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**DISMANTLING PUBLIC POLICY: PREFERENCES,
STRATEGIES, AND EFFECTS**

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9.1 Introduction

The cutting, diminution, or removal of existing policy—what we have elected to term 'policy dismantling'—is commonly thought of as something which mostly occurs during periods of economic austerity. It is very much a hallmark of the politics of 'hard times' (Gourevitch 1986), when politicians are pushed to impose losses on particular segments of society for the greater good (Pal and Weaver 2003). These popular conceptions will doubtless have been reinforced by the way in which politicians across large parts of the world reacted to the onset of economic recession in the late 2000s, i.e. by cutting pension entitlements and reducing welfare benefits.

The continuing political salience of these dismantling activities—as distinct from their effects—should, however, serve to remind scholars of the limitations in the existing state of knowledge about the causes and long-term consequences of policy dismantling. Despite the many important advances that have been made in public policy research since the 1950s, we still know far less about dismantling than we do about policy expansion. Indeed, with the exception of the social policy field, the literature on dismantling remains relatively fragmented and thus ill-equipped to offer general insights (Bauer 2006; Knill, Tosun, and Bauer 2009). With a few obvious exceptions (Rose 1990; Pal and Weaver 2003:320,328; Dunsire, Hood, and Huby 1989), there is still little by way of solid comparative analysis (i.e. spanning different policy fields). Indeed, most textbooks on public policy have so little to say about dismantling that students could be forgiven for thinking that public policy only ever expands, be it incrementally or in larger leaps.

Yet the existing literatures (note the use of the plural), tell us that policy dismantling does happen. One of the strong themes in social policy research is, as noted in Chapter 1, that not only does dismantling happen (Pierson 2001), but that it is intrinsically different to policy expansion and thus requires a special analytical approach. The problem is that without research which focuses on other policy sectors, as scholars we are not really in a position to conclude that this is generally true (and thus can be absorbed into a general account of policy dynamics), or if it is only really applicable to social policy (and chiefly welfare state retrenchment).

The broad purpose of this book was to address this gap by examining policy dismantling more comparatively and in the light of more general accounts of policy change (Hall 1993; Vis and van Kersbergen 2007; Knill, Schulze, and Tosun 2010). We have done so by attempting to think about policy dismantling in a more systematically comparative manner. The particular entry point we chose was the preferences of politicians. Why, we asked, do they engage in policy dismantling and which factors are most likely to determine the kinds of strategies they employ to achieve it? In the opening chapters we explored how the fragmentation of knowledge in the existing dismantling literatures has greatly limited comparative work. Rather than search for general causes and underlying patterns, academics have tended to work at separate tables using different analytical approaches and metrics of change. In the area in which dismantling has been subjected to particularly close scrutiny—that is, social policy—scholars have learnt to think in less binary terms (e.g. 'hard' vs. 'good' times, 'big' vs. 'small' cuts, 'functioning' vs. 'terminated' policies), which has opened up many new and exciting perspectives on the politics of dismantling (Haussermann 2010). Nonetheless, these perspectives, all of them immensely valuable in their own terms, have not been brought fully together or integrated into a more general account of policy change.

In this final chapter we therefore analyze what we have learnt about policy dismantling in two different fields of policy—social and environmental—using, as a guide, the analytical framework developed in Chapter 2. The next section reminds us of the challenges that we had to overcome in our pursuit of a more comparative approach, chiefly developing definitions, measures and categorizations that 'travel' (Peters 1998) more easily between the two fields. Running through these again helpfully reveals some of the assumptions underpinning our analysis. The subsequent section reviews our empirical findings, starting with the relatively more tractable category of dismantling effects, then working backwards to the origins of the political preference to dismantle. In the fourth section, we step back and explore what can be abstracted from this work to inform a fuller understanding of policy

change in general and policy dismantling in particular. The final section offers some broad conclusions and explores the scope for new work in this area.

9.2 The challenge of studying policy dismantling more comparatively

The first and most significant obstacle to a more comparative approach is the lack of common concepts, categories, and empirical measures. The problem is partly to do with the nature of the dependent variable, but it goes wider still. For example, there is not even a shared terminology that policy analysts can easily employ to describe the very act of cutting. Most of the available alternatives (retrenchment, termination, deregulation, etc.) were developed for particular reasons and/or for use in specific contexts and therefore cannot be expected to travel smoothly between policy fields.

The first challenge was therefore to establish a definition of policy. Of the various literatures that we could have drawn on, the one dealing with social policy contains the most well developed account of dismantling, expressed in terms of changes in policy outcomes and impacts such as levels of benefit received and aggregate levels of spending on social welfare. But there is a significant and well-known gap between these and other dismantling effects, and the political interventions that force them to change—one that, if taken seriously, would introduce many more confounding variables. For the sake of parsimony (and while being cognisant of the broader notion of effects), we therefore elected to focus first and foremost on changes in the pattern of *policy outputs*.

Even with this more restricted focus on outputs, we still had to confront a second significant challenge, which was to identify the most important elements of policy output and establish a way to study them comparatively. Again, the existing literatures offer many possibilities ranging from entire policy functions (e.g. defence or welfare state support), through to specific policies and particular policy instruments and finally, administrative support functions. We elected to focus on *policy* dismantling because we thought it offered an analytically more viable way to pursue a comparative approach than the obvious alternatives, namely deregulation or termination.

The third challenge was how best to define and measure policy dismantling. The existing literatures reminded us that in order to work, our empirical strategy would have to engage with the potential multi-dimensionality of change, namely the potential for various sub-elements of policy to move in different directions and at different speeds. Taking Hall's typology of policy change as our point of departure (Hall 1993), we developed a new framework with a new set of empirical indicators, to assess the degree of policy expansion and/or dismantling in specific case study contexts. This framework incorporates two aspects: *policy density* and *policy intensity*. Density refers to the extent to which a certain policy area is addressed by governmental activities and is expressed in terms of changes in the *number* of policies and policy instruments. Intensity, on the other hand, provides a basis for measuring the *strictness* or, as in the case of social policies, *generosity* of particular policies. To measure changes in intensity we distinguished between two indicators: *substantial* and *formal intensity*. Having addressed these three challenges, we were in a position to derive a new definition of policy dismantling, namely: a change of a direct, indirect, hidden or symbolic nature that either diminishes the number of policies in a particular area, reduces the number of policy instruments used and/or lowers their intensity. It can involve changes to these core elements of policy and/or it can be achieved by manipulating the capacities to implement and supervise them.

We expected that this would be superior to the alternatives. Of these, 'retrenchment' and 'cutbacks' have been widely used in the social policy literature but are, we suspected, too strongly tied to the dynamics within this sector. 'Deregulation' is also well-known and widely studied but is obviously tied to the act of regulation, that relates to a particular component of 'policy' (i.e. instruments). And as noted in Chapter 1, 'termination' adopts a rather restrictive interpretation of the dependent variable.

The fourth challenge was to develop an analytical framework to explain the patterns of dismantling observed in distinct cases. A close reading of the various dismantling-related literatures provided a sobering reminder of the sheer number of factors that we could have considered. To make this task simpler (and having already dealt with the vexed question of

effects (see above)), Chapter 1 identified three central aspects (or 'elements'): the underlying motivation (i.e. political *preference*) to dismantle; the *opportunity structures* in which decisions about when and how to dismantle are made; and the dismantling *strategies* that politicians eventually opt to employ.

Starting first of all with *preferences* (and drawing on the work of Wilson (1980)), we focused on how preferences shape and are shaped by the distribution and the magnitude of costs and benefits that might be *expected* to arise from attempts to dismantle. In Chapter 2, two broad scenarios were outlined, both within an overarching 'meta' preference to secure re-election: one where politicians perceive that the benefits (to them) of dismantling are greater than the costs; the other, where the costs of the status quo (i.e. not dismantling) are perceived to be greater than the costs of dismantling. In the former, politicians have an obvious incentive to dismantle and openly claim credit for it ('credit claiming'); in the latter, dismantling is likely to be viewed as the lesser evil and therefore will be pursued hesitantly and perhaps in a more hidden way ('blame avoidance'). The important point is that in analytical terms we considered it important to specify *which* costs and benefits are at issue, their magnitude, and who they are expected to fall upon.

On the basis of these two scenarios, we derived four main *strategies* of dismantling, which we defined as a certain mode, method or plan chosen to achieve a desired dismantling effect. These were *dismantling by default*; *active dismantling*; *symbolic dismantling*; and *dismantling by arena shifting*. We suggested that these strategies are employed by politicians to attain their policy preferences in view of other actors' preferences, changing external and situational factors, and prevailing institutional conditions. The choice among them is made in view of the dismantling effects they hope to achieve, as well as the preferences of other actors. So, for example, we expected active dismantling to be characterized by clear reductions in policy density in order to openly claim credit, whereas dismantling by default would be characterized by the blame avoidance tactic of adjusting substantial intensity more stealthily to reflect changing external conditions (e.g. not adjusting benefit levels to keep pace with inflation) (see Table 2.3 for further details). In acting in this way, what at first appears to be a small change can build up into something much greater (the so-called 'camel's nose' effect) (Rose 1990: 268).

If we want to understand the choice of dismantling strategy (in effect, our main dependent variable), then we would need to vary the configurations of economic conditions, institutional opportunities, and constraints in a systematic fashion. At a general level, we were chiefly interested in verifying whether and to what extent policy type makes a difference. If policy type determines the politics of dismantling in the clear-cut fashion originally suggested by Lowi (1964), then we would expect the cost/benefit distribution in the social policy cases (i.e. Chapters 3, 5, and 6) to be significantly different to that in the environmental policy cases (Chapters 4, 7, and 8). With regard to environmental issues, dismantling may thus mean reducing the air quality enjoyed by many people by a very small amount (i.e. diffuse costs), but saving some powerful industries from having to invest heavily in abatement equipment (i.e. concentrated benefits). By contrast, cutting child benefit risks hurting a specific section of the population very directly (i.e. concentrated costs), but could produce no clear beneficiary (i.e. diffuse benefits).

In general terms, this assumption is intuitively appealing. After all, much of the welfare state retrenchment literature has centred on processes of 'blame avoidance' (Hood 2011), as politicians acting under conditions of significant 'permanent austerity' are forced to withdraw public funding from beneficiaries who are instinctively loss averse (note the relevance of prospect theory) (Vis 2011). In such conditions, the widespread reporting of default and arena shifting type-strategies in the welfare state retrenchment literature does seem to confirm this general assumption. By contrast, in a more heavily regulated policy area like the environment where the state is regulating to affect private funding decisions, the cost-benefit distribution could well be different— leading, we might suppose, to more opportunities to claim credit via the use of active dismantling strategies. It may not be a coincidence that the de-regulation literature is replete with examples of politicians (think of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, for example) setting out to win votes by actively and openly decreasing policy intensity, i.e. cutting certain kinds of regulation.

From a very quick look back at the order in which the chapters appeared in Part II, policy type does not appear to determine the choice among strategies in this neat and straightforward fashion; other factors must be at work. The next section therefore looks back across all six chapters to investigate how different institutional and situational factors interacted with external ones. We first give an overview of the effects, then we report on the strategies used, the opportunities and the constraints, and finally we reflect on politicians' choice of strategies in light of their preferences.

9.3 The elements of policy dismantling

9.3.1 *The effects of policy dismantling*

In Chapter 1, effects were defined broadly to include policy outputs and outcomes (i.e. the impact of the outputs). Looking back across the six case studies it is striking that the greatest effects, measured first and foremost in terms of alterations in policy outputs, were revealed in changes in policy intensity, *not* policy density (see Table 9.1), perhaps suggesting a common meta-preference to hide by adjusting the setting of a particular policy rather than removing it wholesale. The only apparent case of change in the policy density measure was to be found in relation to child benefits (Chapters). Of the six cases, this appeared to provide the closest—but by no means a perfect—approximation to complete policy termination (or 'evaporation' to quote the authors). However, on closer analysis this reduction was compensated for by the appearance of a cognate policy—namely tax benefits—so the net effect on policy density (as opposed to intensity) measure was limited.

The clearest examples of reductions in policy intensity (and specifically substantial intensity) are to be found in the chapters on pensions (Chapter 3) and child benefits (Chapter 5). In the latter, both the level of the benefits received and their scope were reduced as part of a longer-term transformation from a universal to a means-tested form of delivery (i.e. while density stayed the same, intensity declined). The study of social benefits—and specifically the indexation of unemployment benefits (Chapter 6)—also revealed remarkable dismantling in relation to policy intensity, even in a country such as Sweden where the welfare state has generally been assumed to be resilient,

Table 9.1. The effects of dismantling²: a summary

	Policy density			Policy intensity		Comments
	Policy density	Instrument density	Substantial intensity	Formal intensity		
3. Pensions	No	No	Yes	No	Policy intensity: reductions in scope and level	
4. Air pollution	No	No	Yes	Yes	Most attempts to reduce substantial intensity failed; formal intensity: affected indirectly	
5. Child benefits	No	No	Yes	Yes	Instrument density: some substitution effects (tax replacing child benefits); policy intensity (child benefits): reductions in scope and level	
6. Social benefits ¹	No	No	Yes	No	Policy intensity: significant reductions in substantial intensity	
7. Waste	No	No	No	No	No policy change, other than relatively incremental adjustments	
8. Water	No	No	No	No	Over a longer time span, significant expansion	

Source: own compilation.

Notes:

¹ Unemployment benefit; basic pension; child allowance

² Indicates the presence/absence of dismantling, not the magnitude of change

backed by unions and other significant policy takers. Policy density, by contrast, remained largely unchanged.

Aside from these examples and given the general tendency to target intensity rather than density, significant reductions in policy intensity were still the exception not the rule. This finding echoes some of the claims made in the early welfare state retrenchment literature, as well as subsequent work on the politics of loss imposition (Pal and Weaver 2003: 328). This is note-worthy because our cases extended beyond social policy to environmental policy, where in principle we might expect to find more examples of politicians brazenly dismantling policies to 'claim credit'. It is also noteworthy because all six cases were selected on the

grounds that dismantling appeared to be taking place (e.g. air pollution—Chapter 4), had been reported in the existing literature as having occurred (e.g. water pollution—see Chapter 8), or a priori seemed very likely (e.g. in the waste case study—Chapter 7).

The other aspect of policy intensity, that is formal intensity, also appeared to have been mostly unchanged across all the cases. The obvious exceptions were air pollution (where it increased under Clinton but was subsequently and quite deliberately reduced under Bush, only to then be restored by the Obama administration) and child benefits (where it was partially reduced). Indeed, in the water case, formal intensity actually increased under the Control of Pollution Act (via public access to information registers) and then declined slightly following the hit list saga (in terms of a lighter sampling regime, albeit according to new EU policies with a higher policy intensity). Other than the case study of social benefits (which did measure the levels of benefit received), the case study authors struggled to make categorical statements about the other dimension of 'effects', namely policy outcomes, but some (e.g. the waste, water and child benefits chapters) suggested how they could be developed in the future.

Finally, not all the cases exhibited a consistent pattern of change in intensity—there were some interesting examples of little or no overall change (for example waste) and even some policy expansion (e.g. pensions in Switzerland—albeit part of a wider compensatory deal to win around opponents). In the case of water policy, the balance between reduction and expansion depended upon the time frame selected by the analyst—an important point to which we will return. And as noted above, the reduction of policy intensity was the more common form of dismantling observed across all the cases, as opposed to the wholesale removal of whole items and/ or areas of policy, corresponding to significant reductions in policy density. Nonetheless, at least some of the case studies provided clear evidence that politicians consciously sought to dismantle by reducing the intensity—or what social policy analysts have termed the 'generosity'—of policy.

On balance, therefore, we can cautiously conclude that our output-focused empirical scheme proved itself capable of measuring policy dismantling across a quite broad mixture of policy areas and jurisdictions. In other words, it appeared to 'travel' relatively well. It was capable of coping with the multi-dimensionality of dismantling; in almost all the cases, the indicators moved in different directions at different speeds. This pattern of policy change would not necessarily have been picked up by a conventional policy termination analysis. Our scheme also helped to differentiate dismantling from some other well-known categories of policy change. For example, it demonstrated that the Control of Pollution Act in the UK was more a case of slow implementation than of outright dismantling, although the dividing line between politicians deliberately slowing down implementation and dismantling by default should not be thought of as fixed, as the waste case also amply demonstrated.

9.3.2 *The strategies of policy dismantling*

We expected politicians to use up to four types of dismantling strategies and we found, though in slightly different shades, evidence of all four in our case studies. *Active dismantling* was most clearly apparent in the lowering of future pension levels in Switzerland and Italy, and in the increase in the allowable investment in US energy plants up to 20 per cent (of the replacement cost) without triggering an administrative review. And in the case of packaging waste—though including large elements of blame shifting to Brussels and a certain passivity among party-political elites in Germany—regulatory standards were eventually eased. *Dismantling by default* was observed when a range of benefits were left untouched in Spain and in a number of northern countries (Denmark, Sweden, Germany, and the UK), even throughout a period of relatively high inflation.

Symbolic strategies were used in the waste case (retaining a policy which was deficient but symbolically important to many different actors), the water case (drawing up a hit list was a way of 'standing up to Brussels') and, in particular, the air pollution case (signaling to the powerful US energy industry a serious determination to cut regulatory burdens). Finally, *arena shifting* was employed, but only in the air pollution control case was it the dominant strategy. More often than not, arena shifting was used in combination with other strategies. Decisions were shifted, for example, from the state to privatized water industries in the water

case and also from the national to the European arena in the waste case. In the water case, vertical arena shifting occurred when the governing party in the UK sought to include, via the publication of a hit list, the EU in its regulatory struggle to hold down the rising cost of water treatment.

It is important, however, to understand whether, in a particular case, dismantling is actually the preferred endpoint or really a means to achieve something else (such as, for example, increasing loyalty among constituents). If dismantling is really the politicians' primary objective, then certain dismantling strategies suggest themselves. If there is little opposition, direct dismantling can be pursued to directly attack the core of a particular policy. If ample resistance is expected, the more likely strategy is dismantling by default and/or arena shifting. But if dismantling is really a means to achieve something else (e.g. appeal to a particular constituency that something is being done), then symbolic dismantling is probably the more suitable choice.

The key point is that our four categories appear sufficiently comprehensive to include all observable attempts (be that successful or unsuccessful) at policy dismantling. The six cases did not reveal a need for more differentiated or radically different strategies. Our analytical schema also coped with the tendency for the strategies to be used in combination with one another rather than in isolation. In fact, it revealed several strategies being selected and used at the same time (the case of the hit lists being the best example); in other cases, completely different strategies were employed in quick succession (e.g. the air and water pollution cases). In order to shed light on the precise conditions under which politicians chose particular dismantling strategies, we need to explore the influence of the factors included in the analytical framework outlined in Chapter 2.

9.3.3 *Policy dismantling: opportunities and constraints*

Our analytical framework (summarized in Figure 2.1) suggested that politicians' preferences to engage in policy dismantling, as well as the choice of a particular dismantling strategy, are influenced, but not determined by, situational factors, economic factors, and institutional constraints and opportunities.¹ Let us now consider the role of these factors in the six case studies.

Situational factors: it is easy to appreciate why natural catastrophes, scandals, or accidents (such as the one at the Japanese nuclear power station at Fukushima in 2011) might influence politicians' choices to dismantle. However, our case studies provide surprisingly little empirical evidence that they were determinative. Little can be said about them *ex ante*, let alone explain their likely impact, which has not already been noted by writers such as Kingdon (1984).

More important in the six cases were slower-moving technological changes, the gradual virus-like spread of certain policy ideas (Benson and Jordan 2012), for example, in relation to privatization or changes in dominant policy framings, for example, around a new challenge such as climate change. New ideas about causes, effects, and policy responses may indeed change the way in which actors conceive of dismantling. Compare, for example, the role of privatization in the water case and the role of the new private sector bodies in the waste case. Gradual technological changes (principally the advent of large-scale mechanized sorting in the waste case), for example, rendered the German system of waste reuse less and less effective and thus triggered a struggle to keep a manifestly deficient policy in place. It was also at work in the increasing ability of the UK water industry to deliver (via the construction of very large automated water treatment facilities) water quality improvements in a more predictable and cost-effective manner than had been possible in the 1970s. The key point, however, is that changes such as these were background factors; they were not determinative.

Macroeconomic factors: in virtually all of our cases—be they social or environmental—prevailing socio-economic conditions were, however, more influential. In the existing literatures, the dismantling of social benefits and pensions is commonly triggered either by short-term socio-economic conditions or continuing permanent austerity-type pressures. The non-development of child benefits in Spain, the dismantling of unemployment benefits in Germany via adjustments of indexation rules, and the slow implementation of the Control of

Pollution Act in the UK were all justified with respect to the need to cope with unfavorable economic conditions.²

There was, however, a significant difference in the way these factors played out in the social and the environmental cases. In the social policy field, socio-economic developments impinged more directly on the short-term and long-term fiscal situations of whole countries. The need to adapt policy to wide ranging social spending cuts (as in the pension case) was somehow easier to justify: it was all about fiscal consolidation in the face of slow moving demographic and economic challenges. By contrast, in the field of environmental policy, a commonly-used argument for dismantling concerned the restoration of 'competitiveness'. What this actually means in practice (competitiveness for whom?) and how it is to be attained is less clear and thus open to party political interpretation, sometimes with a strong ideological aspect. In practice, all three of our environmental cases concerned quite 'lumpy' investments that did not incorporate a significant 'race to the bottom' dimension.³ Had they done so, the politics of dismantling might have played out differently. The broad point we wish to make is that economic factors played a similar role to that of technology: they constituted the background upon which actors in particular institutional constellations made and re-made their choices. They did not determine the specific path which dismantling took, namely via the selection and use of specific strategies. To fully understand this aspect, we need to go beyond the situational characteristics discussed above and investigate the institutional constraints and opportunities that prevailed in each case.

Institutional constraints and opportunities operate at the level of the whole polity. *Polity level* factors (such as the number of institutional veto players or the structure of national party systems, which shape the distribution of partisan veto players) have been highlighted in the welfare state literature as having an important influence on the choice of policy dismantling strategies.

Some of our case studies confirm this to be true. As hypothesized in Chapter 2 and also Chapter 3, dismantling activities are most likely to be opposed by actors that benefit from the status quo. In other words, the greater the number and power of veto players, the lower the probability that active dismantling strategies will be used and, *ceteris paribus*, the more likely we are to observe more hidden and passive dismantling strategies (i.e. dismantling by default). Finally in the water case, we witnessed a unitary state (the UK) with relatively few veto points, consciously deciding not to implement expensive new policies to hold down public spending.

To our surprise, party ideology and electoral cycles hardly played a role in our social policy cases. If socio-economic pressures are high, no matter whether the government is left- or right-leaning or where the government is in the electoral cycle (as in the Italian pension case), active dismantling is what politicians had to engage in (note the influence of 'permanent austerity'). This was even more prominent in situations of non-decision or hidden forms of dismantling, as the case study of the indexation of social benefits in Denmark, Sweden, Germany, and the UK showed. By contrast, the environmental cases appear much more 'ideologized', with a much greater role for what Wilson (1980) would recognize as a more entrepreneurial form of politics. The role of party ideology, political signaling, and symbolic politics was more crucial for understanding these cases and especially those concerning water and air pollution. In the next section, we explore how the impact of all the factors discussed in this section influenced politicians' preference to dismantle.

9.3.4 *Political preferences to dismantle*

What can be learnt from the case studies with respect to how the emergence of dismantling preferences, in particular institutional and situational contexts, leads to the selection of particular dismantling strategies? Starting first of all with the social policy cases, while problem pressure was a necessary condition in the pension case, the nature of the respective political system (Switzerland vs. Italy) and the institutionalized legacies of earlier pension decisions, shaped the potential set of options available to politicians seeking to secure their preferences. So, while *active dismantling* was the dominant strategy in both countries, efforts also had to be made to hide losses, or at the very least overcome resistance, by forming coalitions and consulting widely. In this context, it was especially

remarkable that active dismantling was justified in the Swiss case in terms of 'curbing privileges'. The key point here is that while active dismantling was selected by politicians as their dominant strategy to secure their preferences, its effects were effectively delayed by 'grandfathering' to future generations.

In the case of child benefits, the importance of institutional factors is evident, but in a rather more negative sense. It was the weak institutional anchoring of the children's cause, principally the absence of a well-resourced advocate, that most strongly facilitated the non-development of policy over time. The strategy here was one of *by default*, but an inverted one, i.e. the non-development of a policy rather than the dismantling of an existing one. In establishing new public policies, one needs to mobilize the support of a majority; in the case of child benefits, such support was absent and thus the policy was not proactively developed. Essentially, non-mobilization (due among other things to a lack of cross-party agreement, the absence of strong political entrepreneurs, and an absence of an active and well-organized coalition of policy takers) condemned this particular policy to a long and gradual decline.

In the case of social benefits, we have a case of *dismantling by default*: the impact of the polity and policy-specific factors were almost negligible, at least in comparison with the pensions case. In essence, the 'by default' strategy used was not so dependent on the shape of existing institutions or the organization of the relevant policy contexts, since it did not require the active participation of those involved. Depending on the existing programmatic structure, a 'by default' strategy can, in principle, circumvent political opposition for a long time, but possibly not for ever. Originally, it was perceived to be the politically less painful way to cut in the countries studied, but differences in programmatic design rendered some of the systems more liable to future politicization than others.

Turning next to the environmental chapters, the air pollution case was marked by various attempts at active policy dismantling (the Clear Skies Initiative) and was mostly dominated by *symbolic action* (the 20 per cent rule) and *arena shifting* (the Cheney Task Force). The particular features of the US polity (legalism, distributed power, and many checks and balances) appear to have shaped the way in which policy dismantling was enacted. This was also reflected in which strategy delivered the greatest political success. In the end, dismantling proceeded where and when there were fewer veto players (i.e. the executive administrative arena). But given the many obstacles in the American political system, the Bush government was forced to employ many different strategies to secure its dismantling preferences, which of course included appeasing the large energy companies.

In the case of German waste, the main puzzle was the absence of any serious dismantling strategy even though the main policy was patently sub-optimal. The situation was allowed to persist because policy implementation had been delegated to private sector firms. This ensured that the costs were borne not by public budgets, but by consumers paying higher prices for waste services (a kind of unintended form of arena shifting). In turn, new constituencies developed around the policy (policy feedback) insulating it from attack (see above). This situation ensured that the political pressure on the government to act remained low and its preference to dismantle remained weak. Where politicians cannot expect pay-offs and where no societal advocacy for dismantling emerges, deficient policies can thus survive periodic financial crises and mounting performance deficits.

Finally, in the water case the choice of strategies (non-implementation with respect to the Control of Pollution Act and arena shifting in the case of the hit lists), was the product of political pragmatism (serious socio-economic pressures in the 1970s, followed by the unforeseen rise in the EU's power throughout the 1980s and 1990s). Throughout, politicians found themselves responding to rapidly changing events at home and in the EU. Indeed, this case arguably had less to do with the changing institutional set up in the UK, than the changing ideological preference for broader policy objectives such as more/less privatization and/or deeper European integration.

9.4 Policy dismantling: lessons learnt

The empirical illustrations outlined above usefully reveal how situational, economic and institutional factors shaped general preferences for certain concrete dismantling strategies. In this section, we draw some preliminary theoretical lessons about the politics of dismantling

from these empirical accounts. In general, political actors evaluated the expected political costs and benefits of policy dismantling in the light of institutional opportunities and constraints, as well as other actors' preferences.⁴ Their choice of a particular dismantling strategy depended upon how the costs and benefits of dismantling were expected to unfold across the affected actors and the extent to which these actors were able to organize and mobilize for or against dismantling.

If we take a certain functional pressure to dismantle and some minimal dismantling advocacy for granted and if the fundamental question of whether or not to dismantle is answered in the positive, the next factor determining the choice of strategy was the strength of the institutional constraints confronting politicians. Assuming a certain cohesiveness within the ruling party, a crucial question was how much opposition power could be assembled by the potential anti-dismantling coalition. The greater that veto potential, the more likely it was that passive and/or hidden dismantling strategies were chosen. Thus it was the institutional—even the constitutional—reality which determined not only the mode, but also the concrete target of policy dismantling.

In our cases, the characteristics of the polity also influenced whether politicians were able to employ what one could call 'unilateral strategies' of policy dismantling, i.e. dismantling by default, symbolic dismantling, or just manipulating certain parts of a specific policy over which they have greater executive control. The more a polity embodied checks and balances and thus the greater the number of veto players, the more likely politicians were to employ dismantling strategies which did not require the agreement of other actors. In this sense, dismantling by default and symbolic dismantling appeared to be the most likely strategies.

The more politicians needed to seek consent from institutional, party or other societal actors in order to realize dismantling, the more costly (in time, side-payments and other resources) the process was going to be for them. It was clear, however, that costliness crucially depended on whether or not a broad societal agreement emerged about a specific policy problem which might be resolved by dismantling. Whether or not such broad agreement existed—or could, via the combined use of different strategies be manufactured - determined whether more active and/or more revealed strategies were used.

Related to that, another important factor in our dismantling cases was public opinion, specifically the public's acceptance of policy dismantling. For example, the fear of retribution from Green voters led the German government to hide the inefficiency of the waste disposal policy it had established. But the child benefits case highlights that public opinion or public pressure was not a given; without well-organized policy takers, particularly within the ruling party or the politico-administrative system, it is easier to neglect (and thus to dismantle by default) certain areas of public policy.

The perception of costs and benefits with regard to certain policies was significantly affected by the organizational and institutional structures that obtain at a certain moment in a political system (thus confirming one of the conventional wisdoms of social policy research). To a certain extent one can say that the individual political systems 'created' their particular dismantling patterns. The air pollution case exhibited the typical traits of US politics, i.e. blockage in the Congress that led the government to use administrative regulations which were counterbalanced by processes of judicial review. By contrast, the German waste case was rooted in a political tradition of turning to top-down corporatist solutions, i.e. delegating tasks to semi-public organs which are created and survive due to regulatory interventions and mandatory participation by all sides. However, policy type undoubtedly played an important role too. We can see this very easily by examining how the strategies were distributed across the six cases. In very general terms, the environmental cases were more likely to feature the more revealed strategies (namely symbolic and active) suggesting a greater element of 'credit claiming', whereas the social ones were dominated by the two more hidden strategies (by default and arena shifting), suggesting a stronger urge to 'avoid blame'.

Having now established links between the predominance of certain preferences in particular institutional conditions and the selection of particular strategies, it is insightful to complete the circle and address the final important element of dismantling raised in Chapter 2: whether the strategies that were selected generated the effects that we originally predicted they would

(see Table 2.3 for details). In general, the child benefits, social benefits, and waste cases all confirmed that *by default strategies* are more likely to focus on the nonadjustment of substantial intensity. With the exception of the child benefits case, politicians seem to have judged that the political risks associated with reducing instrument density were too high. Similarly, our predictions about the effects of *active dismantling* were also confirmed in those cases where it was attempted: in general, there was a significant focus on substantial intensity, although the attention devoted to reducing policy density was less than we had originally predicted. Where *arena shifting* was selected (in general, it was not, however, the dominant strategy—see above), the target was formal intensity. Finally, our predictions about the effects of *symbolic dismantling* were confirmed in the two cases where it was a significant feature, namely the hit lists saga in the water case and the 20 per cent threshold in the air pollution case.

9.5 Conclusions and new directions

In very broad, system-level terms, the expansion and contraction of public policy occurs in the context of macro-level trends in the economy, demography, and public attitudes to issues such as welfare protection and environmental quality. Policy makers seek to adjust—through expanding or cutting—policy to match these relatively slow moving processes. Therefore, in principle, we should expect policy change in both directions. Yet in spite of its continuing political significance, the cutting, diminution, or removal of existing policy—what we have elected to term policy dismantling—remains a greatly neglected topic in public policy analysis. As noted in the opening chapters, the most advanced work has been done in the field of social policy. Here, an enormous amount has been learnt in the last three decades about why politicians dismantle, the factors that determine the strategies they use to achieve their dismantling goals, and the varied effects these have on the pre-existing pattern of policy outputs and, eventually, policy impacts. However, the basic features of this sector (principally the magnitude and distribution of costs and benefits) have, we feel, exerted a powerful and constraining influence on the way in which policy dismantling in general is conceived of and studied.

In very general terms, we know that cutting in this sector often requires highly concentrated costs to be imposed on often very strongly represented and deserving beneficiaries, whereas the resulting benefits tend to diffuse across the rest of society. Politicians certainly do not stand to benefit automatically from cutting in this particular realm. These basic features have informed and, we sense, sustained an implicit assumption that policy dismantling in general represents a special category of politics. Ever since Pierson (1994), it has been thought of as embodying a uniquely difficult political challenge—how to avoid blame for cuts that are necessary but politically unpopular to achieve. Add in the effect of the negativity bias which causes people to react particularly strongly to losses (i.e. informed by prospect theory) and policy feedback (through which existing policies steadily generate new constituencies of self-interest), and one has a wicked policy problem par excellence. Consequently, the menu of the most likely strategies has been dominated by those that seek to hide its real effects from beneficiaries and, above all, voters. Indeed for Pierson (1994: 18), given that 'retrenchment is generally an exercise in 'blame avoidance', rather than 'credit claiming', the three strategies that politicians do seem most likely to employ are indeed those of obfuscation, division, and compensation.

Our more comparative perspective on policy dismantling challenges many of these conventional wisdoms. First of all, it challenges the notion that *dismantling is inherently difficult to achieve*. Our case studies have revealed that dismantling happens and sometimes very smoothly indeed. While there are undeniably profound political and institutional obstacles to cutting some policies (especially the social ones surrounded by policy takers) and especially some of their component parts (specifically density as opposed to intensity), cutting is nonetheless possible either with more open and direct strategies or, depending on the prevailing institutional circumstances and mood among the public, with more hidden ones.

Second, it challenges the view that *dismantling amounts to a binary choice between continuation and termination*, which was implicit in the early policy termination literature.

Rather, dismantling is far too complex and multifaceted a phenomenon to squeeze into such a simple analytical scheme. The definitions and concepts developed in this volume have enabled us to paint a much more subtle empirical picture that picks out the dismantling trends even within individual dimensions of a particular policy, such as the calibration of particular instruments.

Related to that, we have shown that dismantling is *not necessarily dominated by the politics of loss imposition*. In some of the cases, strategies were, as Pierson first demonstrated, consciously selected to impose losses on some groups. But in others, they were selected to bestow benefits on particular groups. And in yet others, they were used by non-state actors operating at various levels of governance to block and/or accelerate what politicians were doing (Pal and Weaver 2003: 324), as part of a much wider game of policy making. While very useful, the concept of dismantling strategies now needs to be further expanded to accommodate these potentially different (i.e. more credit claiming) motivations. We think that our fourfold categorization of more or less revealed forms offers a useful point of departure in this respect. Fourth, we have shown that *dismantling is not confined to the social policy field*. Our chapters show that politicians pursue it in a wider range of circumstances, policy areas, and countries. It is certainly not confined to 'hard times'. Indeed, the more one moves away from social policy to more heavily regulated areas like the environment, where the state is not spending public money and there might therefore be powerful actors pushing for dismantling, the more significant this point becomes. Policy type—a factor first noted by Pierson—therefore needs to be re-introduced into the dismantling literature as a matter deserving greater analysis. For us, thinking about policy dismantling in terms of preferences, opportunity structures, strategies, and effects has proven very useful in slicing further into the Gordian knot of cause and effect.

This leads to a fifth point: *dismantling politics should not be conceived of as an entirely separate and hence intrinsically different kind of politics*. Dismantling is not necessarily dominated by the imposition of pain: in some cases, benefits may be more salient to some actors at certain points in time than the costs. Dismantling is therefore not necessarily a game of blame avoidance; it is not even necessarily 'inherently unpopular' or 'extremely treacherous' (Pierson 1994: 18). Whether or not actors engage in dismantling to 'claim credit' (instead of avoid blame) depends on the particular constellation of costs and benefits and different actors' perception of alternative options (and their associated pay-offs). Blame avoidance games are just one aspect of a wider policy game that actors play. In more regulatory (for example, environmental) policy fields, dismantling may be used by different actors as part of a 'signaling game' to court voters or appeal to party members, or to win the support of powerful actors such as industry. Dismantling decisions are, in other words, centrally concerned with the same activities that bulk large in the everyday politics of policy expansion: building coalitions; framing policy problems; working across multiple levels of governance; hiding costs and buying off opponents; and, as suggested in Chapter 6 and also by Schneider and Ingram (1993), portraying target groups as more or less deserving of attention. However, what is special is that the distribution of costs and benefits is more likely to be such that the benefits are rather uncertain compared to the costs and where the strategy chosen is the least worst option. This implies that a strategy of dismantling by default or via arena shifting will be particularly prevalent, especially in the social policy field. Furthermore, it also suggests that dismantling may often be more difficult to observe empirically than expansion. Our policy cases are testimony to the need to pay careful attention to the detailed aspects of policy (specifically, small but recurring adjustments in intensity as opposed to large but infrequent changes in policy density) in order fully to reveal policy dismantling.

Dismantling, therefore, is a particular and, in many respects, uniquely complicated sub category of policy change, where the political urge to hide is particularly evident (Mettler 2011). After all, we would not expect to find many examples of expansion by default.⁵ But to say that policy dismantling is different to policy expansion should not be taken to mean that scholars should employ *entirely* different theories and methods. In this book we have tried to show that the process of selecting dismantling strategies can be explained using middle range concepts such as veto players, windows of opportunity, policy framing, and so on.

Related to that, through our more comparative approach we have revealed that some of the core axioms of the welfare state retrenchment literature— such as policy feedback, for example—are not as confined to the social policy fields as someone reading the existing work in this field might be forgiven for thinking.⁶ Take the concept of policy feedback for example (Pierson 1993). The welfare state retrenchment literature has very convincingly demonstrated its importance in the social policy field, but our cases indicate that it is just as prevalent in the environmental field, despite the supposedly more diffuse nature of many environmental benefits. It was especially apparent in the waste case ('ecological participation') but also featured in the water case (local technocrats seeking privatization to secure a more predictable source of financing). At the same time, policy feedback was not a feature of all the social cases. As noted above, the non-development of child benefits in Spain had a lot to do with the absence of strong policy takers. Similarly, others have suggested that the negativity bias—another key axiom of the welfare state retrenchment literature—is generally applicable to the study of politics, its precise effects now need to be explored in a range of different institutional and, we would argue, policy settings (Vis 2011: 349).

We hope these five points will encourage scholars of public policy not to treat dismantling as a niche subject (as policy termination has effectively become) with its own dedicated theories and approaches or focus on specific types or instruments of policy (e.g. the welfare state or (de)regulation). Our approach—based on a more neutral conceptualization of the phenomenon and a more open framework to identify it empirically—has deliberately sought to move dismantling back into the mainstream of comparative politics and public policy. Crucially, the theoretical concepts that we have employed in this book to explain actors' behavior, as well as the interplay between their preferences and different institutional configurations, are precisely the same as those used to understand broader policy dynamics. The implication is that if we know about institutional factors and powerful actors' positions we can— on the basis of political science analysis—formulate expectations about the kinds of dismantling strategies politicians will select. In this sense, policy dismantling is not radically different from normal policy making; it certainly does not, as mooted in Chapter 1, necessarily turn the standard Lasswellian definition of politics on its head.

If our argument is accepted, new and exciting opportunities for dialogue and debate with the broader field of public policy analysis should open up. The potential pay-offs here are potentially large and mutually attractive, because at present public policy scholars are eager to identify general patterns in policy change, but their thinking seems dominated by the difference between large and small policy changes, as opposed to the precise direction of policy change (namely expansion or dismantling) (but see Howlett and Cashore 2009). For both scholars of policy dismantling and those interested in longer-term policy dynamics (Jacobs (2011) for example), the pay-offs from examining it more comparatively are likely to be very significant indeed.

Admittedly, the cases of dismantling assembled in this book were not intended to be a systematic test of a specific hypothesis; in fact, our analysis has oscillated between theory-generating and theory-testing. Nonetheless, as a general plausibility probe, the six cases have demonstrated the added value of studying dismantling more comparatively. More intellectual and empirical work is now needed, perhaps informed by the very thought-provoking hypotheses derived at the end of each empirical chapter. In general terms, one obvious path is to open up the number of policy types a little more. A lot of the work on path dependence has focused on budgets and, more specifically, more distributive policy areas such as agricultural support, which have excited a lot of political attention, but have not exhibited an equivalent amount of cutting (Daugbjerg 2003). With some exceptions (Rose 1990), there has been very little work which samples across the full range of policy areas, including some of the less obvious ones such as defense or economic policy. Pal and Weaver's (2003) account of the politics of loss imposition in the USA and Canada provides a useful example of how future work can be designed to disentangle the effect of policy type from broader, political system variables. The chapters assembled in this book also underline the need to ensure that research designs are sensitive to the tendency for dismantling to unfold over fairly long time periods and thus in the context of wider processes such as

Europeanization and globalization. When examined over a longer time frame using the analytical framework described in Chapter 2, some of the cases revealed evidence not of dismantling per se, but of more subtle policy substitution effects and even policy expansion. Another path would encompass work of a more methodological nature. We have shown that the study of policy dismantling is potentially highly demanding (addressing inter alia longish causal chains and indirect and often deliberately hidden effects/relationships). Scholars interested in analyzing these things more comparatively will need to prepare themselves accordingly. For example, many of our cases were characterized by significant changes in policy intensity, but very little change in policy density. Larger 'n' quantitative analyses (for example, see Knill et al. 2013) could confirm whether or not this is a general finding and, if so, help to pinpoint cases deserving more detailed, and perhaps more qualitative, analysis. Similarly, we did not identify many straightforward examples of changes in the more polity-oriented category of formal intensity. Future work could usefully draw on work done on administrative cuts (for example Dunsire, Hood, and Huby 1989) to investigate whether this was a real finding or an artifact of our policy output- focused empirical approach. Finally, in terms of future research designs, we have sought to develop and employ categories that traveled between policy fields. As a first step, we therefore opted to concentrate on policy outputs. We suspect that the more analysts move from studying outputs to eventual impacts—changes in the quantity of cash benefits received or the level of environmental quality enjoyed by voters, for example—the more difficult it will be to draw direct comparisons. Yet inter-policy comparisons such as these are often uppermost in politicians' minds when they come under external pressures to cut. The next stage in comparative work could usefully analyze what shapes politicians decision to distribute cuts *across* as well as within different policy areas. Common measures of overall and relative effect can, of course, be envisaged—money for example—but are not unproblematic; the use of monetary assessment metrics in areas such as environmental and health policy has proven to be highly controversial. Yet, it is precisely this aspect—how cuts in different areas of policy directly impact upon the lived experiences of voters and citizens—which has the most immediate and direct political consequences, because it sets the stage for the next round in the continuing political game of policy change, encompassing both policy expansion or dismantling. Ever since the onset of the financial recession in the late 2000s, the political relevance of academic work which documents and explains *both* aspects has grown and grown.

Notes

1. We have changed the order of presentation as compared to Figure 2.1 in order to address the most important explanatory elements last.
2. The influence of economic conditions should not to be denied, but its importance is not clear-cut in all the cases. For example, Chapter 5 showed that a deteriorating economic situation is not determinative (child benefits in Spain and Portugal experienced different levels of dismantling despite similar macro-economic pressures).
3. Had we looked at environmental policies governing traded products such as cars, for example, competitiveness pressures might have bulked larger (dismantling to prevent capital fleeing to countries with lower standards, for example).
4. Thus, perceived political costs and benefits should be distinguished from the social costs and benefits that are generated when policies are actually dismantled (i.e. in the language used in Chapter 1, 'effects').
5. Although this hypothesis could of course be tested empirically.
6. If new regulation typically delivers concentrated costs and diffused benefits, we would not ordinarily expect significant policy feedback (cf. social policies), other than when policy entrepreneurs and pressure groups are especially active (Wilson 1980).

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