

**THE ADVOCACY COALITION FRAMEWORK AFTER
A QUARTER OF A CENTURY.
EXPLAINING THE POLICY PROCESS**

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this article is to answer some key questions about one of the most important frameworks in the research of the policy process – Advocacy Coalitions Framework created by Paul Sabatier. Within the article beliefs were defined as an essential element within the political system, which is responsible for the functioning of the advocacy coalitions operating in individual political sub-systems. Secondly, as it had been shown in previous research, there are restrictions on significant policy changes, which usually do not occur over the political cycle of 10–15 years. Over the last 25 years, the ACF – framework that in the words of the author is close to the status of theory – passed a few serious revisions in response to concerns from other researchers

KEYWORDS: advocacy coalition framework, policy process, public policy, policy change, political theory.

INTRODUCTION

The Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) as an independent framework arose in the late 80's and 90's as a result of the works by P. Sabatier (in cooperation with H. Jenkins-Smith) about the process of the implementation of policy decisions, the importance of the technical information for the policy process and the

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specifics of this process in the event of a conflict of goals (Sabatier, Weible 2007: 187). Since then, more than 80 research papers have dealt with the framework. Sabatier has developed an approach that has much in common with the work of academics who emphasise the function of policy networks. The ACF is a complex theory that views the policy process as involving an “advocacy coalition” that comprises of actors from all parts of the policy system. Most of the ACF research focused on the USA energy and environmental policy, but recently the ACF has been applied to a different policy subsystems in diverse states.

In this article responses to the three key issues of concern regarding the essence of the ACF will be included. First of all, the problem of a definition and function of beliefs within the political system and in different policy subsystems will be concerned. Secondly, the question about conditions which determine the political change and the way it occurs (this issue is particularly difficult for the majority of theories within political science) needs consideration. Thirdly, as the research was developed, serious modifications were made in the ACF, that was influenced by mutual relationships with other theories/frameworks within the policy process research.

ADVOCACY COALITION FRAMEWORK – AN OVERVIEW

In the opinion of the creators, the ACF is based on the three cornerstones (Sabatier, Weible 2007: 191): 1. Macro-level assumption that the process of shaping policies occurs mainly among professionals within the policy subsystem, but their behaviour to some extent depends on factors of a systemic nature. 2.) Micro-level model of an individual is based on the assumptions of social psychology 3.) Meso-level belief that the best way to deal with the multiplicity of actors is to aggregate them into advocacy coalitions.

Participants in the policy process have their beliefs strongly established and are motivated to transform those beliefs into a specific and detailed policy before their opponents will be able to do the same (Weible 2007: 96–98). Common beliefs act as a binder, which connects the actors inside the advocacy coalition. At the same time, different coalitions compete in order to influence the decisions in a way that will suit their system of beliefs. The rivalry between the coalitions takes place within a specialized policy subsystem. Processes inside the subsystems often provide them with long-term sustainability for two reasons – firstly, because deep core beliefs and policy beliefs within policy coalitions are rarely subject to

change, and secondly, because one advocacy coalition is able to dominate the subsystem for many years to come.

In the Advocacy Coalition Framework, the policy process is seen as a combination of intense political disputes and routine technical decisions. The actual effects of policy decisions may not be fully visible even through the decade (Sabatier 2007b: 3–4). Information of a technical or scientific nature play an important role in changing the beliefs of policy actors. The ACF grants researchers (academics, policy analysts, think tanks and professional consultants) the role of central actors of the policy process. Information of a scientific or technical nature may have an impact on the policy carried out even when this information does not cause changes in the beliefs of the advocacy coalition. This impact comes down to the influence on the policy entrepreneurs¹.

The ACF takes into consideration the importance of the events outside the subsystem but also highlights their relative nature – their actual impact depends on the behaviour of the policy actors. Socio-economic changes are important but the political system in this context is not the Easton's "black box" (a reductionist depiction of the political process), which easily transforms demands and support into outputs of the system.

The authors of the ACF refer to the policy cycle theory by highlighting the protracted character of the policy process and by recognizing that the effects of policy decisions can be fully analyzed only in the long term. The process of policy-oriented learning is the key to maintaining the position of the advocacy coalition. Moreover, the process of formulating and selecting policy decisions cannot be researched in isolation from implementation and without taking into account the participation of actors at other levels than the central one. On the other hand, the authors of the ACF are among the most ardent critics of the stages approach to the policy process, pointing out that the artificial division of the policy process stages is remote from reality. They focus on the policy subsystems, instead of the various stages, as a basic subject of study (Jenkins-Smith, Sabatier 1993b: 5).

¹ Policy entrepreneurs are actors in or out of government who try to exploit policy windows supporting a policy alternative that they favour onto the agenda.

BELIEFS SYSTEM AS THE FOUNDATION OF THE POLICY PROCESS

The most distinctive feature of the ACF is the inclusion of the role of beliefs in the policy process. Policy actors try to achieve the widest possible inclusion of their beliefs in policy decisions. Analysis of the selection of a specific policy decision from the potential choices should not be limited to research on only the intended effect of the policy decision. It should also explain why certain effects are identified as desired and the selection of the implementation methods. P. Sabatier refers to G. Majone in stressing the importance of the interpretation of the policy problem (Sabatier 1988: 158).

ACF takes account of the role of policy networks in policy decision-making and it does so in a manner different from the elitist theories. Advocacy coalition is built of a wide catalogue of actors – not only representatives of the iron triangle of powerful interest groups, government departments and parliamentary committees working at one level of the political system. Other important members of the coalition are journalists, representatives of the world of science, NGOs or even a number of low-tier workers in public administration². They are able to play an important role in creating, disseminating or evaluating the policy ideas and concepts (Sabatier, Weible 2007: 192). Advocacy coalitions do not try to build a policy monopoly by exclusion of as many actors as it is possible from the policy process. That is how policy monopoly works in the punctuated equilibrium theory³. In the ACF they often behave quite contrary – actively looking for actors, not yet committed, to extend its own coalition.

The ACF refers to the developed democracies where the scope of the tasks of the public authorities has become huge raising the risk of overloading the political system. In order to prevent such, public authorities and governments divide public policy sphere into sectors and subsectors by granting decision-making competences to the officials placed lower in the hierarchy. Consequently, this group of officials looks for a needed expertise in the process of consultation with the representatives of the interest groups who make a kind of transaction – they provide information and experience in return for access to the decision-

² In a case of USA even judges can participate in the advocacy coalition.

³ The *punctuated equilibrium* theory concerns policy process and was first presented by F. Baumgartner and B. Jones in 1993. It points out at long periods of incremental changes and short burst of radical changes.

-making process and a chance to influence the content of the decision. Since the process of far-reaching specialization takes place within the system, groups rarely possess knowledge that would enable them to effectively participate in more than one or two sectors (Sabatier 1993: 23).

Within the ACF boundaries between coalitions, political authorities and policy entrepreneurs are neither rigid nor clear. Although the purpose of the coalition is to have an impact on the decisions of the political institutions, it is possible that these institutions already originally share common political beliefs with the specific coalition. The members of the institutions of political authorities can also be simultaneously members of the advocacy coalitions. Besides, it is not inconceivable that members within one institution belong to competing coalitions.

As mentioned before, in the ACF political actors are motivated by their own political beliefs in order to create a long-term coalition, rather than narrowly understood “self-interest, that results in a tendency to form a coalition of convenience” (Sabatier 1993: 27). System of beliefs in this framework is understood as a set of views about how the world works, how it should operate, and what should be done to achieve the desired conditions (Cairney 2012: 202). System of beliefs also refers to political activities, influencing the perception of policy problems – what deserves the highest priority, which factors should be examined closely and which political institutions are most likely to treat favourably the point of view of advocacy coalition (Jenkins-Smith, Sabatier 1993b: 41). The common belief system is the main element that ensures that the various actors within the coalition work in a coordinated manner for a long time.

Within the belief system three types of beliefs may be distinguished (although the boundaries between the first two types are not clear) (Sabatier 1993: 30–31):

1. Deep core beliefs – that express the personal philosophy of the political actor. The examples are: conviction about human nature (whether man is inherently good or bad), relationships between the values of freedom, equality and security, or the left-right division in its primary dimension.
2. Policy core beliefs – that express the fundamental political attitudes. Most often they are the same kind of transposition of deep beliefs into the specific policy subsystem. There are, however, exceptions to this rule (for example, a person that prefers freedom over equality and appreciate free market economic mechanisms, but within the health subsystem supports the far-reaching intervention as this view is based on his past experience). Convictions regarding the relationship between the public and private

sector, distribution of power among levels of authorities or hierarchy of importance of policy problems can also be included into the category of political core beliefs⁴. They are the primary binder of the advocacy coalition.

3. Secondary beliefs – that concern methods of decision-making and policy implementation. They have a smaller scope than the entire subsystem. This may include detailed rules concerning public participation in the proceedings of a specific body or how to determine the amount of public expenditure within a specific policy. Secondary beliefs can be shaped by transformation of political beliefs into idiosyncrasy of the specific part of the policy subsystem (e.g. within the subsystem of the health care – preferences about the structure of the health care system in the capital city or the funding mechanisms of psychiatric treatment).

These types of beliefs differ in a level of minuteness, degree of impact on the policy-oriented learning and the probability of a modification as a result of an influx of new information or events. Deep core beliefs are the least susceptible to the changes – change of those beliefs within one policy cycle is almost excluded and would be termed as a “religious conversion” (Sabatier 1993: 31) as these beliefs relate to the normative issues and are usually shaped during childhood and insensitive to the empirical evidence. The vagueness of deep core beliefs makes it difficult to use them as precise instructions when making policy decisions. At this stage, the role of the policy core beliefs is larger, they motivate behaviour and shape decisions within policy subsystem. The probability of change is greater than in the case of deep core beliefs but still small – usually they exhibit a long term stability⁵. Sabatier points out that the defense of your own ego, sense of community and organizational structure create strong resistance against change, even in the face of the contradicting empirical evidence and internal inconsistencies (Weible 2007: 99). Changes within the policy core beliefs refer most of the time to the evaluation of problem’s salience and its place on

⁴ The clarity of typology has not been improved by Sabatier’s singling out the category of policy core policy preferences within core policy beliefs that are “beliefs” with a range of subsystem. Policy core policy preferences are vital and form a long-lasting division lines. Most often, it is simply a specific policy solutions (eg. smoking ban in public places) that divides the actors within the subsystem into proponents and opponents, and this division is a key factor shaping subsystem.

⁵ Only in later works, Sabatier expanded above mentioned classification, pointing out that among the policy core beliefs we could separate normative elements, which are not subject to change from empirical elements, where change is more probable.

the agenda (Sabatier, Jenkins-Smith 1993: 221). Secondary beliefs are the most susceptible to change, they are routinely modified as the feedback is coming during the decision-making and its implementation.

Although the belief system plays the central role in the formation and lasting of advocacy coalition, the ACF does not ignore the traditional view of competition for policy influence between the groups based on the size of the resources of various kinds. The coalition's ability to take a dominant position within the subsystem is dependent on a number of factors: the position of the coalition members within political authorities, public support, the ability to mobilize followers, the amount of financial resources, knowledge about problems, causes and policy alternatives, the abilities of coalition leaders – e.g. to present an attractive vision of the coalition and to explore opportunities for policy change created by an external shock (Sabatier, Weible 2007: 201–203).

Resources and belief system may be the subject of feedback strengthening – resources allow for an increase in the number of actors within the coalition that at the same time, and in order to preserve the cohesion of the coalition, raise the need to reinforce the belief system which is the main binder of the coalition. In addition, political authorities with members of the coalition holding important positions also have resources that could stabilize the belief system as dominant in the subsystem (Weible 2008: 621–625).

POLICY CHANGE AND LEARNING

Within this framework the possibility of change is not precluded. Predominantly, it is the result of the coalition's ability to adapt to the environment and involvement in the policy process of learning that is necessary to maintain the power of the coalition against competition within the subsystem (Cairney 2012: 200). The scope of such a change is usually not significant, because the learning process is limited by the permanently ingrained political beliefs. In other words, the coalition makes the selection of the new information and allows the change only if that would not require undermining the common political beliefs, which bind the entire coalition.

Extensive change requires an external shock, which directly affects the position of the coalition within the subsystem. That shock of exogenous origin may come from the emergence of a new governmental coalition on the system-level, public opinion change, change of conditions in the socio-

-economic environment or policy decisions taken in other subsystems. As a result, the dominant coalition is forced to revise its political beliefs, though even this may not prevent it from losing a dominant position in favor of the opposition coalition. Whether the adaptation of the beliefs of the coalition will allow it to maintain its dominance depends on the will of the two categories of actors – political authorities and policy entrepreneurs. Policy-oriented learning in terms of ACF relies on the system of beliefs, which is different from other theories that explain the phenomenon of learning within the political system (Hall 1993: 275–296; Rose 2005). ACF is a marriage of political theories based on interests and knowledge (Bennett, Howlett 1992: 279–280). The premise that policy actors are only intermediaries that help in the adaptation of the political system to the impulses from the environment is rejected. As described earlier, different levels of sustainability of different types of beliefs determine the scope of the learning process.

Sabatier separates processes of policy-oriented learning taking place within the coalition from those taking place between coalitions. Learning inside the coalition is based on the fact that individuals – members of the coalition – use the collected information to adapt their beliefs or on the fact that the coalition acquire new members. Consequently, as the coalition members interact, reciprocal influence on the change of beliefs is taking place. Typically, this process of change takes several years and happens routinely during the monitoring of the implementation of specific policies. Noticing the intended and unintended consequences of policy decisions affects the stability of beliefs concerning the best ways to solve policy problems. The speed and the intensity of the policy-oriented learning inside the coalition depends, among other things, on the number of new members, the degree of the conformity of new information with existing beliefs, argumentative value of new information and political pressure for change (Carboni 2012: 33–35).

Learning between advocacy coalitions takes the form of an adaptation of the beliefs of one coalition to another. Sabatier stresses the political nature of this process, in the sense that it does not have a lot in common with “selfless search for truth” (Jenkins-Smith, Sabatier 1993a: 45). The exchange of information between coalitions that should be the basis of the learning process between coalitions meets a lot of obstacles. During high-intensity policy disputes, when postulates of the opponent threatens core beliefs, information is used rather as a kind of weapon in the political struggle and not as the object of reflection. Information that would allow to assess the detailed policies are often not easily available and are subject to such an interpretation that would demonstrate its compliance with

the system of beliefs. Even those widely accepted technical measures of success of specific policies are used in the biased way to strengthen the position of the coalition. Even if the policy-oriented learning process between coalitions occurs, the adaptation will be very rarely a simple transfer of the beliefs of another coalition. Most often, a few elements of the belief system are absorbed in order to publicly declare improvement of the weaknesses of the policy, but in a manner that will allow it to follow the core beliefs to the greatest extent⁶. Without external shock coalition is able for many years to undermine the reliability of the received information and to delay the real policy change (Sabatier 1998: 104).

One policy cycle usually lasts about 10 years or more (Sabatier, Weible 2007: 193). At that time, the belief systems are not subject to significant change and positions of advocacy coalitions within the subsystem (usually from two to five coalitions occur in one subsystem) have a stable character. Only small changes happen during a cycle through the process of learning. The stability of the subsystem is enhanced by relatively solid “parameters” of the political system (external to the subsystem), which rarely change within the cycle. These parameters are: constitutional and of a social structure, socially accepted core values, distribution of natural resources and “the basic attributes of the problem area” (Sabatier 2007: 324–326). Two types of factors determine the behaviour of actors within the system: stable parameters and the previously described exogenous shocks of fourfold nature. Stable parameters cannot cause a radical change within the subsystem but they exert a significant impact on resources and restrictions of subsystem actors. As in the punctuated equilibrium theory, in the ACF there are periods of stability and periods of radical change. External shock does not always result in a radical change. There is even a possibility of absence of any changes due to an external shock.

THE ADVOCACY COALITION FRAMEWORKS – DEVELOPMENTS AND APPLICATIONS

Over the last quarter of a century at least 80 studies that were based on assumptions of the ACF have been published – usually it was a case study using the ACF framework to explain the phenomena or to verify the chosen hypotheses of the

⁶ It may resemble Polish readers an old slogan “Socialism yes, distortions no”.

ACF, mostly concerning the importance of external shock and the stability of the advocacy coalition in the presence of disputes relating to policy beliefs.

The first review of the ACF made by P. Sabatier concerned the role of the political authorities who are members of the advocacy coalition but have a more central position than members of coalitions outside the authorities. As a consequence, there are periods when the members of the authorities abandon membership in the coalition for a new one. That happens most often after general election. Moreover, there are situations when political authorities using its institutional legitimacy impose solutions within the subsystem against strong opposition from the dominant coalition (Sabatier, Jenkins-Smith 1993: 213–214).

The increase of the territorial range of research using the ACF resulted in the creation of the distinction between young and mature subsystems. Only in mature subsystems there is possibility of relative autonomy and stability. Mature subsystems work because for a long time there are specialized units at any significant level of public authorities, interest groups and academics dealing with the issue. The actors within the mature subsystem see themselves as an independent community, that is connected by the fact of having adequate knowledge and belief that the issue is an important political problem. In young systems, boundaries between subsystems are not fully formed, policy issues have no fixed meaning or common interpretation, and the costs of operation are unknown. The second major revision of the ACF related to the classic works of Lijphart and his division of political systems into the Westminster and the consensual model.

The last major revision significantly enhanced the understanding of sources of the radical policy change. Policy change may be caused not only by the exogenous shock and creating opportunities for the opposition coalition. “Internal shock” is also possible and it generates the crisis of confidence within the dominating coalition. It occurs commonly when the previous policy decisions and its implementation were a total failure in the view of the members of the coalition. As an effect there is a dramatic change of policy core beliefs or position of policy coalition within the subsystem. Both types of shock share the same source, frequently it is a focusing event, and they both result in strengthening the opposition coalition (Birkland 1997: 5).

The change may also come from an agreement between the competing advocacy coalitions (Sabatier, Weible 2007: 205). The creators of ACF *de facto* incorporate here a theory of alternative dispute resolution. Of course, not in all policy domains is such an agreement possible. It is hard to imagine such

a compromise where the normative components of policy beliefs dominate instead of empirical, for example the issue of abortion rights.

Authors of ACF intended that it would be useful for the analysis of the “developed” democratic political systems. However, its design was based on studies of the political system of the United States and as a result a few critical voices were raised. Most often it was alleged that ACF made unstated assumptions about strongly organized interest groups, weak political parties, the plurality of decision-making arenas and difficulties in making radical policy decisions rooted in political system (which requires, in the case of the USA, the cooperation of the two chambers of Congress and the President) (Sabatier, Weible 2007: 199).

It is obvious that the conceptual grid ACF requires adaptation – for example, in relation to the Polish political system it would require clarification of the concept of systemic changes in the governmental coalition, which originally meant a change of President and in both chambers of parliament. It raises the question how to treat the change of the parliamentary majority without changing the President (that has a relatively weak position) or how to treat shifts within the multi-party Parliament, when only one of at least two members of coalition government exchanges. Political parties, interpreted as separate from political authorities, would require a greater consideration. Similarly, in the British political system, in the absence of the American system of “checks and balance”, the symbolic role of the monarch and expected one-party parliamentary majority electing the sole executive body, the ease of making radical policy changes is significantly higher (before the 2010 General Election the stable electoral preferences of citizens resulting in multi-term prime ministers brought stability here). However, hitherto AFC applications to the European realities proved useful in explaining the essence of the policy process (Kübler 2001, Smith 2000, Albright 2011, Ingold 2011). In particular, the possibility of applying the AFC to the multi-level policy processes, including the level of the European Union seems intriguing⁷.

⁷ ACF offers many advantages for studying EU policy processes. “Academics have had no difficulty discerning coalitions composed of administrative agency officials, interest group leaders, and researchers from various countries forming, for example environmental or industry-based coalitions in a variety of subsystems. ACF would expect coalitions seeking to maximize their advantage by venue-shopping. ACF’s clear distinction between major (policy core) versus relatively minor (secondary aspects) policy change should help to clarify the bewildering array of policy initiatives at different levels of government occurring in many policy domains. It is hoped that the recent stress on clear indicators of the beliefs and degree of coordinated activity among potential coalition

There are some doubts about the method of conducting studies of the subsystem – whether researchers should analyze the complete subsystem at the same time – including all levels of important political authorities, or rather focus on the operation of the subsystem on the one level – mostly nation-state level. Sabatier indicated that such selection is not unambiguous and depends on circumstances such as: the scope of autonomy of each level and the advancement of integration between actors at different levels (Sabatier 1998: 115). In the European case, for example, it would imply that in examining the domain of internal security researchers should focus on the state level and in the environmental policy domain, it is necessary to study all levels of the subsystem because the powers of specific levels, as well as the level of mutual integration of actors are considerable.

Similarly, stating when we can distinguish the existence of a separate subsystem may be questionable. Premises in this case are of the substantial or geographical nature. In one study, the existence of a separate automotive pollution control subsystem within the air pollution control subsystem was proven based on the existence of separate legislation, units of governmental agencies, different interest groups and researchers (Zafonte, Sabatier 2008: 72–75). Nesting subsystems (subsystem can be easily recognized at the same time, as part of a larger subsystem) and the overlapping boundaries of subsystems (policy issue can be regarded as adhering to two different subsystems at the same time) also impede research.

Sabatier thinks that ACF refers to multiple streams theory, pluralism, rational choice theory, or even institutionalism. Stressing the importance of the institutions, he understands them as norms, which are followed because they are considered as natural, normal and legitimized. The ACF links to the theory of rational choice explicitly when assessing the group's internal cohesion refers to such factors as the frequency of interaction, cost of information exchange or the ability to create solutions perceived as fair within the group. The most important group binder, outside of beliefs, is mutual trust, which is a precondition for collective action (Zafonte, Sabatier 2008: 78). Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) – contemporary probably the most frequently used

members will encourage researchers to carefully document the number of coalitions and the membership of each” (Sabatier, 1998: 133).

framework in the policy research created by Elinor Ostrom and based on the rational choice theory – shares similar assumptions⁸.

In the context of the rational choice theory a few questions appeared – whether a shared belief system is sufficient motivation to take collective action or otherwise saying – are there any Olson’s free riders in the advocacy coalition? Declaring the same belief within the group is not tantamount to the engagement in cooperative activities in the interest of the group (Schlager 1995: 243–270). The tendency to act in their own interest is higher in materialistic groups. There is always a problem of transactional costs – cooperation of people from different groups and institutions can be difficult even with a common belief system (Ingold 2011: 441).

Sabatier answers the above mentioned questions by referring to the three arguments. Firstly, the transaction costs of participation in an advocacy coalition are relatively low compared to other forms of collective action. Secondly, the potential benefits of participation may be exaggerated for the members of the advocacy coalition, particularly threatened by the opposition coalition. The intentions of opponents are demonized and their strength is exaggerated, and that supports cooperation and coordination within the coalition (Matti, Sandstrom 2013: 242–246). We may distinguish next to the usual coordination within the coalition (e.g. developing a joint action plan and its collective implementation) a notion of “weak coordination” (e.g. monitoring the activities of coalition members, and taking complementary actions in response). Weak coordination lowers the transaction costs and thus reduces the risk of a free rider occurrence.

Theories of the rational choice are focused on self-interest quite narrowly understood, while ACF accentuates the role of beliefs as the motivation to action and does not *a priori* exclude altruistic behaviour. The motivations of individuals can refer to a “logic of consequences” – right behaviour is the one that maximizes good consequences and to a “logic of appropriateness” where right behaviour means adherence to the rules.

⁸ The relationship between the ACF and the IAD framework is too complicated to discuss fully in this article and is open to multiple interpretations.

CONCLUSIONS

The main assumptions of the ACF in comparison to the other frameworks and theories is that beliefs are identified as the main cause of political behaviour. At the same time, large number of actors bind together to create advocacy coalitions dividing multiple levels of government into a manageable number of units. The most important components of the belief system are deep core beliefs and policy core beliefs.

The ACF is a conceptual tool which is rich in explanations of the process of policy learning, focusing on how individuals change their beliefs and how information is used. It concerns policy-oriented learning as an important source of policy change. External shock may also result in a radical change of policy.

Since its creation the ACF had been modified by its authors in a way that shows similarity to ACF's assumptions – changes were made in the face of emerging criticisms and as a results of some research but in a way that does not breach its basic assumptions. With the development the ACF has become close to the status of theories of a general nature, but still is useful in explaining political outcomes.

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