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Viewpoint Article

Balancing Trade-Offs between Policy Responsiveness and Effectiveness: The Impact of Vertical Policy-Process Integration on Policy Accumulation

Abstract: *In modern democracies, policy stocks pile up over time. In many ways policy accumulation reflects societal modernization and progress. However, if policy accumulation is not matched by corresponding expansions in administrative capacities necessary for policy implementation, a negative trade-off between responsiveness and policy effectiveness evolves. We argue that aligning policy formulation and implementation activities through vertical policy-process integration (VPI) may curb policy accumulation towards a more sustainable level. Our conceptualization of VPI builds upon the distinction of two dimensions: (1) bottom-up integration affecting policy design and improving policies' effectiveness and (2) top-down integration concerning the allocation of implementation costs and, hence, constraining responsiveness incentives. It is the central aim of this viewpoint to raise awareness about the importance of VPI as a potential way out of the responsiveness trap that threatens modern democracies.*

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Evidence for Practice

- Administrators have to deal with ever-more implementation tasks induced by policy accumulation. This bears the risk of systematic implementation deficits and thus ineffective policies.
- From this perspective, it is highly important to identify and develop mechanisms that allow for sustaining the process of policy accumulation. We argue that this can be achieved by the integration of policy formulators into the implementation process as well as by involving policy implementers in policy-making.
- The concept proposed in this paper can serve decision-makers as a yardstick to determine the degree of vertical integration among policy formulators and implementers and to identify areas for future improvement and organizational reform.

Introduction

It is a major asset of democratic governments that they are responsive to societal demands. Citizens and interest groups claim cleaner environments, better social protection and education, more transparency, or more individual freedoms. Governments typically respond to these demands by adopting new policy outputs, in the form of laws, regulations, or programs. As established policies are terminated only rarely (Bardach 1976), policy outputs pile up over time. Policy accumulation hence constitutes a central, yet largely unexplored feature of modern democracies.

In many ways, policy accumulation reflects societal modernization and progress. Most citizens are happy not to live in a country that still trusts in the social policies of the 1870s, or the environmental policies of the 1950s. Yet, merely adopting new policies reflects nothing but symbolic politics if these measures are not effective in addressing the problems for which they were designed. There are potential trade-offs between

policy responsiveness and policy effectiveness. The more governments respond to societal demands via policy accumulation, the more they might overburden implementation bodies with ever-more and increasingly complex policies (Limberg et al. 2020). This, in turn, has the potential to undermine the long-term support for governmental intervention (Keiser and Miller 2020).

Theoretically, there are three ways to escape from this “responsiveness trap” (Adam et al. 2019). First, citizens can reduce their expectations vis-à-vis the government. Yet, this is an unlikely scenario. Public opinion data suggest that citizens have a rather “schizophrenic” view on the government (ibid., 2019: 35). While people are generally critical of governmental intervention, they tend to be quite demanding when it comes to solving concrete policy problems such as healthcare, the provision of decent housing, or the imposition of strict environmental legislation. Second, governments might avoid the responsiveness trap by expanding administrative

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capacities along with growing implementation burdens emerging from policy accumulation. Unfortunately, also this option is hardly realistic. Most governments face fundamental fiscal and ideological constraints for public sector expansions in times of globalized financial markets, austerity, and still reverberating ideas of New Public Management (Lobao et al. 2018). The remaining third option is that governments manage to keep policy accumulation at a sustainable level. Sustainable accumulation means that governments respond responsibly to the constant demand for new policies. In concrete terms, this implies that policy growth rates are kept as low as possible while at the same time existing implementation capacities are allocated as efficiently and purposefully as possible.

Achieving this objective and avoiding excessive accumulation is anything but easy. The central challenge is that, in many instances, there is a division of labor between the sectoral bureaucracies in charge of policy formulation and those in charge of policy implementation. On the one hand, there are bureaucracies—typically at the ministerial level—that are responsible for drafting new policies in response to political or societal demands. It is in the very interest of these bureaucracies to expand their competences and strengthen their institutional status by constantly producing new policy proposals. On the other hand, and in contrast to the ministerial level where policies are off the table, once they are adopted, the burden to implement these policies accumulates at the “street level,” i.e., at the desks of people working in implementing bodies and executive agencies.

We argue that structural capacities for integrating the processes of policy production and implementation play a decisive role for bridging the gap between responsive and effective policy-making. These patterns of vertical policy-process integration (VPI) might vary not only across countries but also across policy sectors. There are two dimensions of institutionalized feedback and exchange through which VPI might contribute to avoid excessive policy accumulation. The first dimension—*bottom-up integration*—captures the volume of the “voice” that implementation bodies have in policy formulation, in particular with regard to their experience with design flaws of existing policies. This way, VPI reduces the risk that ever-new policies are needed to compensate for the deficits of the policies already in place. The second dimension—*top-down integration*—refers to the extent to which the implementation costs are internalized in the process of policy formulation. To what extent do bureaucracies that produce policies also have to bear the cost for implementing these measures? In short: Well-integrated bureaucracies should not only produce fewer policies but also need fewer new policies than administrations that lack effective VPI.

How Policy Accumulation Undermines Policy Effectiveness

In the comparative public policy and public administration literature, the phenomenon of policy accumulation appeared on the analytical radar only recently. The dominant focus of research has been on describing and explaining instances of individual policy change and implementation (Knill and Tosun 2020). Despite this general assessment, there is broad scholarly agreement that policy stocks in modern democracies are continuously growing, regardless of the policy area or country under study. There are a number of publications pointing to the prevalence of accumulation patterns, emphasizing

widespread and densely populated “policyscapes” (Mettler 2016), as well as layered and increasingly complex mixes of policy instruments and targets (Thelen 2004). In short, policy accumulation is an undisputed phenomenon. It occurs whenever the rate of policy production exceeds the rate of policy termination (Adam et al. 2019).

The negative consequences of accumulation for the effectiveness of public policies are also undisputed. On the one hand, policy accumulation inevitably creates complex policy mixes, challenging the coherence and consistency of the policy measures taken (Howlett and Rayner 2007). On the other hand, policy accumulation directly translates into increased implementation burdens. Policy accumulation should hence—in principle—come along with the simultaneous expansion of administrative capacities in terms of additional infrastructure, budget, and personnel. Otherwise, new policies are likely to be implemented only deficiently, or their (proper) implementation might create negative trade-offs for the implementation of already existing ones (Tummers et al. 2015).

While the problems emerging from policy accumulation are well acknowledged, we lack concepts and theories that help us to understand how democracies could strike a sustainable balance between policy responsiveness and policy effectiveness. Apart from vague recommendations to craft and adopt “carefully designed governance arrangements” on a case-by-case basis (Howlett and Rayner 2007), it is striking that there has been only limited academic interest in addressing the factors that allow government to forge a more sustainable path towards policy-making. To address this research gap, we focus on the systemic features of political systems, i.e., the structural preconditions that ensure or inhibit effective integration of processes of policy formulation and implementation.

Bridging the Gap between Policy-Formulating and Policy-Implementing Bureaucracies

We argue that, in order to understand and, if necessary, reduce the level of policy accumulation, attention needs to be paid to arrangements that shape the interactions between administrative bodies responsible for policy formulation (mainly ministerial bureaucracies) and those in charge of policy implementation (mainly administrative authorities and agencies) at different institutional levels. We refer to these arrangements as vertical policy-process integration (VPI). While the idea of VPI is not entirely new and has been emphasized as a precondition to ensure policy effectiveness (Trein and Maggetti 2020), we still lack a conceptual specification of how VPI can be assessed empirically.

In response to this problem we suggest two VPI dimensions to capture the extent to which governments can avoid excessive policy accumulation. The bottom-up dimension of VPI refers to the implementation level’s influence on policy design. The top-down dimension of VPI captures the extent to which bureaucracies involved in policy formulation also have to carry the costs of implementing these policies (see figure 1).

Policy Design and Bottom-Up Integration

There are numerous reasons why policies might fail and not achieve their intended results. Policies might suffer from design flaws such as overly ambiguous policy objectives (Pressman and Wildavsky 1984), faulty assessments of the nature of the policy problem at hand

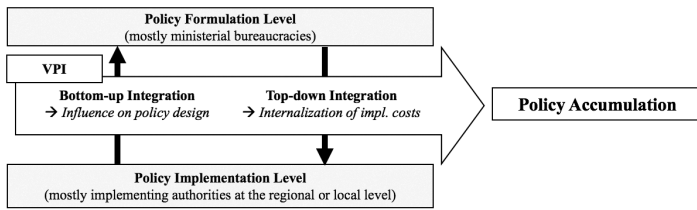


Figure 1 Theoretical Considerations on VPI and Policy Accumulation

(Linder and Peters 1987), or wrong assumptions about means–ends relationships (Schneider and Ingram 1997). Moreover, governments might not possess the capacities required by a given policy instrument (Howlett and Ramesh 2016). While all these design flaws are created during the policy formulation process, they can only be identified at the implementation stage, i.e., by implementing bodies who encounter in their daily work that there are discrepancies between the policies’ intentions and the actual situation.

Effective policy design hence depends on the flow of information from the bottom (the administrative authorities and agencies in charge of implementation) to the top (governmental bureaucracies responsible for policy formulation). Yet, what sounds obvious in the first place is a demanding endeavor in the context of highly differentiated administrative systems. We argue that there are in particular three aspects determining the implementation level’s capacity to effectively participate in the policy-making process. These are (1) articulation, (2) consultation, and (3) evaluation.

First, *articulation* refers to the extent to which the different agencies in charge of implementation of sectoral policies are able to develop clear and coherent positions on their preferred policy design options and their evaluation of previous policies (Elmore 1978). Articulation presumes a minimum level of organizational integration across different implementation bodies, for instance, the existence of associations of local or regional authorities that represent the interests of lower levels of government in central policy-making. Second, for effective bottom-up integration it is essential not only that the implementing level speaks with one voice, but also that this voice is heard, i.e., actually integrated into the policy formulation process. The extent to which this is the case depends on the development of *consultation* procedures in which implementation bodies can present their concerns and positions to the bureaucracies in charge of designing new policy proposals. Third, the chance for learning from implementers’ policy experience further increases if policy design is based on both *ex ante* and *ex post* policy *evaluation*. Yet, while systematic policy evaluation has gained prominence over the last decades, the extent of its application varies considerably across countries (Head 2016).

Implementation Burdens and Top-Down Integration

Policy outputs do not make a difference per se. To effectively change and shape the behavior of target groups, policies also need to be adequately applied in practice. Thus, any policy comes along with considerable burdens for implementation. Administrative bodies and procedures must be set up for delivering services or for controlling and sanctioning policy compliance. Moreover, implementation bodies must be equipped with the necessary financial and personnel resources to pursue their (new) tasks.

Given that policy formulation and implementation are often located at different levels and places of government, there is a general risk that costs and benefits of new policies are “decoupled”: Whilst the level in charge of policy formulation may benefit from demonstrating responsiveness to societal demands, the burden for applying and enforcing these new measures accumulates at the implementation level. In such constellations, the bureaucracies responsible for policy formulation face few limitations to constantly produce new policies. Yet, in political reality, free lunches are usually rare. To what extent though does the formulation level also have to bear the costs of implementation to enable implementation bodies to deal with accumulating administrative burdens? These costs can be captured by three aspects: (1) formal accountability, (2) administrative resources, and (3) organization.

First, the bodies in charge of policy formulation might be *formally accountable* for the activities of implementation bodies and thus have to carry the costs of legal oversight. In addition to merely checking whether implementation bodies comply with the law, control might also entail technical–administrative supervision, i.e., control of the appropriateness of organizational arrangements at the implementation level. Second, implementation comes along with *administrative* and *policy costs*. Direct costs of policies, e.g., the costs of child benefits, must be accounted for; implementers must be trained, employed, and equipped. If the bureaucracies in charge of policy formulation have to bear such costs, they have lower incentives to constantly produce new policies, as resources are limited. A third form of implementation costs refers to the efforts involved in the *organization* of implementation structures. Which bodies should be in charge of implementation? Is it advisable to delegate the implementation task to several agencies? While these aspects constitute (at best) “second-order” issues in the public debate, they are crucial for ensuring the proper functioning of public policies (Steinebach 2019). In general, top-down integration is more pronounced when the costs of organizing implementation structures rest with the level in charge of policy formulation.

The Impact of VPI on Policy Accumulation: Four Ideal-Type Scenarios

In the previous sections, we distinguished between two dimensions of VPI: bottom-up and top-down integration. The bottom-up dimension is expected to slow down policy accumulation through the production of better policies. Better policy design means less need for ever-new measures to correct design errors of existing policies. The top-down dimension, in turn, captures the extent to which policy producers have to bear the costs of policy implementation, hence slowing down policy accumulation via the “cost brake.” Depending on the extent to which VPI on these two dimensions is pronounced we can identify four ideal-type patterns (see table 1).

Table 1 Types of VPI and Expected Levels of Policy Accumulation

		Top-down integration	
		Low	High
Bottom-up integration	Low	Scenario 1 <i>Rampant policy accumulation</i>	Scenario 3 <i>Insidious policy accumulation</i>
	High	Scenario 3 <i>Insidious policy accumulation</i>	Scenario 2 <i>Sustainable policy accumulation</i>

In *scenario 1*, the overall level of VPI is low. The policy formulation level can easily “afford” to be (over)responsive to political and societal demands as implementation costs are not internalized in the process of policy formulation; i.e., policy formulation bodies have a rather free lunch with regard to the implementation costs of the policies they produce. At the same time, lacking bottom-up integration means that policy design does not benefit from experience and feedback gained at the implementation level. This increases the probability that policy design is (largely) ineffective. Accordingly, ever-more policies might be needed to correct for the flaws of existing ones. The combination of low design quality and low internalization of implementation costs is likely to result in *rampant* policy accumulation that quickly exceeds the available administrative capacities.

Scenario 2, by contrast, constitutes the exactly opposite scenario. Strong top-down integration implies that the bureaucracies in charge of policy formulation have to bear the costs of implementing these policies. This poses severe constraints on swift policy adoptions. Moreover, bottom-up integration will positively affect overall policy design quality. Both aspects contribute to keeping policy accumulation at a *sustainable* level. Here, it is most likely that the administrative resources can keep up with the level of policy accumulation.

Scenario 3 can be located between these two extremes: Here, we only find integration along one of the two dimensions, i.e. either from the top to the bottom, or vice versa. In these constellations, we expect a less drastic form of policy accumulation compared with situations in which VPI is completely absent. Yet, given that only one of the two “brakes” on policy accumulation applies, there is an *insidious* danger that policy accumulation and administrative capacities for implementation could steadily lose balance. While we thus expect more or less the same outcome when either top-down or bottom-up integration is missing, the problem diagnosis differs between the two constellations. In the lower-left cell, sustainable policy accumulation is best achieved by the internalization of implementation costs in policy formulation. In the upper-right cell, by contrast, decision-makers should look for a way to provide a stronger “voice” for the implementers in the policy-formulation process.

Outlook: Implementing VPI

We have presented VPI as a potential way out of the responsiveness trap that threatens modern democracies. But how can the necessary reforms be best achieved in practice? Molenveld et al. (2020) highlight that policy implementers principally perceive top-down mechanisms as ineffective to achieve successful coordination. Rather, they ask for adaptive arrangements and deliberative processes. Thus, a first step in the right direction seems to look for informal ways and venues that include the policy-implementing level more strongly in the process of policy formulation. Moreover, any improvement of VPI along these lines requires that practitioners—at all levels of government—are fully aware of the negative consequences associated with deficient VPI. It was the central objective of this viewpoint article to raise this awareness.

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