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**POLICY DISMANTLING**

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805.

**ABSTRACT** One of the many ways in which politicians seek to respond to economic austerity pressure is to cut or even completely remove public policies that were introduced in better times. Yet, despite the many advances that have been made in policy research, relatively little is known about why, when, how and with what effects politicians engage in policy dismantling. This article takes stock of the existing literatures with the aim of stimulating a renewed focus on policy dismantling. It identifies a number of pertinent analytical dimensions (namely the origin of political preferences, prevailing opportunity structures, dismantling strategies, and effects/outcomes/impacts) and explores how they can be brought together to provide new insights into the comparative politics of policy dismantling. Finally, claims are made in relation to what policy dismantling research can offer to the understanding of both policy dynamics and politics more generally.

**KEY WORDS** Blame avoidance; deregulation; policy dismantling; policy expansion; policy termination; public policy; welfare state retrenchment.

## INTRODUCTION

In the late 2000s, many parts of the world entered an era of intense economic austerity. One of the ways that politicians sought to respond to austerity pressures was to share out the pain by raising taxes. Another was to try and save public money by cutting public policies that support particular client groups. Today, the cutting, diminution or removal of existing policy – activities which can profitably be grouped together under the heading of ‘policy dismantling’ – remains a dominant aspect of political discourse in many parts of Europe. Yet, despite the many important advances that have been made in public policy research since the 1950s, public policy scholars still know far less about dismantling than policy expansion. Indeed, with the exception of the social policy field, where welfare state retrenchment has been a live issue since the 1980s, the literature (or more accurately, literatures) on dismantling, fail to empiricize the main patterns of change, let alone explicate the precise preferences to cut – always a rather puzzling aspect given the opposition it is widely

assumed to trigger amongst beneficiaries. Moreover, with a few obvious exceptions (Dunsire *et al.* 1989; Rose 1990;), there is very little solid comparative analysis (i.e., spanning different policy fields or jurisdictions).

This article seeks to address this significant gap in our understanding of everyday politics as well as broader policy dynamics, by taking stock of existing research on *policy dismantling*, a term which first appeared in the title of Pierson's (1994) *locus classicus* on welfare state reform. We elect to use this term as a synthesizing device because it appears to offer an analytically more viable way to draw wider lessons than the obvious alternatives – policy termination, welfare state retrenchment, deregulation, etc. – which are tied to specific areas or elements of policy (goals, instruments, etc.).

The next section explores the relevant literatures, with the modest aim of identifying the most salient lessons for academic work on policy dismantling. Drawing on Bauer *et al.* (2012), we discuss what conclusions these literatures have reached with regard to four central dimensions, namely: the source of *political preferences* (i.e., why do politicians dismantle?); the *opportunity structures* in which they and other actors dismantle; the *strategies* (i.e., how actors dismantle); and the *effects* they generate (i.e., primarily on the policy *status quo*). In the third section, we build on these points by exploring one sub-area of policy dismantling research which we think is especially ripe for new work and which draws together these four analytical dimensions in a productive fashion, i.e., that seeking to compare within and across different policy fields. To illustrate our more general point that a renewed focus on policy dismantling could be potentially highly fruitful for our broader understanding of policy and politics, the fourth and final section speculates on the potential value added of adopting a more comparative approach.

## POLICY DISMANTLING: THE EXISTING LITERATURES

### Policy termination

Some of the first attempts to study dismantling were made by Brewer (1974) and his associates (Behn 1978), who saw policy termination (i.e., the complete removal or 'death' of existing policies) as the final piece in Lasswell's (1956) attempt to understand the entire policy cycle. According to one influential contribution, six major factors explain why termination is so rare: cognitive aversion; institutional longevity; dynamic conservatism; anti-dismantling coalitions; legal obstacles; and the high costs of initiation (see deLeon 1978: 286 ff). Over the years, the termination literature has produced a number of case studies, but few analytical improvements with regard to the substance of this approach.

In terms of our four analytical dimensions, the termination literature has made its greatest contribution in terms of effects – especially in the sense of demonstrating the rarity of complete termination. But the conceptual and empirical work which emerged did not have a deep or lasting impact on the

policy analysis community, let alone on the grand debates in political science in general. Missing were solid comparisons across countries (the debate on opportunities and strategies of policy dismantling was mostly restricted to the American political system). The dominance of single case study designs (with their well-known limitations with regard to theoretical development) and the lack of dialogue with other research agendas, further contributed to its relative isolation. Finally, the dependent variable – termination – was unnecessarily stripped of analytical variation, thus neglecting other effects (partial or even non-termination for example).

In sum, except for clarifying some potential effects, the termination literature never made much progress in terms of the four dimensions. Consequently, fundamental questions – for example, the source of politicians' preferences to dismantle – remained unanswered. Furthermore, by never really addressing their 'dependent variable problem' (Green-Pedersen 2004), termination scholars effectively left it with insufficient analytical variation. Despite some more recent attempts to revive interest (Daniels 1997), the whole approach has largely run out of steam.

### Deregulation

Political demands for deregulation first emerged in the United States of America (USA). The 1980s are now known as 'the decade of deregulation' (Moran and Prosser 1994: 9). What emerged from this period was an extensive literature on deregulation, which has made a great deal of headway in terms of explicating the four dimensions of dismantling. Thus, a range of preferences for deregulating have been hypothesized – linked to ideological preferences for a smaller state through to technological changes and external harmonization pressures – but have not been systematically tested (Howlett 2006).

In terms of strategies, deregulation can involve struggles over how to justify (or deny) the costs and benefits of acting – something that scholars of welfare state reform would immediately recognize (see below). Hancher and Moran (1989: 132) perceptively suggested that deregulation could occur in two different ways: *actively* (i.e., governors changing rules and/or altering the way they are implemented); or *passively* (i.e., when policy systems fail to keep up with changes in external technological and economic changes). Clarke's (2000: 26) reference to 'the deregulation charade' has an obvious affinity with blame-avoidance strategies. Yet deregulation need not necessarily follow a blame-avoidance logic: if, as in a regulatory field such as environmental protection, deregulation amounts to no more than a search for alternative ways (or instruments) to do the same thing, dismantling could well be an attractive option for those who think they are being (over)regulated. Our main point, though, is that in seeking to explicate the selection and use of strategies, analysts should specify *which* costs and benefits are at issue, and who in practice they (are expected to) fall upon.

Finally, the question of effects has been a running theme within the deregulation literature. Majone (1996) helpfully pointed out that deregulation could encompass the design and application of precise instruments, through to more polity related aspects. In an early contribution, Hancher and Moran (1989: 130 – 1) sought to achieve greater analytical precision with regard to the dependent variable. They argued that deregulation could imply a number of possible changes ranging from the *cancellation* or abolition of existing rules (which they predicted would be rather rare in practice), through to *substitution* (the much more common practice, they thought, of replacing one rule for another that is narrower in scope) and what they termed *systematization* (i.e., pruning back, simplifying or revising existing rules) (*Ibid.* 130 – 1). To that, Majone (1996) helpfully added that the way in which deregulation is often thought of – a process through which regulation is dismantled – can be rather different to what he and many others demonstrated empirically to be the case, namely ‘regulatory reform’ (i.e., a combination of deregulation and re-regulation – that is, the addition of new rules), particularly at European Union (EU) level. Others investigated how re-regulation could be manifest in the appearance of ‘new’, that is non-regulatory, instruments (Jordan *et al.* 2003; Jordan *et al.* 2005). This finding seemed to confirm Hancher and Moran’s (1989) expectation that deregulation could generate eye-catching changes in policy instrumentation whilst leaving the substantive goals and objectives of policy largely unaffected. Indeed, the deregulation literature has usefully revealed that deregulatory strategies can produce a number of interwoven effects, which poses an immediate challenge for the formulation of the dependent variable.

In sum, unlike the termination literature, the deregulation literature has started to address questions related to preferences, strategies and effects. However, in general it has tended to concentrate on one element of ‘policy’, namely policy instruments.

### Welfare state dismantling

The third area of literature concerns the reform of the welfare state. It is voluminous (for reviews, see Levy [2010] and Green-Pedersen and Haverland [2002]), but remains somewhat detached from other sub-areas of public policy research. Nonetheless, it has achieved the greatest advances in terms of the four dimensions, both singly and, uniquely, in combination with one another.

In terms of preferences, early on dismantling was presented as something that political actors had to pursue to cope with external ‘permanent austerity’-type pressures (Pierson 2001: 13); later, the role of globalization and international regulatory competition (chiefly within the EU) were also investigated and the underlying motivators teased out (Knill *et al.* 2009; Leibfried 2010: 275). Weaver (1986: 387), for example, hypothesized that it could allow politicians to engage in scapegoating or other multi-level

blame-avoidance games. Another potentially rewarding approach has been to understand how these various external pressures are not simply socially constructed, but subtly refracted through the prism of national party politics. The well-known tension between political and policy goals is often thought to bulk especially large in the politics of dismantling. Others have extensively cultivated this line of thinking to explore why some governments seem to have a much stronger and more consistent preference to dismantle than others. But in general, politicians seem to retrench when the alternatives are perceived to be worse, or when the effects can be hidden via phased cutting (Vis and van Kersbergen 2007). Finally, the literature has shown that some preferences may – at least in part – be endogenously derived, i.e., via processes of policy feedback.

In terms of opportunity structures, the second dimension, the welfare state literature has developed a sophisticated conceptualization of the context in which politicians and other actors act. The existing policy design (Pierson 1994: 47 – 50) was shown to be an important aspect. For example, policies which incorporate indexation rules could be more quickly tweaked to cut spending than those requiring more significant (and hence higher profile) legislative changes. Meanwhile, it is well known that the vertical and horizontal distribution of authority hinders the expansion of policy (policy innovation generally declines as the number of veto points increases) (Benson and Jordan 2011; Bonoli 2001). But in ‘hard times’, when policy dismantling is often presumed to be higher up the political agenda, the relationship may work in the other direction (Pierson 1994: 36, 39).

Turning to strategies, when caught between the Scylla of an external pressure to cut and the Charybdis of political opposition from a policy’s beneficiaries, Pierson (1994) argued that politicians would be driven to employ strategies that avoided or otherwise dissipated blame. Subsequent empirical work revealed, however, that when used, many of the strategies were less effective than originally envisaged. In addition to intense opposition from particular beneficiaries, sympathetic implementing officials found imaginative ways to evade cuts. Consequently, while some individual welfare policies were reformed, and there was a great deal of blame shifting and avoiding, overall the welfare state seemed to be rather resilient.

But while significant policy dismantling is difficult to achieve, Pierson (1994) showed that smaller cutbacks could nevertheless be achieved by designing and sensitively deploying different strategies. Weaver (1986: 385 – 90) had earlier identified eight strategies, ranging from keeping cuts off the political agenda through to scapegoating and making cutbacks automatic. Crucially, all these sought to avoid the political blame for cuts. But it is, of course, important to remember that if dismantling was popular amongst certain key voters and/or policy actors, the strategies might well be geared towards publicizing its existence, not hiding it away. Here, new cross-sectoral work could be immensely valuable. At present, there are too few comparative empirical studies to form a sound judgement on the factors that most affect strategy selection and

implementation. Issues of timing and temporality appear to be important, though: building new reforms on top of old ones may, to paraphrase Bonoli (2001), open up new opportunities to achieve radical cuts.

Finally, in terms of effects, the fourth and final common dimension, the welfare state literature usefully reminds us that dismantling can be more difficult to observe empirically than expansion, especially when the motive to ‘avoid blame’ is strong. Researchers face a choice between looking at outputs (Green-Pedersen 2004: 6), impacts, and possibly even outcomes such as changes in social inequality or environmental quality. Many studies of social policy have utilized outcome measures such as average replacement rates, but these are inherently problematic because they may be affected by very many confounding factors (Green-Pedersen 2004: 7). All three of the literatures should really have considered this matter, but only that concerning the welfare state has really made that much headway.

New work on policy dismantling must adopt a means to measure changes on the dependent variable. It should be capable of capturing small but recurring adjustments in the calibration of instruments, as well as larger but possibly infrequent changes in the overall density of policies in a given area. Finally, researchers should be careful not to bias their studies: the (de)regulation literature showed that dismantling preferences may generate unintended consequences (i.e., re-regulation, including the adoption of completely new policy instruments). The obvious risk is that by searching for evidence of dismantling, analysts overlook other salient policy changes including expansion (Howlett and Cashore 2009: 42).

#### NEW ANALYTICAL PUZZLES AND THEIR ASSOCIATED CHALLENGES

This necessarily brief tour of the relevant literatures indicates that there are some especially salient dimensions which could be re-assembled in many different ways, depending on the underlying research question or puzzle that analysts wish to address. To illustrate what is possible, in this section we will explore one especially relevant puzzle – that relating to cross-policy variations – and show how it cuts across all four dimensions. In the final section we explore a number of other puzzles that could, in principle, be explored by those seeking a more comprehensive understanding of policy dismantling.

For scholars of public policy, ‘policy’ is an obvious dependent variable to adopt, but others have found it fruitful to focus on dismantling strategies (Bauer *et al.* 2012). Broadly following a ‘policy determines politics’ logic, Pierson (1994) and his co-workers looked at both. They essentially argued that because social policy adopts a (re)distributive logic, during a period of policy expansion the costs of new policies will be diffused across taxpayers, but the benefits will be concentrated on welfare state recipients. During a period of dismantling, on the other hand, ‘cutbacks [will] impose concentrated costs in return for diffuse benefits’ (Pierson 1994: 13). Add in the tendency for

recipients to react more strongly to the threat of losses than to the offer of equivalent gains, and it is not hard to appreciate why cutting might demand blame avoidance strategies.

Pierson was more sensitive to the intrinsic differences between different policy types than some of his contemporaries. He showed that dismantling in an area (e.g., health care) where the state is distributing resources will not necessarily exhibit the same political dynamics as one (e.g., labour markets) where the state is regulating. He demonstrated that policy (type) has a significant influence on the politics and also the longer term effects of dismantling. But despite several subsequent attempts to attract support for this approach (Pierson 2006), the role of policy type gradually dropped out of the analytical picture. New work on policy dismantling could therefore usefully engage in comparative work by looking at areas of *regulatory* policy. There are good reasons for believing that dismantling dynamics in these fields will be different. Building on the same policy determines politics logic, during a period of policy expansion we might expect the costs of new regulations to be concentrated on regulatees, whereas the benefits are likely to be more widely diffused across society. By contrast, when it comes to dismantling, the benefits are likely to be more concentrated (principally on regulatees, who may benefit both immediately and directly from less onerous forms of control), but the costs could potentially be more diffusely distributed within the wider public. So unlike many areas of social policy (Green-Pedersen and Haverland 2002: 46), there could be some very powerful votes in dismantling policies in an area such as the environment, such that the desire to 'claim credit' begins to outweigh the widely presumed pressure to 'avoid blame' (Levy 2010). The widespread reporting of stealthy and 'dismantling by default'-type strategies in the welfare state retrenchment literature does seem to bear out 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 more open and active dismantling strategies. If so, other types of dismantling strategy would have to be hypothesized and tested empirically (Bauer *et al.* 2012).

What analytical challenges should those wanting to undertake such work expect to confront? In addition to identifying a more encompassing suite of dismantling strategies, they would need to decide how to configure their dependent variable. Spending has been an obvious option in the welfare state literature, but may be less applicable to more regulatory policy areas. Consequently, analysts may prefer to focus on *policy outputs* instead, in which case other challenges would have to be confronted, not least the potential for multi-dimensional change (i.e., the potential for various sub-elements of policy to move in different directions and at different speeds), which deregulation scholars detected.

Taking Hall's (1993) widely used typology of policy change as their point of departure, Knill *et al.* (2009) have developed a valuable scheme to assess the

degree of policy expansion and/or dismantling. Their 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. Policy dismantling can thus be defined (a second important challenge) as a change in a particular policy area that either diminishes the number of policies in a particular area, reduces the number of policy instruments used and/or lowers their intensity. Other, more polity-related aspects could also be envisaged and introduced into the analysis, such as the administrative capacities to implement and supervise policies, which would be highly suitable to macro-comparative analysis.

A third challenge is to develop an analytical framework to explain the patterns of dismantling observed in particular cases. Here, the welfare state literature provides many useful ideas for selecting independent variables. If we want to understand the choice of dismantling strategy or policy effects (two possible dependent variables), then analysts will need to vary the configurations of economic conditions, institutional opportunities and constraints in a systematic fashion. This can be done in 'large n'-type analyses (Knill *et al.* forthcoming) and/or in carefully selected case studies (Bauer *et al.* 2012).

#### WHAT IS TO BE GAINED?

A more comparative and finely grained empirical approach to policy dismantling has the potential to offer many new and important insights. First of all, it could challenge the widely accepted notion that dismantling is inherently difficult to achieve. While there are undeniably profound political and institutional obstacles to cutting certain types of policies in some jurisdictions, 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. Korte and Jörgens (2012) have shown how the Bush administration in the United States (US) dismantled a programme to control air pollution from large and stationary sources, precisely to appeal to those parts of the electorate that ideologically opposed 'big-government'. Häusermann (2010) has shown that re-election and pension cuts can go hand-in-hand. However, indirect forms of dismantling, such as changes to benefit indexation, are still the best choice for politicians who need to quickly consolidate budgets (Green-Pedersen *et al.* 2012).

Secondly, it could reveal much more about where, when and why politicians opt to dismantle. Is dismantling really confined to 'hard times' or is it a feature of the good economic times too? Building on what is already known about dynamics within certain policy sectors (Knill *et al.* 2009; Leibfried 2010), does the presence of multiple levels of governance, as occurs in the EU, enable or constrain dismantling? And what precisely is dismantled? Is it policy instruments or is it policy goals? Or is the most common form of dismantling slow and gradual reductions in the calibration of instruments (Jordan *et al.* 2013), perhaps as a

consequence of a conscious indexation strategy? At present, existing research on these and other pertinent themes (such as 'new' regulation), as well as depoliticization more generally (Flinders and Buller 2006), is under-empiricized and hence ill-equipped to answer these questions (but see Berry *et al.* 2010; Maltzman and Shipan 2008; and Wurzel *et al.* 2013).

This leads to a third point: policy dismantling research has the potential to tell us more about policy change in general. Dismantling is undoubtedly a particular and, in many respects, uniquely complicated sub-category of policy change, where the political urge to hide is particularly strong. After all, we would not expect to find many examples of expansion by default. But to claim that dismantling is different to expansion should not be taken to imply that scholars should employ *entirely* different theories and methods. In our view, policy researchers stand to gain more by employing middle-range concepts such as veto players, windows of opportunity, policy framing and so on, than following policy termination researchers and ploughing their own furrow. We feel that building a dialogue with those studying more general patterns of policy change (e.g., Howlett and Cashore 2009) could prove to be mutually very beneficial, as well as those studying other stages of the policy process, such as policy innovation and diffusion (Volden *et al.* 2008).

Finally, dismantling research has the potential to enrich our understanding of politics in general. In the past, there has been a tendency to treat cutting as an entirely separate and hence intrinsically different kind of politics. Yet, dismantling need not be 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. Similarly, policy dismantling need not necessarily be 'inherently unpopular' or 'extremely treacherous' (Pierson 1994: 18). Surely, whether or not actors engage in dismantling to 'claim credit' is an empirical matter; one that depends on the particular constellation of costs and benefits, and different actors' perception of alternative options (and their associated payoffs). The point is that political dismantling and non-dismantling preferences should not simply be presumed, but be empirically validated and explained to produce sound policy analysis.

Dismantling games are therefore just one aspect of a much wider policy game that actors play. They can involve precisely 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. Policy expansion and policy dismantling are therefore best viewed as two sides of the same coin and should be studied accordingly.

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