of all ideas that policy entrepreneurs communicate over time. Only a few of these are developed into policy alternatives, having undergone some “softening up” to satisfy three “survival conditions”: value acceptability, technical feasibility, and resource adequacy (Kingdon, 1984). Scholars have argued that more integrated policy communities tend to require more softening up for alternatives to enter the agenda, but typically demand less deliberation during decision-making than less integrated ones (Zahariadis, 2014). Finally, the *politics stream* captures the required political determination to proceed with policy change. Variables in the stream include the national mood, pressure group campaigns, and administrative or legislative turnover, with each offering prospects for vetoing or facilitating policy initiatives.

Policy windows are (mostly) random occurrences that allow policy entrepreneurs to couple the three streams through effective strategic action. They open either in the problem or the politics stream when developments in a variable prove to be disproportionately impactful (Herweg, Zahariadis & Zohlnhöfer, 2018). *Policy entrepreneurs* have a dual role in the MSF; they turn ideas into “pet” policy proposals through the mechanisms identified in the policy stream and engage in strategic action (as elaborated in the previous section) to induce stream couplings and produce policy change (Kingdon, 1984). agency waits for the other to act or is politically motivated to exclude the other from any decision.

4. Case Study and Research Design

Seeking to determine the conditions for successful policy entrepreneurship in environments of institutional instability, we explore policy change for public health in Greece. The country’s health system includes stark contradictions. While the number of specialist doctors is surprisingly high – jumping from 2.54 to 6.10 per 1000 of population between 1980 and 2020, almost double the OECD average of 3.5 – general practitioners are few, comprising just 5% of the doctor workforce in 2020 as opposed to an OECD average of 23%. More importantly, the number of hospital beds has been decreasing annually since 1990, standing at 4.18 per 1000 of population in 2019, less than the OECD average of 4.40 (OECD, 2020). At the same time, the policymaking landscape has been defined by persistent resistance to radical change across policy fields (Kazakos, 2005). The Greek health policy sector is populated by a stable and integrated policy community where “experts with multiple roles in different organisations and with close links to political parties” are a common sighting (Spanou, 2008). Crucially, the sector suffers from perennial “implementation gaps” and intense politicization, blurring institutional and administrative continuity (Sotiropoulos, 2004).

5. Conclusion

We examine two instances of attempted policy change in public health in Greece: one unsuccessful in 1992 and one that was successful in 2003. We rely on primary data to test our hypothesis. Employing the MSF as the guiding framework for both data collection and analysis, we use elite interviews, legislative documents (bills, parliamentary reports, and transcripts of parliamentary deliberation), policy evaluation reports, and unpublished drafts of alternatives shared by interviewees. Semi-structured elite interviews were conducted with 42 stakeholders who had held political or advisory roles in public health policymaking during the period of study. The interviews were conducted between April 2018 and February 2020. Document analysis followed a qualitative template format, with data categorized according to the framework’s five structural elements and their respective sub-variables. The analysis presents the two process-

tracing accounts and comparatively tests the hypothesis to draw conclusions on contingent policy entrepreneurial success.

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