









# Unboxing the vague notion of policy goals: Comparison of Croatian public policies

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## Abstract

This study aims at empirically improving public policy theory by unfolding the concept of policy goals and contributing to their classifications. The research focuses on the thematic dimension of policy goals and investigates 11 Croatian governmental strategies using qualitative content analysis. The research identifies original policy goal types and classifies them into sector-, process-, evaluation-, instrument-, and value-oriented goals. Article concludes with a more comprehensive definition of policy goals, as governmental statements about desired futures in relation to specific sectoral purposes, values, and principles in democratic political systems, policymaking process improvements, necessary instrumental innovations, and evaluation standards that should be fulfilled. The application of this definition and developed goals' classification reveals that elements of policy-process theories, evaluation research, policy design theory and instrument analysis, democracy theory, and sector-specific research need to be synthesized to better understand the concept of policy goals and to advance their research.

## KEYWORDS

comparative public policy, cross-sectoral comparison, qualitative content analysis, policy design, policy goals

## Resumen

Este estudio tiene como objetivo mejorar empíricamente la teoría de las políticas públicas mediante el desarrollo del concepto de objetivos políticos y la contribución a sus clasificaciones. La investigación se centra en la dimensión temática de los objetivos políticos e investiga 11 estrategias gubernamentales croatas utilizando análisis de contenido cualitativo. La investigación identifica tipos de objetivos de política originales y los clasifica en objetivos orientados a sectores, procesos, evaluaciones, instrumentos y valores. El artículo concluye con una definición más completa de los objetivos de las políticas, como declaraciones gubernamentales sobre futuros deseados en relación con propósitos, valores y principios sectoriales específicos en los sistemas políticos democráticos, mejoras en el proceso de formulación de políticas, innovaciones instrumentales necesarias y estándares de evaluación que deben cumplirse. La aplicación de esta definición y la clasificación de los objetivos desarrollados revela que los elementos de las teorías del proceso de políticas, la investigación de evaluación, la teoría del diseño de políticas y el análisis de instrumentos, la teoría de la democracia y la investigación de sectores específicos deben sintetizarse para comprender mejor el concepto de objetivos de políticas y para avanzar en su investigación.

## Palabras clave

política pública comparada, comparación intersectorial, análisis de contenido cualitativo, diseño de políticas, objetivos de políticas

## 摘要

本研究旨在通过分析政策目标的概念并对其分类作贡献，进而从实证上完善公共政策理论。本研究聚焦政策主题维度，并通过定性内容分析，调查11个克罗地亚政府策略。研究识别了原始政策目标类型，并将其归类为以部门、过程、评价、工具、以及价值为导向的目标。文章的结论对政策目标进行了更全面的定义，包括政府就与特定部门目的有关的未来所作的声明、民主政治系统中的价值和原则、决策过程的改进、必要的工具性创新、以及应实现的评价标准。

对这一定义和所提出的目标分类加以应用，揭示了：需要对政策过程理论、评价研究、政策设计理论和工具分析、民主理论、以及特定部门研究的各要素进行整合，以期更好地理解政策目标的概念，并促进相关研究。

## 关键词

比较公共政策, 跨部门比较, 定性内容分析, 政策设计, 政策目标

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Policy goals are statements that declare what governments intend to do (Birkland, 2015; Dunn, 1994; Hogwood & Gunn, 1984; Howlett, 2011; Schneider, 2013). As the formal manifestations of a desirable future, they are the basic component of any public policy (Althaus et al., 2007; Anderson, 2006; Colebatch, 2004; Hill, 2010; Howlett & Cashore, 2014; Stone, 1997; Wildavsky, 1992). Because they vary greatly across different policy areas and are grounded in a wide variety of principles, solid classifications of policy goals as well as their forms and dimensions virtually do not exist in empirical policy research. Additionally, explications of diverse characteristics of policy goals in the literature are poorly related to real-world policy cases. Still, policy goals act as the fundamental guidelines for policymaking. They justify all governmental action through policymaking, and their empirical relevance is unquestionable. Therefore, it seems warranted to enhance the theoretical understanding of policy goals and to engage in thorough empirical investigation of their nature and diversity. A systematic empirical analysis of policy goals and their features can offer valuable insights into the phenomenon of policymaking. Theoretical refinement of the concept of policy goals can provide fruitful ground for the comparisons of diverse policy sectors or regions and countries. Furthermore, upgraded classifications of types of goals, especially when associated with well-developed instruments' classifications, can help produce diverse models of policy design to enrich empirical policy theory.

As our literature review shows in detail, it seems that policy theory<sup>1</sup> has a hard time with policy goals: Instead of developing precise concepts and operationalizing them in empirical research, it takes goals as self-evident while providing only rudimentary definitions. In this study, we thus strive to address this research gap by enhancing the definitions and classifications of policy goals based on empirical analysis. The research is focused on the substantive dimension of policy goals. Accordingly, even though we shortly review the difference between diverse neologisms of policy goals (as ends, objectives, values, targets, etc.) that represent the dimension of goals' forms to show theoretical inconsistencies, we do not aim at clarifying those neologisms by empirical analysis. Instead of focusing on the forms in which goals appear, we investigate their thematic dimension with the aim of characterizing and systematizing the topics and issues they encompass, as the least explored aspect of policy goals. The thematic dimension of policy goals is thoroughly investigated through a cross-sectoral comparison of policy documents adopted in one country. We explore a European country, namely 11 Croatian governmental strategies, which are analyzed with the application of qualitative content analysis (QCA), as set by Margrit Schreier (2012). As the policy literature provides only limited input on the topic, the purpose of this study is descriptive—to categorize policy goals by their content. Specifically, we want to find out to what degree policy goals vary thematically.

To better capture goals' content diversity, we attempted to ensure representation of all major policy areas in the sampling of governmental strategies (Compston, 2004). Furthermore, our sample included multisectoral policies targeted at specific social groups that contain topics related to several policy sectors (Fink-Hafner, 2007). We also included strategies devoted to specific policy issues. For the purpose of processing and analyzing policy goals, we developed an original coding scheme that classifies policy goals into sector-, process-, evaluation-, instrument-, and value-oriented goals, which represent, on a more general level, five main categories by which goals can vary on their content dimension. The subcategory level of our coding scheme is probably more context-dependent and specific to Croatia and selected sample. However, main categories of our coding scheme are not merely descriptive codes but wide-ranging, transposable, and connected to policy theory and could thus stimulate further research, especially within comparative designs and application to other countries. Therefore, based on the identification of types of Croatian policy goals, we reveal that elements of policy-process theories, evaluation research, policy design theory and instrument analysis, democratic theory, and sector-specific research should be synthesized both to better understand policy goals and to advance their research.

Article proceeds with literature review, showing how policy theory treats the concept of policy goals and what shortcomings in defining and classifying policy goals are present in the literature. Methodological framework that explains the application of the qualitative content analysis follows (more details on methodological conduct are available in the Appendix S1). Result and Discussion section summarize main findings, propose a novel definition of policy goals, and stress its relevance. Our research on the thematic aspect of policy goals revealed that they should be more comprehensively defined as governmental statements about desired futures in relation to specific sectoral purposes, to values and principles in democratic political systems, to needful policymaking process improvements, to necessary instrumental innovations, and to evaluation standards that should be fulfilled.

## 2 | POLICY GOALS IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

The policy literature considers public policy to be a value-based game, defined as “a purposive action backed by the coercive powers of the state” (Smith & Larimer, 2013, p. 230). Goals that connect social values and purposive collective action are thus a fundamental feature of any public policy. Policy sciences pioneer Harold Lasswell “also defined public policies as government decisions but noted that they were composed of two interrelated elements: *policy goals* and *policy means* operating at different levels of abstraction” (Howlett, 2011, p. 15–16). Since then, the dominant paradigm in the policy literature is that policy is a systematic pursuit of goals (Colebatch, 2004, p. 47). The concept of goal is “the central tenet of modern policy analysis,” while policy is “the rational attempt to attain objectives” (Stone, 1997, p. 37). As policies are made to attain goals or at least come close to meeting them (Birkland, 2015, p. 232), “every policy is fashioned of tension between resources and objectives” (Wildavsky, 1992, p. 17).

The concept of policy is therefore associated with goal-instrumental or intended rationality inherent in objectives (Wildavsky, 1992, p. 10, Colebatch, 2004, pp. 53–55, Hill, 2010, p. 18, Smith & Larimer, 2013, pp. 47–48). This is a basic assumption in most of the policy literature (Colebatch, 2004, p. 62), which holds “that anything meriting the title of policy must contain some element of purposiveness” (Hogwood & Gunn, 1984, p. 14). Jenkins offers one of the most widespread definitions of public policy, which he sees as a set of governmental decisions on the choice of policy instruments and goals (e.g., see Howlett et al., 2009, p. 6, Hill, 2010, p. 15, Howlett & Cashore, 2014, pp. 19–20). Another

common definition provided by Anderson states that policy is a purposive course of action that is goal-oriented (Hogwood & Gunn, 1984, p. 22, Anderson, 2006, pp. 6–7, Kraft & Furlong, 2007, p. 4, Smith & Larimer, 2013, pp. 3–4), inasmuch as “policy is ultimately about achieving objectives” (Althaus et al., 2007, p. 8).

With policymaking defined as applied problem-solving in the process of matching policy goals to policy means (Howlett et al., 2009, p. 4), it is no wonder that goals are a central component of many policy theories and applied policy analysis. The notion of goals is a starting point in the standard conceptualization of policymaking processes within the stages cycle model. Goal definition corresponds to the initial phase of the policy cycle (Colebatch, 2004, p. 50), either being subsumed under agenda setting or forming a stand-alone step of setting objectives and priorities at the beginning of the process (Hogwood & Gunn, 1984, p. 4, 8–9). Additionally, refinement of policy goals is present in all phases of the policy cycle (e.g., see Hogwood & Gunn, 1984, p. 150).

Policy analysis also focuses on policy goals. Applied research for the purpose of providing advice to decision makers, before or after the decision, traditionally starts with policy goals research. For example, goals are the central research theme in impact analyses and in program, process, and outcome evaluations (Smith & Larimer, 2013). The analysis usually starts by describing goals and continues with examining whether goals are clearly articulated and communicated, realistic and socially desirable, and to what extent they are attained (Smith & Larimer, 2013, p. 132). Goal achievement, goal attainment, or effectiveness assessment is the most used form of policy evaluation (Vedung, 2013). Goals are a constitutive part of the evaluation criteria of effectiveness (Kustec Lipicer, 2012, pp. 137–138). In analyzing policy options as part of classical cost–benefit analyses or in cost–effectiveness analyses prior to decision making, goals are also an unavoidable unit of analysis: “If they cannot be identified easily, then the cost–benefit analysis will be difficult, and perhaps even impossible, to perform and justify” (Bickers & Williams, 2001, p. 204; see also Hogwood & Gunn, 1984, p. 187; Spicker, 2008, pp. 129–132). What all these models have in common is that they hold a normative assumption by which goals are considered crucial to policy success (e.g., see Althaus et al., 2007, p. 9).

Theories developed within policy studies often posit policy goals as the crucial variable of policy research. This works both for classical, rational decision making models (e.g., see Allison & Zelikow, 1999) and for policy design theory, which “is perhaps best understood as the politics of defining goals” (Smith & Larimer, 2013, p. 193). Policy studies dedicated to the examination of the substantive content of policy from the policy design perspective view goals as the fundamental element of any sector (Howlett, 2011, pp. 19–22; Schneider, 2013, p. 223; Smith & Larimer, 2013, pp. 171–195; Birkland, 2015, pp. 228–262). Further, the “top-down” approach to policy implementation affirms the centrality of goals and is concerned with determining whether policymakers’ proclaimed goals are being realized (Hill, 2010, pp. 188–190). Likewise, the Advocacy Coalition Framework claims that policy actors are motivated by their belief systems, whereas the policy-core level of those beliefs contains general goals (Weible & Smith-Jenkins, 2016, p. 20). To add a final example, the central element of policy networks comprises public purposes that bring the diverse official and unofficial actors together and to which these networks contribute (Sørensen & Torfing, 2007, p. 9).

This short literature review illustrates that policy goals are of central importance in policy research. However, theorization of policy goals, conceptualization of features and dimensions of goals, and their classifications are still underdeveloped. A clear and precise distinction between the concepts of goals, ends, objectives, aims, values, and targets is lacking. Sometimes related terms that refer to purposes of policymaking are used in circular definitions (goals are ends or goals are aims), which does not help in clarifying the confusions surrounding these concepts. Policy handbooks usually do not provide separate chapters or sections on goals.<sup>2</sup> Also, they often do not include goals or other

variants of the terms that define policy purposes in their subject indexes (e.g., see Althaus et al., 2007; Anderson, 2006; Birkland, 2015; Hill, 2010; Howlett et al., 2009). Many authors underline how vague, unclear, ambiguous, multiple, overlapping, contradictory, and changeable over time goals often are in practice (see e.g., Rein, 2006, pp. 390–394). Policy theory seems to have a hard time dealing with the empirical phenomenon of goals: Instead of developing precise concepts and operationalizing them in empirical research, it takes goals as self-evident and hardly puts effort into defining them.

In the available definitions, goals are usually linked to the future, desires and expectations, intentions and purposes, problems, and formal statements of ends. For example, a policy goal is defined as both a desired state and an outcome of a policy (Birkland, 2015, p. 8, 236). It is thought that “objective-setting ... is concerned with the statements of a *desired* future” (Hogwood & Gunn, 1984, p. 151). William N. Dunn regards goals and objectives as aspects of a normative future (1994, pp. 195–197). Furthermore, policy goals are seen as the expectations in the policymaking process—its purposes and reasons (Kustec Lipicer, 2012, p. 106, 110–111). Policy goals are thus “basic aims and expectations governments have in deciding to pursue (or not) some course of action” (Howlett, 2011, p. 16). They are connected to intentions as they refer “to the intentional aspects of designs and indicate what the purported consequences are desired to be” (Schneider, 2013, p. 224). “Broad purposes (or “ends”) of governmental activity in one field” (Hogwood & Gunn, 1984, p. 14) is also one of the definitions. Lasswell and Kaplan focus primarily on the term value when they contemplate on policy goals, defining how “a value is a desired event—a goal event” refereeing to “the object or situation desired” (1950, p. 16). Then, objectives are seen as the obverse of problems, because if it is problematic that something is too high, then the goal is to achieve a lower level (Bardach, 2005, pp. 34–35). Finally, goals are also defined as “the stated ends to be achieved” (Kraft & Furlong, 2007, p. 4), which are detected by asking questions on what we are trying to do (Hogwood & Gunn, 1984, p. 8) or “what ought I to prefer?” (Lasswell, 1971, p. 40).

It seems useful to think about goals as sets of ideas, ranging “from philosophical and ethical principles to specific causal logics and sociological constructs” (Howlett, 2011, p. 35), which are connected to ideologies, world views, policy paradigms, and causal stories (Howlett, 2011, pp. 35–36). The implication is that policy goals are a rather complex object of study; it is, however, still possible and useful to clarify between different dimensions, levels, and/or types of goals. Some classifications of policy goals describe goal types briefly but do not explain them in detail. Hogwood and Gunn indicate that there is a difference between goals that are transitive, externally oriented, and functional and goals that are reflexive, internally oriented, and institutional. They also distinguish social, output, systems, product, and derived goals (1984, pp. 156–157). According to another classification, goals can be explicit or implicit and can aim at eliminating a problem, at reducing a problem to a better level, or just preserving a status quo in the face of a growing problem (Birkland, 2015, p. 236, 241). Also, goals/values can be intrinsic and instrumental (Lasswell & Kaplan, 1950, p. 17). Or, quite simply, there are unobtainable and attainable objectives (Wildavsky, 1992, pp. 46–50).

The majority of relevant literature primarily tries to distinguish between different levels of policy purposes. Values and aims are usually understood as more abstract and general purposes, while goals and objectives are thought of as more precise and concrete (Hogwood & Gunn, 1984, pp. 156–157, Dunn, 1994, pp. 195–196, 261, 305–308, 330, Spicker, 2008, p. 49–65, Howlett, 2011, p. 16, Howlett & Cashore, 2014, pp. 20–22, Petek & Petković, 2014, pp. 42–43). Yet there is no consensus on the clear demarcation between different levels of abstraction. To complicate things even further, some objectives that are “lower” on the ladder of abstraction could be regarded both as an end and as a mean of a policy (Dunn, 1994, pp. 305–308, 330), as policy instruments, “techniques or means through which states attempt to attain their goals” (Howlett, 2011, p. 22).



The empirical examples and illustrations of these levels and overlapping terms are also sometimes contradictory. For example, democratic values and the well-being of everyone are set as basic goals (Kustec Lipicer, 2012, p. 27). Deborah Stone highlights equity, efficiency, security, and liberty as goals, but maintains that they are often called values and that they also serve as fundamental justifications for policies and governmental action, and as criteria in policy evaluations (1997, pp. 37–130; see also Birkland, 2015, pp. 232–236). Dunn, when defining goals as broadly stated purposes of policymaking, asserts that “security, welfare, and justice are goals” (1994, p. 261). Spicker’s examples of values include health, welfare, and social justice, but also general democratic principles of beneficence, citizenship, procedure, and accountability (2008, pp. 54–55). Rein enumerates four basic values: safety, equality, freedom, and prosperity, understanding them as policy ends that do not need further justification (2006, pp. 390–391). Maybe most important case of listing examples of values is Lasswell’s emphasis on enlightenment, wealth, well-being, power, skill, affection, respect, and rectitude (Lasswell, 1971, p. 22), as base and/or scope values associated with a goal of “the dignity of the human personality” (Lasswell et al., 2003, p. 73).<sup>3</sup> Combining the levels of policy goals and their content dimension adds to the confusion on how policy goals vary. More importantly, there is no attempt in the policy literature to offer any kind of robust empirical classification of the content dimension of policy goals.

In other words, conceptualization of policy goals and their dimensions is a research gap that needs to be addressed. There are many challenges and limitations in that endeavor. First, academic researchers should be skeptical about publicly proclaimed goals presented in governmental documents or in public officials’ speeches (Hill, 2010, p. 270). Namely, declared goals and actual goals can and in fact often do diverge (Hogwood & Gunn, 1984, pp. 155–156). Second, we often observe discrepancies between officially proclaimed goals of the policy subsystems and of specific actors within that subsystem (Colebatch, 2004). Third, it is debatable to what extent collective goals can even be detected at the beginning of the policymaking process, as they become evident only as the outcome of the interactions (Hogwood & Gunn, 1984). Finally, a strong focus on clearly conceptualized goals is arguably part of the rationalistic mind-set of public policy. The field of policy research today, particularly from a post-positivist and interpretative perspective, has developed many persuasive arguments about policymaking that diminish the importance of goal-oriented rationality. Over-rationalization of fuzzy and ambivalent processes of goal definitions and negotiations in policymaking, the argument goes, is not accepted as a universal normative ideal, neither in policy practice nor in the academic world.

However, we argue that policy goals still constitute the central element of public policies and policymaking processes, regardless of the research approach. They are the normative aspect of policy (Colebatch, 2004, p. 59). Policy goals give a sense of purpose to organizations and sectors (Hogwood & Gunn, 1984, p. 157) and create a base for collective action to a diversity of policy actors (Colebatch, 2004, p. 8). Perceiving policy as goal-oriented activity better justifies than explains behavior (Colebatch, 2004, p. 57). By providing justifications, policy goals legitimize political action and pave the way for greater accountability of political elites and other actors, which represents an important democratic facet of public-sector goals (Vedung, 2013, p. 389).

Considering the normative and empirical importance of goals, the sketched problems in conceptualization of policy goals and existing research gaps, as well as the profound challenges and limitations in addressing them, with this study we adopt an empirical bottom-up approach. Almost century old policy sciences that started with diverse profound concepts of Harold Lasswell, including those referring to scope values, that is goals or ends, still struggle with precise conceptualization and operationalization of policy goals. It was rightly noted that Lasswell’s “dependence on readily available examples or analogies rather on meticulous research have made his work suggestive but hardly evidential”

(Eulau, 1958, p. 241). We instead provide a more empirically grounded and precise data-driven picture of a European country as firm ground for future research that is, hopefully, marked with finer detail, and referring to the actual values proclaimed in the policy process.

Our idea is to systematically examine policy goals in diverse sectors within a single polity to disclose what insights on goals real-world documents can provide. By comparing different policies and their formal goals, we want to dig deeper into variations of goals present in practice. To help in developing a more clear-cut understanding of how policy goals vary, we try to approach the issue from another angle. Instead of developing precise distinctions among values, aims, goals, and objectives, we focus on the thematic dimension of policy goals as the arguably least systematized aspect of research. We do this in the hope that it will bring some inspiration on how to enhance policy theory on policy goals in the future and to stimulate further systematic empirical research on this issue. As a next step, classifications of the content dimension of policy goals should be linked to their respective levels, and then to other elements of the policy design, especially to policy instruments.

### 3 | METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The analysis of policy goals is conducted through coding strategic documents of the Croatian government by means of a qualitative content analysis. QCA is designed for describing different dimensions of the phenomenon under study. As a descriptively oriented analytical strategy, it features the development of original classifications of a huge amount of textual data into main categories and explains their meanings. It is systematic and consistent, flexible to diverse data sources, and enables the reduction of multidimensional data into several important aspects (Schreier, 2012). Hence, it is well suited to address our descriptive aim and research question on how thematic aspects of policy goals vary.

Despite a potential mismatch between formally proclaimed and actual goals, governmental strategies are recognized as a convenient data source for initial research efforts on policy goals' topics. They represent an easily accessible and inexpensive data source that offers comprehensive and reliable insights into specific policy sectors. Therefore, the analysis was based on document selection as the data-collecting method (Bowen, 2009; Esmark & Triantafillou, 2007).

As we seek an in-depth, thorough, and comprehensive examination of goals' thematic diversities, the research design is based on a cross-sectoral comparison within a single European country.<sup>4</sup> Croatia provides a good case for investigating the diversity of goals, as the Croatian government produces numerous strategic documents that are quite often a result of policy transfer and Europeanization. Additionally, Croatian strategies and policy goals have not previously been subjected to any systematic comparative analysis. Finally, the focus on Croatian strategies was chosen also due to the natural selective bias, as the research team is well acquainted with the policymaking context and language nuances of Croatian documents. The empirical investigation was performed by a team of eight scholars, specialized in different public policies.<sup>5</sup>

Documents that were analyzed were sampled using four criteria. First, we collected documents produced by state actors—the Parliament, cabinet government, or ministries, assuming that the landscape of official policy goals will be best represented by documents adopted at the national level. Second, we focused exclusively on strategic documents, including national strategies, programs, and guidelines. These types of documents are explicitly devoted to setting goals, in contrast to laws, orders, or other types of legislation. Third, we sampled the most recent document. This means that at the time of the empirical investigation, selected documents should have still been in the stage of



implementation. Two recently expired strategic documents, which were still not replaced with newer versions, were partial exceptions. The fourth criterion of document selection relates to the content of the document and to the issue of policy sampling.

To determine what policies to select to make the research sample as diverse as possible, policy taxonomies were used as a guiding tool. The simplest policy taxonomy is the nominal classification dividing them into sectors formed by specific activity or by specific target group (Fink-Hafner, 2007). Policies formed around sets of connected activities, that make a meaningful whole, as for example health or agriculture policy, are “traditional sectors.” Those are usually represented by governmental ministries and constitute classical subsystems of actors in any country. Most comprehensive taxonomy of all fundamental national public policies represented in the governmental ministries is the one that divides them onto five policy areas: defense and foreign affairs, law and order, economic policies, sectoral policies and social policies (Compston, 2004). To have a diverse sample of standard public policies, we selected five policies, one sector from each fundamental policy area: security, justice, employment, transport, and education policy.

Policies that are formed by target groups are of a newer date. They are designated for specific identities, for specific social groups as target populations that should benefit from policymaking. Those policies are multisectoral in nature as they “cut-across” standard sectors. For example, youth policy combines issues from education, culture, employment, health policy, and other sectors. Those policies have a dual character, as they simultaneously mainstream into classical sectors and poses codified versions visible in core national strategies for a specific group. Those policies are rarely included into policy area taxonomy, as they still sporadically form distinctive ministries. As we expect that multi-sectoral policies produce most complex and most diverse goals, we added three of those policies into the sample: gender equality, disability and youth policy.

Additionally, governments quite often produce strategic documents for specific policy issues that usually do not neatly overlap with basic governmental ministries and sectors. Examples are strategies and programs for the protection of endangered species, for promoting cycling or for waste management development. While assuming that cross-listed strategic documents would also encompass a greater diversity of policy goals, we included in our sample strategies for protection from domestic violence, for reading support, and for wood processing and furniture production. Thus, we ended up with 11 strategic documents in the sample, each representing one unit of analysis, and divided into three cases or policy/strategy types (see Table 1). In total, the coding material consisted of 988 document pages, in which policies defined by activities hold 56 percent, by target group 30 percent, and

**TABLE 1** Sample of policies

By activity	By target group	By issue
1. Security (23/52 <sup>a</sup> )	6. Gender Equality (36/118)	9. Domestic Violence (53/71)
2. Justice (20/190)	7. Disability (177/562)	10. Wood (48/235)
3. Employment (41/72)	8. Youth (81/143)	11. Reading Support (43/92)
4. Transport (254/466)		
5. Education <sup>b</sup> (212/222)		
<b>Total</b>	<b>(550 pages/1,002 units)</b>	<b>(294 pages/823 units)</b>
		<b>(144 pages/398 units)</b>

<sup>a</sup> The first number in parentheses represents the number of pages for each selected strategy, and the second reflects the number of coding units within each strategy.

<sup>b</sup> The currently applicable *Strategy of Education, Science, and Technology* was selected as the document representing education policy, but the fifth section, which covers science and technology, was not included in the analysis as those policies are not part of the selected sample.

**TABLE 2** Coding scheme

1. Sector-oriented	2. Process-oriented	3. Evaluation-oriented	4. Instrument-oriented	5. Value-oriented
1.1. Accessibility	2.1. Capacity-building	3.1. Coherence and Relevance	4.1. Awareness	5.1. Democratic Legitimacy
1.2. Cohesion	2.2. Cooperation and Coordination	3.2. Efficiency and Effectiveness	4.2. Invest	5.2. Equality and Human Rights
1.3. Development	2.3. Evidence-based Policymaking	3.3. Quality	4.3. (Re)Organize	5.3. Environmental Protection
1.4. Employment	2.4. Implementation	3.4. Timing	4.4. (Re)Regulate	5.4. Justice and Rule of Law
1.5. Mobility	2.5. Strategic Planning	3.5. Sustainability		5.5. Nonviolence
1.6. National Identity				
1.7. Security				
1.8. Social Inclusion and Empowerment				
1.9. Well-being and Prevention				

by policy issue 14 percent of the total number of pages in the sample (see the list of sampled coded documents at the end).

After sampling, a more detailed reading of the whole coding material was initiated with the purpose of segmenting the data into coding units. Coding units were determined using the thematic criterion. Only parts of the texts that explain goals were extracted. This means that segmented coding units vary by size, ranging from several words to half a sentence, one sentence, or several sentences, depending on the document at hand. A crucial criterion for segmenting coding units was that one unit should contain only one goal.<sup>6</sup> All coding units were meant to answer the questions “where are we heading?” and “what are we trying to achieve?” and not “how are we trying to achieve it?” which speaks to means, not goals.<sup>7</sup> The segmentation process resulted in 2,223 coding units composed of 11 documents; of these coding units, 45 percent refer to policies defined by activity, 37 percent to policies determined by target groups, and 18 percent to issue-related strategies (see Table 1).

The coding scheme was developed based on a data-driven approach. All extracted coding units were first coded inductively, by the whole research team (each document by its specialist). For each coding unit all observed features were turned into inductive codes, to grasp as many aspects of policy goals' content as possible. A long list of inductive codes was compressed into groups of similar features to create codes and additionally to structure them into broader categories or supra-codes.<sup>8</sup> This resulted in a two-level coding scheme with five categories and 28 subcategories (see Table 2).

The main categories represent thematic dimensions of policy goals, and subcategories represent variations within each dimension, that is, individual goals. The first category is reserved for sector-oriented goals—goals that are directly associated with desired outcomes of policymaking in a specific sector, as benefits for individuals, social groups, or all citizens, and to problem-solving within specific subsystems. Sector-oriented goals are central to each policy, and the concept of policy goals primarily refers to sector-oriented goals. For these reasons, sector-oriented goals are the richest category in the coding scheme and comprise nine subcategories. However, the content of policy goals is not limited solely to the activities and issues that arise from policymaking in a specific sector. For other variants of goals, we developed additional categories with four to five subcategories.

Process-oriented goals aim at improving some features of the decision making process and the organizational aspect of some policy. Only indirectly are they intended to solve policy problems or enhance outputs and outcomes of specific sectors. Evaluation-oriented goals directly stress the importance of fulfilling some standard evaluation criteria within a specific sector. Instrument-oriented goals refer to the introduction or change of policy instruments as policy goals.<sup>9</sup> Value-oriented goals are aimed at advancing the quality of democracy in general and represent core constitutional values of liberal democracies or the fundamentals of a political system.<sup>10</sup> This set of goals is connected to the broad impacts of policymaking that cut across policy sectors and target the systemic level.

Coding was done on the subcategory level, meaning that units were first coded as the subcategory and then automatically assigned to the main category encompassing that subcategory. A basic coding rule within QCA is that a coding unit can be assigned only once with one main category and related subcategories. This means that a single coding unit could be coded minimally once and maximally five times within the developed coding scheme. This basically means that, for example, only one sector-oriented or one process-oriented goal could be present in a single coding unit.<sup>11</sup> Test coding was conducted in two waves. The second test coding was conducted on a subsample of 15 percent of all coding units, and it resulted in a coefficient of agreement of 79 percent and kappa coefficient of 77 percent.<sup>12</sup> This was determined to be a satisfactory level of intercoder reliability, considering the large size of the coding team and high variability of one to five codes that could be assigned per coding unit. In the final coding, 2,223 coding units were coded altogether 3,815 times, and one coding unit was coded on average 1.7 times.

As the aim of our paper was to describe thematic varieties of policy goals by data-driven categories, coding scheme is itself our most important finding (Schreier, 2012, p. 219). In the next section, we will uncover the result in more detail by combining qualitative and quantitative style of presenting results (Schreier, 2012, pp. 219–240). To summarize diverse findings from a large dataset, we present results by categories and by subcategories, and compare them both by cases. We also explored the co-occurrence of main categories. All was illustrated by frequencies of appearance of main categories and subcategories, to give relative indicators of their importance. Still, as those frequencies could be biased by the structure of the sample and/or by unequal size of documents and unequal number of coding units per document (see Table 1), they should be conditionally accepted. Even though subcategories are unequally dispersed across documents, not one is situated exclusively in a single document. To reduce the impact of unequal size of cases on the results in the next section, we do not report in absolute frequencies but in percentages in an illustrative manner (Schreier, 2012, p. 236).

## 4 | RESULTS

All main categories that represent thematic dimensions of policy goals were found to be largely present in the coded material: sector-oriented goals were present in 49 percent of all coding units; process-oriented in 41 percent; evaluation-oriented in 31 percent; instrument-oriented in 25 percent; and value-oriented in 22 percent. Not surprisingly, sector-oriented goals prevailed. We already emphasized that this group of goals is central. Thinking and elaborating on policy goals, most researchers probably equate them with sector-oriented goals. Also, this category contains almost twice as many subcodes compared to other main categories. Still, the high presence of all other categories (each around or above a quarter of the whole material) is reflective of high diversity of policy goals in Croatia, which vary strongly across all thematic dimensions.

At the subcategory level, the following five goals were prevalent in Croatian public policies: capacity-building (12%), development (11%), social inclusion and empowerment (10%), evidence-based policymaking (10%), and awareness (10%). Together, they appear in 48 percent of all coding units. The list of five least present goals include national identity (1%), cohesion (1%), timing (2%), justice and rule of law (2%), and mobility (3%). Together, they were assigned to only 10 percent of all coding units.

Finding that capacity-building is a highly important goal does not seem too surprising, as Croatia is sometimes characterized as a weak state with low institutional capacities, or at least with questionable levels of state power (Bejaković, 2009; Börzel, 2013; Grdešić, 2009; Keil, 2013; Petak & Kotarski, 2019). What comes as a surprise is the low frequency of the code national identity. Research on Croatian politics and electoral behavior shows that political competition is strongly based on the issues of identity, tradition, national symbols, religion, and interpretations of history. These prevailing cleavages dominate over economic and redistributive issues that appear irrelevant in determining electoral behavior and partisan identification in Croatia (Henjak, 2017; Henjak et al., 2013). A part of the explanation perhaps lies in the gap between the actual and proclaimed goals, and the tacit knowledge that is not translated into formal policy, but this finding begs for further research on why the emphasis on national identity is not so manifest in the formal documents.

If we analyze categories and subcategories along the three types of policies in the sample or our three cases, we observe the following attributes. All policy types are characterized by a high diversity of goals, and sector-oriented goals dominate across policy types (see Table 3). The second most represented thematic dimension among policy types comprises process-oriented goals, followed by evaluation-oriented goals, which, in turn, slightly prevail over instrument- and value-oriented goals.

**TABLE 3** Prevalence of thematic dimensions of Croatian policy goals per policy type

Goal type <sup>b</sup>	Policy type <sup>a</sup>		
	By activity	By target group	By issue
Sector-oriented	<b>22%</b> (1) <sup>c</sup>	17% (1)	10% (1)
Process-oriented	<b>18%</b> (3)	17% (1)	6% (2)
Evaluation-oriented	<b>19%</b> (2)	6% (4)	6% (2)
Instrument-oriented	9% (4)	<b>12%</b> (2)	4% (3)
Value-oriented	8% (5)	<b>9%</b> (3)	5% (4)

<sup>a</sup>Policy/strategy types are represented by cases in our QCA analysis.

<sup>b</sup>Goal types are represented by main categories in our QCA analysis.

<sup>c</sup>Numbers in bold indicate the policy type with the highest score within a specific goal type (comparison within rows). Numbers in parentheses show the rank of a specific goal type within the policy type (comparison within columns).

**TABLE 4** Most and least prevalent goals in Croatian public policies per policy type

	By activity (%)	By target group (%)	By issue (%)
Top 5	20	18	11
1.3. Development	6	0	4
1.8. Social inclusion and empowerment	2	6	2
2.1. Capacity-building	8	4	1
2.3. Evidence-based policymaking	4	5	1
4.1. Awareness	2	4	3
Bottom 5	7	2	1
1.2. Cohesion	1	0	0
1.5. Mobility	2	0	0
1.6. National identity	1	0	0
3.4. Timing	1	1	1
5.4. Justice and rule of law	1	1	0

Activity- and issue-based policies show great similarity in the relative importance of different dimensions of policy goals. Target group policies differ in the emphasis on thematic goal dimension when compared to activity- and issue-based policies. First, sector- and process-oriented goals are equally represented in the target group policy type. With no “central sector” in multisectoral policies, sector-oriented goals have a bit less standing. The special nature of this policy type likewise resulted in greater prevalence of instrument- and value-oriented goals. Value- and instrument-oriented goals are even more prevalent in target group policies than in policies determined by activities in total numbers, despite the lower share in the sample. This seems particularly intuitive for value-oriented goals, which are also by definition cross-listed as multisectoral policies.

When taking a closer look at the subcategory level, the comparison between policy types again reveals that target group policies deviate the most (see Table 4). The economic goal of development, which is quite present in other policy types, has an extremely low appearance in target group policies

**TABLE 5** Co-occurrence of goal types

	Process-oriented	Evaluation-oriented	Instrument-oriented	Value-oriented
Sector-oriented	13%	13%	9%	10%
Process-oriented		13%	8%	6%
Evaluation-oriented			6%	7%
Instrument-oriented				5%

(only nine times in 823 coding units). The goal of timing, an evaluation criterion that underscores prompt and timely action in policymaking and early or continuing intervention, occurs evenly across policy types, even though policies by activities hold a much bigger share in the sample, almost double the share of target group policies.

Qualitative content analysis is not a methodological strategy primarily designed for detecting relations among codes. Following QCA rules, our research also showed low levels of co-occurrence between codes, as one coding unit was on average coded 1.7 times. Still, co-occurrences between codes, even only at the level of main categories, show interesting results (see Table 5). Sector-, process-, and evaluation-oriented goals most often appear together in the material (all combinations in 13% of all coding units), as they comprised the largest shares of the total number of coding units. The next most prominent co-occurrence is between sector- and value-oriented goals, in 10 percent of the total material coded. As this is almost half of all detected value-oriented goals, it indicates how intertwined sector- and value-oriented goals are.

## 5 | DISCUSSION

The previous section showed the presence of diverse thematic dimensions of policy goals and their inner variations in Croatia. Even though frequencies of code appearance are secondary in QCA, because little inference can be extracted from them, the space limitations in this article do not allow us in-depth analysis of meanings within codes. Nevertheless, we believe that the key value of using QCA, namely the mapping of features of some phenomenon by developing an original categorical apparatus, was confirmed in our analysis. The cross-sectoral comparison of Croatian public policies detected five main categories of policy goals that could be used as a novel goal classification in the policy literature. The subcategory level of our coding scheme is probably much more context-dependent and specific to Croatia and sampled policies, but the main categories of sector-, process-, evaluation-, instrument-, and value-oriented goals can stimulate further research, especially within comparative designs. Also, they can help in refining empirical policy theory and conceptualization of policy goals, as they are not merely descriptive codes but wide-ranging, transposable and connected to policy theory.

Policy goals are a fundamental aspect of any public policy practice and research, but their practical and theoretical utilization is hindered with unclear conceptual and empirical boundaries. Our study shows that policy goals are complex empirical phenomenon and a concept that is, just like most empirical social science problems, incomprehensible, open-ended, intractable, multidimensional, and inherently resistant to a clear definition. However, our findings indicate that their content can be sketched in the following manner. Core policy goals are devoted to main topics of each sector, and this is the central meaning of the concept—goals are defined as purposes “of governmental activity in one field” (Hogwood & Gunn, 1984, p. 14). Still, it appears that only half of all policy goals refer to desired sectoral outcomes and purposes (Birkland, 2015). What about the second half?



It seems that some sectoral purposes spill over from the policy subsystem level and try to land at the national level, by invoking various democratic, philosophical, and ethical principles (Howlett, 2011; Spicker, 2008) in broader value-oriented goals. Therefore, it is challenging to distinguish subvariations and examples of these two groups, “classical” policy goals and value-oriented ones. It seems that value-oriented goals are compatible with Lasswell's general normative commitments, while perhaps being more detailed in some aspects, for example by explicitly highlighting environment, justice and nonviolence. Then, sector-specific goals can also be achieved indirectly, by way of enhancing the general quality of the policymaking process. Goals are evidently not merely an expression of expectations in the policymaking process (Kustec Lipicer, 2012) but also of the process itself. Hence, goals are associated not only with the policy design “as a noun,” which means they are an element in the policy structure that should be designed (Schneider, 2013). They are also connected to the policy design “as a verb”—determining how the design and formulation of policies should look.

Furthermore, goals and instruments are both conceptually and practically intertwined. As Dunn underlines, some less abstract objectives could be regarded both as ends and as means of a policy (1994). Our research showed that numerous goals directly set up new instruments. This is how this conceptual overlap is materialized in policy practice. Finally, our research showed that agenda setting and the evaluation stage “meet.” In the empirical melting pot of a policy cycle, policy goals and evaluation criteria tend to overlap (see also Stone, 1997), one determining the other. Contemporary policy goals thus transcend merely sectoral purposes. This complexity is probably reinforced by the new developments of more complex multisectoral policies focused on target groups. Overall, Lasswell's distinction between scope and base values is compatible with our framework, with sector- and value-oriented goals being close to scope values and the rest with base values. Still, our main categories distinguish those general concepts much more precisely and operationalize their content. For example, our research shows how base values are about process, instrument, and evaluation goals.

We conclude our discussion with suggesting a new and more comprehensive definition of policy goals. Goals are not merely governmental statements about desired futures but more specifically governmental statements about desired futures in relation to specific sectoral purposes, values, and principles in democratic political systems, policymaking process improvements, necessary instrumental innovations, and evaluation standards that should be fulfilled. All these elements are sporadically present in the policy literature but are never systematically linked to each other within the conceptualization and discussion of policy goals. Therefore, to understand policy goals and advance their research, there should be a greater synthesis among segments of policy-process theories, evaluation research, policy design theory and instrument analysis, democratic theory, and sector-specific research.

## 6 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study aimed at improving the understanding and classification of policy goals. Policy goals, despite being a fundamental feature of policymaking in any sector and a crucial element of the concept of policy itself, are still poorly theorized and rarely empirically investigated. By recognizing the widely unaddressed need for a more systematic treatment of the thematic dimension of policy goals, we offered a differentiation of five thematically different policy goal variants. Unlike the deductive approach prevalent in classical and contemporary policy research, our methodological novelty is deriving thematic variants of policy goals by a systematic inductive empirical investigation. The analysis of Croatian policy practice revealed that besides classical sector-oriented policy goals, goals could also be process-, evaluation-, instrument-, and value-oriented in their content.

Apart from standard goals that focus on delivering policy outputs and outcomes, and on providing benefits to citizens by solving problems within a policy sector, policy goals also concern the broader policymaking context. Policy goals determine what evaluation criteria, for example sustainability, effectiveness, or coherence, should be accomplished by policymaking within specific sectors. They deal with features of the policymaking process that should be improved. Cooperation, coordination, or strategic planning are examples of goals that strive at improving policymaking performance, and consequently the outcomes of diverse sectors more indirectly. Then, goals and instruments are intertwined and sometimes hardly distinguishable in the empirical examples. Our research showed that this could be analytically captured by so-called instrument-oriented goals that are focused on the introduction of new instruments or the reconstruction of the existing ones. Finally, policy goals in specific policy sectors sometimes point to governmental statements on a desired future at the wider systemic level, to the quality of democracy and fundamental aims of the political system as a whole.

We believe that the five main categories by which goals vary on their content dimension, and which were empirically generated in our research, constitute a relevant contribution to policy research and empirical policy theory. They help to unfold the concept of policy goals, by precisely defining the content in which policy goals are grounded. Still, our classification of policy goals requires additional research and should be further refined both theoretically and methodologically. In accordance with our findings, to better conceptualize policy goals, there should be better integration among policy-process theories, evaluation research, policy design theory, democratic theory, and sector-specific research. Additionally, the classification would benefit in precision and validity if further tested in different countries and prospectively extended on the subcategory level within a cross-national comparative research design. Diverse future projects could be inspired by our findings on goals, for example by adding analysis of goals' forms to the analysis of their content; developing policy design models by combining goal classification with instrument classification; comparing new and old democracies by their goals; comparing diverse international documents to reveal the coherence of their priorities; comparing party positions and ideologies through their operationalization in policy goals; or refining the evaluation research and its relevance criteria by comparing proclaimed policy goals and peoples' priorities, to name just a few.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> We use notion on policy theory in a broad sense, including frameworks, theories in a narrow sense, and models (Ostrom & Ostrom, 1997).
- <sup>2</sup> Noteworthy exceptions include Hogwood and Gunn's *Policy Analysis for the Real World*, with the chapter "Objectives and Priorities" (1984, pp. 150–170) and Deborah Stone's *Policy Paradox*, whose second part is named *Goals* (1997, pp. 37–130).
- <sup>3</sup> Lasswell distinguished scope values, that is goals or ends, and base values, that is means (Lasswell, 1971; Lasswell et al., 2003; Lasswell & Kaplan, 1950).
- <sup>4</sup> Comparative public policy, as a subdiscipline of political science, uses three main comparative strategies: cross-time, cross-national and cross-sectoral comparison (Lodge, 2007). We deployed the one focused on comparing several sectors/policies in one country at one moment in time.
- <sup>5</sup> For details on (dis)advantages of a large research team, see the Appendix S1.
- <sup>6</sup> For details on the segmentation process, see the Appendix S1.
- <sup>7</sup> If the quotation answers both questions—*what* we want to achieve and *how*, it was included (for example, "increase accessibility of international airports through public transportation"). If it answers only *how*, it was not selected (for example, "the purchase of new vehicles for public transportation").
- <sup>8</sup> For details on the coding scheme development, see the Appendix S1.
- <sup>9</sup> Continuing the application of the existing instrument was not coded here or at all in this research, as this answers only the question of how some ends should be accomplished.
- <sup>10</sup> "Freedom, equal rights, national and gender equality, peace-making, social justice, respect for human rights, inviolability of ownership, conservation of nature and the environment, the rule of law and a democratic multiparty system are the highest values of the constitutional order of the Republic of Croatia and the basis for interpreting the Constitution" (Croatian Parliament, 2010: Article 3).
- <sup>11</sup> The 16-page codebook, containing detailed definitions, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and examples for each code, as well as some additional coding rules, is available on request. For details on code development procedures and coding rules, see the Appendix S1.
- <sup>12</sup> Detailed results of both test-coding rounds are available on request. For details on test coding, see the Appendix S1.
- <sup>13</sup> All numbers represent the share of 2,223 total coding units. As one coding unit could be coded one to five times, the sum of all shares exceeds 100 percent. The same applies for all presented results.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section.

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