

Culture, Values and Public Policy

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Introduction

This paper argues that culture and values need to be at the heart of thinking about public policy. Policy is more likely to be successful (however success is defined) if policymakers take these aspects into account.

The paper starts by briefly defining culture and values, before setting out four reasons why they are central to public policy. First, value systems are crucial to determining whether or not a policy will achieve its stated goal. Second, legitimacy within prevailing culture and value systems is in itself a desirable policy outcome. Third, addressing tensions between value systems is an important role that the political and policy processes play in a democratic polity. Fourth, policy choices and the behaviour of political actors affect culture and values, creating feedback loops that alter the context for future policy choices.

The paper then sets out some implications of these arguments for public policy practice. It considers the way values operate in political debate and how that affects accountability, the ways in which governments alter culture, and what approaches to policy implementation and learning fit best in a framework that puts culture and values at the centre. Finally, the paper considers some potential counter-arguments that require the overall story about the central role of culture to be nuanced or altered for particular contexts.

The discussion draws on several themes from the political science and public policy literature, in particular combining elements of complexity theory and discussions on the role of evidence in policymaking with work on drivers of voting behaviour, and in particular the recent “realist” view of the democratic process. However, it does not attempt a comprehensive review of the relevant literature and also draws extensively on the author’s own experience as a senior practitioner and observer of policymaking.

What are Culture and Values?

“Culture” is the set of (usually implicit) norms and habits of behaviour shared by the actors in the relevant system

This paper does not attempt a detailed discussion of the different meanings that can be given to the terms “culture” and “value systems”. For the purpose of the following argument, “culture” is the set of (usually implicit) norms and habits of behaviour shared by the actors in the relevant system; to use Geertz’s term, a “fabric of meaning” that generates social actions (Geertz, 1973). Symbols, narratives and language are crucial building blocks of culture, and as such are essentially public. Scholars taking an interpretative approach to studying organisations or other social structures give these cultural building blocks a central place in their explanations of the causes and meanings of what they observe (Abolafia et al, 2014).

“Value systems” in this paper are very closely linked to culture, and are the set of fundamental beliefs held by an individual or group about what is valuable, what is fair, what constitutes right and wrong, who deserves what, and similar ethical matters. As with culture, these beliefs are not necessarily explicit and may manifest themselves as feelings and ways of behaving. The psychological concept of “superordinate goals” (Sherif, 1958) is useful here – the overall aims that are shared by all the actors and that their ways of operating act to reinforce. Such goals do not need to be, and often aren’t, written down or otherwise expressed in a way that all the actors would explicitly sign up to, but can be deduced from the way they interact, with the norms having, in many cases, “no formal institutional backup” (Katayama and Ursprung, 2004).

Because the two concepts are so intertwined (e.g. a group have a culture of behaving in a certain way, which is linked to what they believe about what constitutes an admirable life) this paper follows the practice in some other literature of not separating them, unless that is necessary for a particular point in the argument (e.g. Benabou, 2008).



Why are Culture and Values so Important?

Culture Drives Outcomes

These first four sections explain why culture and values are so important to understanding public policy. The first reason, addressed in this section, is that culture is central to determining the outcomes of a policy.

There are lots of tools and frameworks for developing policy. Market-based tools (like contracting out), more state-focused tools (regulation and expenditure), deliberative tools (consultations and citizen involvement) and many more. Officials developing policy advice for ministers, politicians debating propositions, journalists commenting on policy issues, and academics assessing the results spend considerable time and effort in considering the merits of these tools. Is it better to contract out a service or run it in-house? Should a service be devolved to local communities to respond to their needs, or centralised to drive efficiency and fairness? Should the government give people money to purchase something or provide it directly?

However, which tool is chosen often has remarkably little impact on what happens. In complex policy systems, outcomes tend to persist over considerable periods of time (often called “path dependence”) with large costs and inertia standing in the way of change (Pierson, 2000). Values and culture are extremely powerful in determining outcomes, regardless of the tools employed. In the famous quote (sometimes attributed to Drucker) “culture eats strategy for breakfast”. After consuming strategy, culture then moves on to policy tools for lunch. The tools get co-opted and altered in order to serve the goals, values and assumptions of those using them.

A theoretical basis for asserting that culture and values are so important to outcomes comes from the long-standing line of argument in public policy research: that central authority has a limited impact on outcomes in a distributed delivery system. Outcomes will not be driven by centrally specified approaches but by how the individual actors (“street-level bureaucrats” in Lipsky’s famous phrase (Lipsky, 1980)) use those processes. They will do this according to the prevailing organisational culture and their own values, perceiving and refracting a central policy initiative through that context. As John (1998) argues, decisions taken during implementation are as important as those taken by those generally known as “policymakers”, and the existing culture of networks and institutions are central to shaping them (John, 1998). The eventual outcome of the policy is produced by those refractions and mutations, not by what was written in the original proposition announced at the centre (Muers, 2014). Some argue that this process of incremental decentralised decision-making effectively makes policy a matter of “self-organising networks” (Rhodes, 1997) and complex systems rather than top-down decision-making. Culture is a key reason why street-level bureaucrats matter so much.

There is also empirical evidence of the important role that culture plays in determining both specific policy outcomes and general approaches to policy in different places (e.g. Bednar and Page, 2018; Alesina and Giuliano, 2015). For example, international development practitioners are well versed in the phenomenon of

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culture consuming tools. Years of attempts to introduce “rational” merit-based bureaucracies, transparent needs-based allocations and fiscal planning in some developing countries have, in many cases, seen those tools simply used to continue the extraction of rents for clan and family members where that is the prevailing culture. The introduction of the tools of a liberal capitalist economy (such as companies limited by shares, open trading policies and reducing price controls) in Russia after the collapse of the USSR did not produce the intended policy outcomes. Introduced into a culture of centralised power, those tools have mainly created new ways for powerful state-connected actors to create personal wealth and eliminate competition (Yakovlev, 2006; Hanson and Teague, 2005). In a contrary example, informal networks and patronage-based approaches in China have produced impressive economic growth: one reason (among others) being that those networks sit within a very powerful set of superordinate goals and values around national prestige, supporting iteration and innovation towards those overall objectives (Ang, 2016). In the 1980s, on some measures of institutional quality, (such as quality of the public administration and the effectiveness of contract enforcement), fast-growing East Asian countries like South Korea and Malaysia scored poorly, implying that the institutional tools may be the wrong place to look for why development succeeds (Rodrik, 1997).

In developed countries there are plenty of cases where supposedly market-based or technocratic processes are actually used to reinforce the existing position and values of elites and insiders: procurement rules that are so complex that new entrants find them impossible, “open” recruitment based on a set of criteria that narrowly reflects the status quo, “market-based” solutions that involve little competition and the state retaining all the major risks (the failed London Underground public-private partnership (PPP) is a good example (Crewe and King, 2013)). Cultures of risk-aversion and protectionism have in these cases ensured that the tools serve ends other than those for which they were designed.

Legitimacy Matters

Even if culture and values were not essential to determining whether a policy met its goals when implemented, they would still be important. This is because in a democratic polity it is important that a policy is accepted as legitimate. In turn, what counts as legitimacy is closely bound to the values held by the population: what process of policy development is acceptable, how are people who interact with the state treated, what distributional consequences are seen as fair? A policy that does not consider those underlying values risks being seen as illegitimate.

A policy that is perceived as illegitimate is, of course, less likely to achieve its objectives. Unless the state has the means and inclination to compel co-operation, many policies ultimately rest on the co-operation of the governed. If they see it as illegitimate, this will not be forthcoming. A good example of the problems this causes is the experience in many

countries of some ethnic minority groups being reluctant to co-operate with law enforcement agencies because those agencies are perceived as behaving in an unfair and illegitimate way, for example by searching minorities without justification. The lack of co-operation that comes from the perceived illegitimacy undermines effective law enforcement. A similar example occurred with the doomed implementation of the poll tax in the UK in the late 1980s. A flat-rate tax offended some basic precepts of what people saw as fair, and so, in many parts of society, non-payment was seen as more acceptable than would normally be the case for tax evasion. The Centre for Public Impact has published some insightful examples of how legitimacy is central to policy thinking (CPI, 2017).

The impact of legitimacy on policy success is really just a variation of the argument in the previous section: that culture and values drive policy outcomes. There is, however, a deeper point here. It is valuable that a policy is accepted as legitimate even if that has no impact on whether it delivers other outcomes. In a democratic system we give independent value to the idea that a policy has been developed and implemented in a way that accords with our accepted standards of behaviour and fairness. People do not see their relationship with public services as simply one of consumption, they care about how those services treat others and what their approach says about the society of which they are a part. For example, in one study 66% of people referred to their relationship with public services as being that of “citizens” or “members of the public” compared to only 30% who thought of themselves as “customers” or “users” (Public Management Foundation, 1996).

A society’s legal system is one of the major ways in which it expresses its view of legitimacy. The legal systems of the UK and other developed democracies reflect the view that fair process has an independent value, regardless of its impact on outcomes. Examples include enabling legal challenges to policy decisions on the grounds that legitimate expectations around consultation were not met, and the importance of access to legal advice in international human rights standards. The widespread acceptability of such measures indicates that legitimacy and fairness, concepts that ultimately rest on deeper cultural norms, are important in and of themselves.

The Purpose of Democracy

All societies need to be able to make collective choices that affect all their members. Some of those choices enter the domain of “politics” or “public policy” and some do not. Whether or not there is a clash of values is on common cause of something falling into the realm of politics.

To illustrate this with an example: there is no policy debate about which team should come top of the football Premiership. In contrast, which schools should come top of their league tables is hugely contested. The role of values helps to explain this. In the football case, determining who wins is a simple empirical question, based on scoring

goals and winning matches. Everyone accepts that what is valuable in football is scoring more goals than the opposition. Therefore it is possible to draw a direct logical line from verifiable events on the pitch to the award of a trophy. However in the schools example there is no consensus about what is valuable. Is success in some subjects more important than others? Is it more important to get more pupils to pass, or more to reach the very top grades? Are the best schools the ones that add the most value given their intake, and if so which characteristics of the intake are important?

These questions are matters of political debate. A key reason for that is that it is not possible to resolve them through empirical analysis and data. We can design the most sophisticated value-added metrics, have superb longitudinal studies of what happens to pupils with different grades and understand in detail the skills needs of the economy and still not agree on which of these elements are important. The debate here runs up against what philosophers call the “fact-value distinction” or the “naturalistic fallacy” (Moore, 1903): the impossibility of deriving a logically necessary statement about what ought to happen from a statement about how things are. No amount of data that says certain subjects lead to higher lifetime earnings will convince someone to prioritise those subjects in a league table if they don’t believe that earnings are an important measure of what is valuable in life.

It is of course too simplistic to assert that debates about values are a matter for public policy and debates about technical means to achieve an agreed end are not. The distinction is more subtle, for two reasons. First, there are some occasions where there may be no disagreement about goals or values, but a public policy solution is still required. A classic example is the provision of public goods such as pollution control. Because it is only possible to deliver these things on a collective basis, they automatically become a matter for the policy sphere even if there is no debate at all about their desirability. (It is interesting, however, that the most heated political debates about public goods tend to be in areas where there is not a consensus on the “ought” elements: the morality of possessing nuclear weapons being a good example.) Another reason for public policy debate about agreed goals may be that such debate is a way to obtain information and understanding that is necessary for successful delivery: if there is public discussion about clean water it may become less likely that people will pour cooking fat down the drain and block the sewers.

Second, there are some issues where people in a society have different values but it is possible to achieve a stable co-existence of those views without a policy debate. In a liberal society these will generally be where a sub-group within a society can express their values in a way that doesn’t significantly impinge on the lives of others: private religious observance, appreciation of different forms of art or music, which charities people donate their money to. As soon as any of these values-driven activities start to come to wider notice they do, however, become political: is some art regarded as offending boundaries of decency, is religious dress in public acceptable, which

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causes qualify for registered charitable status? The private space of values is, in reality, quite small and where the boundary should sit is itself a political issue.

Once something becomes a matter of public debate on values, as opposed to about means to an agreed end, the language for discussing it needs to shift. Analytical tools, research and data give way to appeals to underlying values and moral principles. All societies have to find a way to resolve tensions over values and what “ought” to be the case. Authoritarian states operate on the basis that there is only one permissible “ought”, and all questions of value are referred back to that (the will of a deity as interpreted by an absolute monarch, or of the proletariat as determined by the enlightened revolutionary leadership, for example). In contrast, one of the fundamental underpinnings of democracy is the belief that it is acceptable and/or natural for people to differ about values while remaining members of the same society, and there need to be means for enabling people to debate their differences and co-exist.

Such co-existence can be hard to achieve. Fundamental values such as how to think about right, wrong and fairness lend themselves to zero-sum debates where an advance by one side is a loss for another, with limited scope for compromise. Democracies have sometimes managed to achieve stability by, effectively, prioritising one dominant culture and value set. It has been argued that heated debates about LGBT rights and the position of women in society have emerged once people began to challenge a dominant value-set that had denied voice to those alternatives (e.g. Inglehart, 1990). These difficult cultural issues can be managed through democratic processes (witness the smooth sea change that has occurred on gay marriage in many countries, including through direct democracy in some cases, such as in Australia). However this only works if cultural attachments to democratic processes are stronger than attachments to other aspects of culture that are threatened by the outcome of those processes. There is no guarantee that the democratic side of the ledger will win out. In fact it would be odd if it did so: for most people most of the time other parts of their culture are much more salient than anything to do with democratic ways of resolving disputes.

An example that illustrates this comes from the Deep South of the USA in the Jim Crow era. The Southern states had constitutions that looked democratic, and subscribed, in theory, to the egalitarian doctrines of the Declaration of Independence. However, for the white majority, the cultural value placed on their racial supremacy far outweighed attachment to democratic principles. Therefore they put in place all sorts of devices, ranging from obscure voter-registration rules to outright violence, to prevent African-Americans from exercising any political rights (Key, 1949). Given the centrality of white supremacy to all aspects of society in the South, it is hardly surprising that defending it trumped adherence to democracy.

The above argument implies there is a deep-seated tension in democratic systems. One of the primary points of such systems is to give voice and political rights to everyone on an equal basis. Unless a society is extremely homogenous, this equal access to the

political process is very likely to bring to the surface cultural tensions that are not easily amenable to compromise. The more important those cultural questions are, the more likely that they will have stronger meaning for citizens than the democratic process that brought them out in the first place, and therefore the more likely that people will resort to anti-democratic means to resolve them in their favour.

There may be a risk that recognising culture and taking it seriously in policy, as this paper advocates, makes it more likely that democracy will be damaged in this way. This is a valid concern. However the alternative of attempting to play down the values-based element of policy questions requires either an exclusion of challenging perspectives or attempting to solve values-based questions with technocratic debates about means. The first seems illegitimate and the second a mixture of ineffective and dishonest. As Michael Sandel has argued, it is not possible for government to be neutral about moral disagreements, and some versions of liberalism empty political discourse of meaning by trying to do so. He also points out “it is nonetheless possible to conduct our politics on the basis of mutual respect” (Sandel, 2009). That final claim about conduct is crucial: the tone, language and style in which culture is recognised and debated matters. There are ways to recognise and address cultural difference that are more or less likely to inflame views to a point where they overwhelm respect for democratic norms.

In summary, while not all policy issues are about values, and not all issues of values are also ones of policy, the overlap is large. The most hotly debated and difficult policy questions tend to have at least some element of disagreement about what is valuable and how things ought to be. A functioning democracy therefore needs to be conscious of values and able to deal with them within the policy system.

Governments Affect Culture

The three arguments above all relate to how culture and values affect what governments might want to achieve. This fourth section looks at the question the other way round: the impact that governments and their policies have on culture and values themselves. In principle, if culture and values are important, and they are affected by government policy, then it would be irresponsible not to consider that impact as part of weighing up policy choices.

It is important not to overemphasise this argument. Culture and values are deep-rooted and change slowly. Governments cannot simply change them with a piece of legislation or a tweak to the tax system: such changes are really signalling that the government believes in a certain value system rather than necessarily expecting it to become more prevalent as a result. Changing culture is not easy, and certainly not quick. It needs to be done with the grain of what is already there, and by building broad support rather than by top-down decree. It would, however, be naive to believe that culture and values are entirely independent of policy action. The extreme example is the actions of totalitarian regimes: it is hard to argue that the Bolsheviks didn't manage, over many years of focused effort, to

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change the fundamental culture and values of Russia and the other Soviet republics. The experience of Germany after the Second World War demonstrates the impact of government on culture through a sort of natural experiment: surveys after reunification showed that different cultures and value systems had become internalised by the populations of the two halves of the divided state. One study has described these changes as “significant and long-lasting” (Alesina and Fuchs-Schündeln, 2007). However, they also showed some continuity and so emphasised that government can only influence culture slowly, and in part (Boenkhe et al, 1993).

Of course most governments take a much less extreme view of their remit in changing culture than the East German dictatorship did. In fact it could be argued that in a liberal democracy the government has no business in trying to influence the culture and values of the population, but instead should be aiming to reflect them and implement policies accordingly. This argument, however, assumes a rather passive view of the role of government and its policies. In a modern developed economy, government in its various forms will be spending a third or more of GDP, employing thousands of people, and political leaders will be a major voice in news and other forms of public dialogue. It is hard to see how this level of influence doesn’t shift culture, even if slowly and potentially in an unpredictable way, and without the political and policy leaders necessarily intending it to. If this is right, and it is impossible for government to be a neutral player in the evolution of culture, then there is another reason for culture and values to take a central place in policymaking. If governments do not think about how they affect culture they will simply do so by accident.

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**What Does
This Mean in
Practice?**

If we accept that culture and values deserve a central place in how we think about and practice policymaking, what does that imply? Are there mindsets, strategies and tools that seem more or less important once this perspective is applied to the question of how to do policy? The following sections argue that there are implications for both our macro-level understanding of how policy works and also for specific tools and techniques that we might deploy to achieve desired outcomes.

Values at the Centre of Political Choice

Policymaking takes place within a context that is heavily determined by politics: the choices of voters in elections and the choices of parties and individual politicians as they seek to achieve both success at the ballot box and substantive outcomes that they care about. Politics is central to determining what policy is pursued and how. Therefore it makes sense to start with politics for understanding the implications of the importance of culture and values in policymaking.

In a democracy politics is driven in large part by what determines how voters behave. What drives them to choose one party or leader over another? In one view of the world, such as some parts of the rational choice school of political science, voters choose the politicians who promote policies most likely to advance their interests. In this view, policymakers aim to develop and implement policies in a way that will provide benefits to a majority, or a large enough minority to be successful. The tools of cost-benefit analysis, and in particular distributional impact assessments, would therefore be at the heart of policymaking. Some scholars argue that the desire to engage with rational choice theory moved political science research away from a concern with culture and ideas (Blyth et al, 2016).

There are, however, strong reasons for believing that a view that ties more into the previous discussion of culture and values is a better description of the way democracy works in practice. This has been called a “realist” view of democracy in Achen and Bartel’s recent work addressing these arguments (Achen and Bartels, 2016). Starting with a theoretical perspective, even if we were to believe that voters behave rationally, it is not clear that they would base their voting choice on an assessment of which party would implement policies that would benefit them. It is obvious from history that the actual impact of a policy is rarely what it is asserted or intended to be at the start. As pointed out above, the culture of delivery institutions tends to warp eventual outcomes a long way from the policy intent expressed in a manifesto. Voters generally believe that manifestos will not be implemented: either because of the experienced gap between rhetoric and implementation, or because they simply don’t believe promises in the first place. (For example, studies in Sweden showed that only 18% of people agreed with the statement that “elected members of parliament try to keep their election promises” (Naurin, 2011), although in fact a much higher percentage was generally implemented in some way.) Therefore it would not be rational for a voter to invest the considerable time and effort in understanding the detail of a policy

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offer and its potential implications, when that is (both in perception and in reality) almost guaranteed to be wrong. In practice voters do not do so, as many studies attest to the very low level of knowledge most people hold about policies and political institutions (Achen and Bartels, 2016). It is far more rational to choose a political leader based on a broad assessment of whether their values fit those with which the voter identifies (“do they understand people like me?”) or as Achen and Bartels put it, voting on the basis of “social identity” (ibid). Taking a broad values-based approach is also more rational when you consider that circumstances will always change during a term in office. A manifesto cannot tell you how a leader will react to an unexpected economic shock, sudden social unrest or a foreign crisis and a voter cannot, after the event, choose the right response to that. What they can do is choose someone who seems to them to have broadly the “right” priorities and views on what is valuable, and trust them to act accordingly.

Moving on from the theory to the evidence, there is evidence that basic personal values (e.g. around benevolence, openness, desire for security, importance of personal achievement) are significant drivers of voter choice (Barnea and Schwartz, 1998; Caprara et al, 2006). Some studies have argued that a significant element (perhaps up to a half) of political behaviour is inherited (Haidt, 2012) and others that a tendency to support authoritarian political propositions is deeply rooted in heredity and early upbringing (Stenner, 2005). Recently, the rise of populist movements in several countries has led to extensive research on populist voting, looking at whether economic disadvantage is central or whether alternative cultural drivers are more important. There is good evidence from these studies that cultural values play a critical role, looking both at specific elections (for example the Brexit referendum or the election of Donald Trump (Kaufmann, 2017)) or on a wider cross-national basis (Inglehart and Norris, 2016). It is argued that a cultural cleavage between populists and cosmopolitan liberals needs to be overlaid on the more traditional left-right economic divide (ibid).

In a model that puts values at the centre, and where voters do not understand or expect implementation of specific policy proposals, those proposals become a way of signalling what values a leader will embody and promote, rather than firm statements of what they will deliver. Politicians have always understood this: policies are announced to send a signal and create a narrative about what kind of person or party you are. A good recent example is Donald Trump’s infamous promise to build a border wall and get Mexico to pay for it. According to one poll around the time of his inauguration only 14% of Americans believed he would actually build a wall paid for by Mexico (CBS, 2017). But the announcement was an extremely strong signal of a value system (against immigration and cultural change) and an attitude (aggressiveness to other countries and a willingness to break the perceived “rules of the game”). It is those values and attitudes that people are choosing.

The way voters make choices is one of the most powerful incentives acting on the policymaking process in a democracy. If those choices are heavily driven by broad perceptions of cultural fit, with policies acting as signals of cultural positioning rather than actual propositions for implementation, then there are significant implications for the policy process. In particular it means that at the macro level there is little or no accountability for what a policy actually does. Voters will not change their political behaviour based on the impact of a policy if they never acted on an assumption about that impact in the first place. In fact there is evidence that the causation often runs the other way: how someone is inclined to vote affects their understanding of what a policy has achieved. Whether or not someone is aware of a policy and what they believe its effects to be are influenced by their political starting point. This is down to confirmation bias: we interpret information in line with our starting positions. A recent piece of research showed that people's ability to interpret statistics correctly is dramatically worse when the same statistics are used to describe a divisive political topic (immigration) rather than a neutral one (effectiveness of a skin cream) (onlineprivacyfoundation.org, 2017). When political control changes after an election, partisan perceptions of other events change dramatically. To use another contemporary US example, there was an 82% net positive swing among Republican voters in perceptions of how the US economy was doing in the six months following Trump's election as president, at a time when objective economic indicators were fairly stable (Marquette, 2017). So if we believe a political leader is acting in line with our values, that shapes how we see policy and we will tend to register information that implies they are being successful. This dynamic gives politicians considerable leeway to implement policy that is damaging as long as a majority believe they have the right values.

Therefore there needs to be other ways of delivering accountability and improvement in policy implementation. Some suggestions for achieving this are outlined in the next section. Another important aspect is how political debate, election campaigns and the like can best reflect the reality of policy as a signalling device for a cultural fit. A detailed assessment of the content and practice of political dialogue is beyond the scope of this paper. However, on the face of it there are ways in which those who debate and scrutinise politics can reflect the centrality of values. For example, if a politician proposes a new policy it is vital to ask questions that make explicit the cultural values that sit behind it. Why is the state of affairs that the policy aims to produce desirable? Whose interests does it serve and why are they deemed deserving? What does it say about our vision of the good society? Starting with questions around costs, implementation or the policy's place in a campaign or other political strategy misses the point about how voters will assess its merits. The "language game" that is played in politics has values at its core, and focusing conversation on empirical and technical points fails to understand how people listen and what they hear.

Accountability in a Values-driven World

If the way values interact with voter behaviour and political choice means that elections don't deliver accountability for policy decisions, what can we do instead? There are two parts to a potential answer. First, we need to hold political leaders accountable on terms that make sense in the context of a values-driven system: that is, for the values they espouse and how they promote them. Second, we need a different way of ensuring some accountability and incentive for improvement in crucial services on which the public depends.

On the first point, we could do more to make explicit that culture change is often a major policy aim and therefore should be scrutinised and assessed. Accountability and audit could look at the impact policy has on culture, rather than a pure financial and service quality focus. Just because an audit report looks at cultural change won't give it any additional traction with voters in determining how to exercise their powers of democratic accountability. However if the real aim of a policy is (or should be) culture change, evaluation done in those terms is at least more honest and more likely to lead to valuable learning.

For one example of a large, detailed change programme with cultural objectives we can look at the privatisation programme in the UK in the 1980s and 1990s. There were plenty of technocratic claims and counter-claims about the merits of access to private capital and management, and whether the receipts realised in the sales were appropriate. But the bigger-picture goal, explicit in some of the government communications at the time, was to change culture both within the companies themselves and in society more widely by spreading share ownership and a sense of investment in the capitalist system (Myddleton, 2014; Heald, 1988). In evaluating this programme it is, therefore, worth asking whether attitudes to private capital and entrepreneurship changed, for example more among people who received shares than in the general population? The tools for this kind of evaluation exist: attitudes and values can be measured and compared over time (e.g. through the British Social Attitudes Survey or World Values Survey), and specific behaviours that are symptomatic of underlying values can also be identified. Of course it is hard to attribute cultural change to a specific intervention, but attribution difficulties also apply to many of the effects (e.g. behavioural or economic) that conventional policy evaluation is concerned with. This is not a reason to put culture to one side.

One of the problems with trying to measure the impact policy has on culture is that people's reported attitudes and values often diverge from how they actually behave. For example several studies have shown that people often express strong support for placing a high value on preserving the environment, but actually participate in few environmentally friendly practices (e.g. Thapa, 1999). The arguments above on how culture affects public policy rest on culture as it is manifested in behaviour rather than reported attitudes. Therefore when thinking about measurement, surveys may have some use but we also need to look for real-life indicators of culture. By way of illustration,

in the privatisation case discussed above we might want to look at the actual rates of new business formation in the relevant group, as opposed to surveyed attitudes on entrepreneurship.

On the issue of ensuring that accountability contributes to service improvement, as noted above one of the main reasons that culture has a central place in determining policy outcomes is that it affects the practical front-line actions of those administering a policy. It is their practice and innovations (for better or worse) that drive day-to-day outcomes. As well as shifting assessment and audit towards culture, we could shift it towards rapid front-line feedback, providing quick information and accountability for how decisions are affecting delivery in near real time. If large-scale technical analysis of policy is ineffective in delivering accountability, as argued above, then the resource could be better deployed. Emerging technology offers plenty of opportunities to create ways for front-line workers to get more rapid feedback on the effectiveness of their practice and new initiatives. For example, schools are already using sophisticated and continuous tracking of how pupils are progressing and to inform and improve teaching practice. The “Friends and Family” test in the NHS was introduced to provide immediate and specific feedback on patient experience. If government gave a clear signal, backed by a financial commitment, that such real-time accountability was a priority then it is very likely many more methods would emerge. It has been argued that such trial-and-error and immediate feedback is the way to conduct “intelligent policy-making in a complex world” (Sanderson, 2009).

Tools for Delivery Through Culture Change

Accountability for trying to change values is little use if political leaders and policymakers do not have the tools to do so. As argued above, there is evidence that governments do change values whether they want to or not. But what delivery tools and techniques seem more important when we consider policymaking through the lens of culture and values?

Taking symbolic action seriously

Symbolic action is a policy tool that becomes more important once we take culture and values seriously. In a conversation about policy, describing something as “symbolic” can be rather an insult, implying that it will have no impact in the “real” world. However symbols are extremely important in defining and strengthening culture. So powerful symbolic actions, especially if part of a coherent narrative and set of measures aimed at reinforcing certain values, are actually a valid and significant policy tool (Burch and Smith, 2007). In fact, as argued above, it is in many ways more accurate to see most policy announcements as symbols rather than statements of what will actually happen. So those who advise on policy should understand what makes a symbolic announcement potent, how to use them to construct a narrative with real traction in society and how to connect specific policy statements

to deeper cultural trends. This kind of understanding should take a central place in training policymakers, alongside the current common curricula topics of cost-benefit analysis, strategic options appraisal, implementation models and so on, which focus more on trying to manage the complex practical effects of policy. Providing political leaders (many of whom understand that symbolic action is core to their role) with advisers who are trained in technocratic policy and delivery analysis is a mismatch that undermines trust and effectiveness.

Building organisations

Culture sits at an organisation level as well as with society as a whole. It is commonplace to say that certain companies or government agencies have a particular culture. Therefore one way to reflect the importance of culture in policymaking is by emphasising the value of building organisations as a policy tool. A new organisation can embody the desired new culture, operating in a different way from existing institutions. A good example of such practice is the move in several countries to create new anti-corruption bureaus to tackle perceived endemic problems in existing public sector institutions. The Hong Kong Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) is often seen as a very successful example, copied more recently in several of the Eastern European states as part of their preparation for EU membership and also in African countries including Sierra Leone, Ghana and Malawi among others (Sousa, 2009).

Of course, just creating a new institution will not solve cultural barriers to policy change. If the rest of the system doesn't respond and seeks to undermine it, then a new culturally distinct organisation will struggle. Indeed, many of the anti-corruption bodies have suffered this fate as political opponents seek to undermine them by cutting off resources, attacking the integrity and credibility of their leadership or simply ignoring their conclusions (Doig, Watt and Williams, 2005). However if a new organisation goes with the grain of other supportive trends in society it can be an important part of making a difference.

Organisation building is likely to be more effective in some circumstances than others. If the relevant decisions are made by individual citizens (e.g. to stop smoking) rather than by people acting as part of an organisation (e.g. how to enforce the law) then creating organisations is less likely to help. If there are already competing institutions in the same space, a new one may struggle to thrive. And the challenges around developing approaches to accountability that reflect the importance of values apply to new institutions just as much as existing ones.

Decentralisation

The arguments set out above, on the role of front-line public service workers and the importance of rapid feedback and learning – point to another possible policy tool: decentralisation. Which aspects of public services should be organised centrally and which devolved to a local level is one of the longest-standing (and hard to resolve)

If we agree that front-line decision-making is likely to drive a large part of policy outcomes, and that enabling the workers at that level to respond rapidly to feedback from experience then a more decentralised model of policy delivery seems justified

issues in public policy, common to most textbooks on the topic (Hill, 2014). If we agree that front-line decision-making is likely to drive a large part of policy outcomes, and that enabling the workers at that level to respond rapidly to feedback from experience then a more decentralised model of policy delivery seems justified.

There have always been two main arguments mounted against a decentralised approach. In the UK, in particular, these have tended to carry considerable weight. The first argument is to say that local variation in service quality, the so-called “postcode lottery” is unacceptable. National standards and control are needed to ensure that everyone receives the same and is not disadvantaged (or advantaged) based on where they live. The second argument is that national politicians get criticised and held to account for local failures, even when decision-making has been decentralised. To take a recent example, the Prime Minister, Theresa May, made a statement to Parliament and was questioned about the Grenfell Tower fire, despite housing, planning and building fire inspection all being managed at a local level. Secretaries of State for Health have repeatedly had to answer for and investigate problems with particular hospitals (Mid Staffordshire, Alder Hey etc).

Taking the values perspective weakens both of these arguments. Starting with the postcode lottery, if we agree that culture drives outcomes, and accept that culture among service delivery agencies will vary across the country, then a postcode lottery is simply unavoidable. Nationally imposed standards or targets will not override the culture of local delivery systems and their ways of operating. There is good evidence that this is in fact the case, and even within supposedly national services there is major variation in approach and performance. For example a study of the UK’s Jobcentre network, a national network implementing a universal system to national targets, found large variation in performance (NAO, 2013).

On the question of central government accountability, the discussion above also calls this into serious doubt. As set out, voters do not hold governments to account, even for large national policies: people do not understand them or relate real-world impacts to those decisions. They are even less likely to hold central government to account in any meaningful way for a decision or outcome for which they are in fact not responsible. The criticism that a Health Secretary faces over a single hospital is better understood as an expression of general unhappiness with their government’s approach to public health-care or the disadvantaged. There is no evidence that national politicians suffer electoral consequences from local service failings. Given that we have shown that those national leaders couldn’t direct local services effectively even if they wanted to, then this is an entirely sensible position.

Understanding tipping points

It has become a common view in public policy studies that policy change tends not to happen in a linear or predictable fashion. Instead, long periods of stability are interspersed with bursts of unpredictable

rapid change. Evolutionary biologists coined the term “punctuated equilibrium” to describe this pattern (Gould and Eldredge, 1977) and subsequent research by Baumgartner and Jones and others has applied the same models to public policy (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993). Putting culture and values at the centre of our framework for understanding policy change helps explain and reinforce this sort of model. Culture acts as a brake on policy change, as new ideas and pressures are mediated and tempered by stable underlying values and practices held by the people tasked with implementing them. The examples above, of how culture determines outcomes, show how equilibrium can be sustained in part through stable culture.

Culture and values can, however, also help explain how sudden changes and tipping points happen. The “punctuation” of an existing equilibrium often happens when a symbolic event with particular resonance becomes emblematic of a change towards which underlying attitudes have been moving for some time. One UK example is the way that the murder of James Bulger in 1993 led to a step-change in sentencing practices for young offenders and (slightly less directly) adults. The England and Wales prison population rose at an almost unprecedented rate from around 40,000 in the early 1990s to over 60,000 ten years later. There had long been underlying public support for longer prison sentences, widely held social values supporting a more punitive approach, and increasing belief that crime was an important issue (MORI 1993–2005). While this is not to say that politicians would not have responded to these views in the absence of the Bulger case, or a similar event, the combination of underlying views and a hugely symbolic event was very powerful. Of course policymakers cannot manufacture events with the impact of a horrific high-profile murder. But an analysis of potential tipping points that combines the power of symbols, underlying values and the potential policy responses could be a powerful one.

Learning from elsewhere

A final point on policy tools: one tool often employed by policymakers is learning from other countries. Thinking about culture as a central part of understanding policy requires us to change how we go about such learning. It is unsurprising that policy innovations from one place so often fail when moved somewhere else given that values are both different between places and essential to whether or not a policy has the desired effect. However this doesn’t mean that we need to forget about international comparisons altogether. Instead, it is worth shifting the point of comparison to a different level. Rather than starting with “can we implement the policy tool that was successful in country X?” it makes more sense to ask the question “what is it about the system in country X that enabled them to develop an intervention that was so successful in their own context?” (Andrews, 2013). By studying the properties of the system, underpinned by culture and values, we may understand how it enabled a successful policy and what could lead to similar successful innovation in a different cultural context.

Challenges to a culture and values approach

This paper has set out why culture and values are central to thinking about public policy, and how their central position affects political choice, accountability and policymaking. However there are some aspects to public policy that pose a challenge to this approach and do not fit entirely comfortably within the argument above. This final section considers three of these, including possible ways to address them.

Macro-level decisions with a direct impact

A central part of the argument above was that voters are entirely rational to focus on the values espoused by a political leader rather than the detail of their policy proposals because decisions made at the centre have only a tenuous relationship to what citizens actually experience. The organisational culture of delivery agencies and complex interactions between policy change and other factors mean that the line from policy promise through decision to delivery is a blurred and tangled one, so it makes little sense to vote on the basis of a clear expectation of a certain outcome. The counter-argument to consider is that there are some decisions where the transmission mechanism from politician to voter is much more direct, and in these cases it would be much more rational to hold someone accountable on the basis of policy substance rather than values. Good examples would be decisions on taxation, welfare benefits or the geographical distribution of public spending. These are not mediated by a complex delivery system, but use simple and predictable algorithms to have an immediate impact on resources for individuals. Accountability for these decisions can't sit anywhere except with those central decision-makers.

Such central accountability also can't be solely about the symbolic or culture-changing potential of the decision, because of the direct real impact it will have. Technical analysis of the concrete (as opposed to cultural) impact of these decisions is valuable to accountability in a way that is less the case for others. However, the way such information feeds through to political choice and accountability is no less values based. Tax, welfare and spending distribution decisions are very directly tied to values, as they are about who deserves what from the state. There are few more values-based questions in policymaking. Also, even though the impacts of such decisions ought to be much clearer than is the case for many others, the way people perceive such impacts is still heavily subject to confirmation bias.

A good example is a study in Wisconsin that looked at how people felt public resources were distributed across the state, and the relationship between those views and underlying beliefs about government (Kramer, 2016). It found that people's view of how resources were distributed between different parts of the state (ultimately an empirical question) was driven by their (value-based) underlying level of resentment towards government. A traditional view of accountability would operate the other way around: if people saw that resources were being allocated away from them, they would

resent the government. Government could respond to this by changing the formula. In practice it appears that the starting point is whether people resent government, and if they do they assume that resources are skewed away from them, regardless of the actual position. Changing the formula would then address the symptom not the cause.

So while we need to recognise that some types of decisions have a different dynamic in terms of what effect they have, the fundamental place of values and culture in understanding how citizens respond to them and in turn hold their leaders to account remains.

Role of evidence

Is there a risk that focusing on culture and values undermines the legitimate and important role of data, evidence and scientific research in policymaking? These empirical tools have added huge value, and a way of making policy that ignores the understanding they provide is as likely to fail as one that clashes with the prevailing value system. So we need to bring the two together in way that recognises their respective advantages.

The first step in doing so is to recognise how evidence actually fits into the policymaking process. As Cairney (2016) and Parsons (2002) have set out, as policymaking doesn't operate in a linear way from intention through planning to outcome, using evidence is not a matter of setting out some research and expecting this to flow through to sensible decisions and implementation. Evidence is one ingredient in a messy environment, and is subject to all the psychological and institutional shortcuts that are applied to any input. Cairney identifies "rational" shortcuts where policymakers respond to inevitable uncertainty and "irrational" ones where gut feeling, prejudices and values frame how evidence feeds into decision-making. This framework helpfully positions evidence as one component of a system where values play a key role, rather than something that sits outside.

Building on these insights about how evidence fits into the policymaking system, it is clear that a key part it can play is through assisting rapid front-line feedback on policy innovation. If, as argued above, front-line innovation is to be a primary source of policy improvement then it needs to be rooted in empirical fact. Quick evidence on whether a small change is working may well be more use for policy improvement than a five-year study into a large set of macro system changes. There is enormous scope in lots of public services for improving the way data is used to inform front-line practice. Evidence-based policymaking becomes less of a story about whether government ministers use the outputs of major scientific studies, and more about whether practitioners in schools, hospitals or police stations can access and use immediate practical evidence about the impact of what they are doing and learn from each other as they do so. Such "learning as you go" practice, one strand within the approach known as improvement science (Cairney and Oliver, 2017), can be a pragmatic response for the need to integrate evidence with the way values drive decision-making.

If front-line innovation is to be a primary source of policy improvement then it needs to be rooted in empirical fact

In addition, we can see that evidence plays another role once we start from a values-based perspective on policy. The assertion that evidence is important is not values-free. It comes with cultural baggage, such as deference to particular standards of practice and the professional groups that embody them. As became clear in the UK's Brexit referendum and the debate on the role of "experts", what counts as evidence and whether it is important is a political issue. This is where culture and values come back in. If evidence is provided by a professional class whose cultural position seems alien, people will be less likely to take it seriously. Thus it is necessary to be careful about calling for greater use of evidence when debating policy choice. Such a call acts as a way of signalling where someone stands in terms of values (the values embodied by the professionals who determine what counts as "evidence") rather than being a neutral statement. In fact it is in part the claim of "experts" to embody objective neutrality that alienates people who start from a culturally different perspective. Commitment to culture and values is always likely to be deeper than commitment to any standards of evidence. So we should not be surprised if people reject research that seems to undermine a position that reflects their values, and see a plea to "look at the evidence" as a faintly-disguised plea to "change something you fundamentally believe in to fit what a (culturally alien) expert would like".

Overall then, data and evidence do have a hugely important role to play, especially in enabling real improvement in policy delivery. But there needs to be a culture in place that allows that to happen, and it is unrealistic for most political choices to be driven by evidence (for example, rigorous academic evidence, rather than anecdote or personal experience) given the way it slots into pre-existing values and the culturally loaded nature of the very principle of appealing to evidence.

Foreign policy

The role of culture and values in thinking about international relations is far too large a topic to do justice to in this paper. There is clearly a different set of actors and the relationship between decision-makers and real-world outcomes has a different (and if anything even more complicated) dynamic. Culture and values are not only relevant in respect of the "home" country but also the countries which it is seeking to influence or co-operate with. Without doing justice to this full range of dimensions, there is one aspect of the argument above that is particularly important for foreign policy: the view that symbolic action is a valid policy tool. This view is possibly more mainstream in foreign policy discourse: in a system of relationships, indirect power and soft levers actions taken for a symbolic purpose have a natural fit. So it may be that foreign policy experts already have a better handle on what makes something intended for symbolic purposes effective, and if so their domestic policy counterparts need to learn from them.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that understanding public policy requires an appreciation of the role of culture and values. The attention given to them seems too low given their central role, and when compared to other tools and approaches to policymaking. The political and policy processes would benefit from recognition that culture and values are at their heart. Understanding that values drive the way in which citizens hear what politicians say, what the purpose of policy decisions is and what actually happens as a result has implications for how policy actors behave. Stories, symbols, assumptions and prejudices drive governments at least as much as economics, science, options appraisals and strategies. Pushing against this by arguing for a more rationalist model is in itself based on a value-judgement and probably doomed to failure. Being honest about the importance of these softer factors, and then applying our rigour and ingenuity to working with it, is a better way forward.

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