

Public Abstract

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Graduation Term:SP 2008

Department:Political Science

Degree:PhD

Title:COMPARING THEORIES OF THE POLICY PROCESS AND STATE TUITION POLICY: CRITICALTHEORY, INSTITUTIONAL RATIONAL CHOICE, AND ADVOCACY COALITIONS.

This dissertation triangulates four theories of the policy process to explain state-level tuition policy change. Specifically, I compare the Dye, Sharkansky, Hofferbert as a macro level framework, while the Institutional Rational Choice, Advocacy Coalition Framework, and Critical Theory triangulation form the bulk of the project as micro level frameworks. I ask five research questions. What does comparing theories tell us about the nature of the policy process? How does comparative analysis explain policy outcomes? How does it contribute to theory building both for individual theories and at a meta-theoretical level? Is the benefit derived from comparative analysis the result of new insights generated or by the act of triangulating differing lenses? Does using comparative analysis help scholars make connections between macro and micro level policy dynamics? This research contributes to two sets of literatures. First, very little policy research examines theories of the policy process in concert. Second, the field of higher education policy studies tends to be atheoretical in its approach to understanding policymaking.

The project applies a Model III mixed methods design in which a primarily qualitative study uses quantitative analysis in a complementary fashion. The Dye, Sharkansky, Hofferbert framework is used to explain tuition policy change across all 50 states from 2000 to 2006. I employ a multinomial logistic method for data analysis. The micro level theories are triangulated to explain specific instances of tuition policy change in case study states Florida and Missouri over the 2000 to 2006 time frame as well.

Institutional arrangements clearly influence conditions likely to produce tuition policy change. States with more centralized governance structures tend to enact fewer changes in tuition policy. Changes in state revenue and tuition rates, however, showed tentative results, yielding little support for the commonly held belief that states experiencing revenue shortfalls will allow institutions to raise tuition to compensate for declining state appropriations. The results from the case study states show that the IRC seems to provide the most comprehensive explanation of tuition policy in Florida when taken alone, by using the three frameworks in concert we can see that structural change is a means to an end in Florida. During the time frame for the study and in the decades preceding it, coalitions tried to manipulate structure in order to disrupt the opposition. Because the debates about tuition policy in Florida occurred at the near core level of coalitional belief structures, the traditionalist and legislative prerogative coalitions were unable to forge a compromise position. In Missouri, on the other hand, structure played a much less central role. The difference between the two states highlights an important finding of the dissertation. Differing state contexts require a slightly different configuration of the frameworks to produce a rich explanation of the events and debates surrounding tuition policy change.

One area ripe for further theoretical development more directly contributes to ongoing debates about the role of theory in political science. First, the analytical process initiated in this study needs refinement. The rubric should be applied to additional theories in comparative context to tighten the definition and operationalization of the categories. Second, the comparative theory analysis of tuition policy change here revives the debate about the role of political theory in policy research. Specifically, debates from the 1980s about the role of traditional political theory in policy analysis, should be brought into conversation with more recent conversations between economists and public choice scholars within political science.