

REVIEW ESSAY/ESSAI CRITIQUE

Canadian Public Policy: The State of the Discipline

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Abstract

This article examines the state of the English-language peer-reviewed literature published over the 2011–2021 period whose objective is to describe and explain processes of development of Canadian public policies and their consequences. It first presents a profile of the surveyed literature's attention to different policy sectors, elements of public policy, and its chosen methodologies to study them. It then examines the empirical and theoretical contributions of the literature to uncovering the constitutive actors and their interactions in policy processes in policy domains of Canadian jurisdictions; the logics of chosen policy instruments and their distributive effects; and the interactions among Canada's structural, institutional and ideational features and policy actors' motivations and behaviour with processes of policy innovation, continuity and change. A foremost contribution of Canadian policy studies to comparative policy studies is to demonstrate the causal impacts of the interaction of institutional, structural and ideational/cultural factors on processes of policy development.

Résumé

Cet article fait le point sur l'état des études sur les politiques publiques canadiennes en examinant le corpus des documents évalués par les pairs publiés au cours de la décennie 2011–2021 dont l'objectif déclaré est d'expliquer les caractéristiques des politiques publiques canadiennes. Il présente un profil de la documentation en termes d'attention portée à différents secteurs politiques, d'éléments de politiques publiques étudiés et de méthodologies utilisées pour aborder les questions et les énigmes autour de ces politiques publiques. L'article examine les contributions empiriques et théoriques de la littérature, en mettant l'accent sur leur apport à notre compréhension de la façon dont les processus de politiques publiques et les développements politiques qui en découlent sont conditionnés par le contexte structurel, institutionnel et conceptuel de l'élaboration des politiques.

Keywords: Canada; public policy; policy process

Mots-clés: Canada; politiques publiques; élaboration des politiques

Introduction

This article takes stock of the current state of the English-language discipline of Canadian public policy studies over the 2011–2021 period by surveying its main theoretical and empirical contributions and gaps on key themes of interest to Canadian political scientists. This remit, while broad, is nonetheless a challenge, given the different understandings among political scientists of the goals of public policy scholarship and how they can best contribute to these goals (Capano and Howlett, 2020a: 3). In face of these debates, the article aligns with the goals of what Atkinson (2016: 703) has called “policy research” and Cairney and Weible (2017: 621) describe as policy process literature: “the study of the patterns and interactions surrounding public policy over time.” A focus on the policy process literature—that is, describing and explaining the motivations of policy actors, their interactions, and the contextual and other factors that account for public policy development—is warranted because the policy process is integral to understanding why we get the public policies we do and “who gets what, when, how” (Lasswell, 1958). As Simeon observed in his 1976 article “Studying Public Policy” in this journal, the policy process is the crucial “impact point” where actors and contextual institutional, structural and ideational features meet (1976: 58). Moreover, knowledge of the policy process is “the redoubt of political science” (Atkinson, 2016: 714), not least because of the discipline’s close attention to the institutional context within which authoritative decision makers make policy choices. The decision to examine policy process research, to the neglect of the policy analysis literature whose objective is the evaluation of existing policies and the recommendation of future policies (Cairney and Weible, 2017: 621), is justified by the detailed attention to policy analysis provided in a recent edited collection (Dobuzinskis and Howlett, 2018).

This article focuses on the contribution of literature that examines Canadian public policies published over the decade 2011–2021. This temporal scope does not give appropriate recognition to the significant contributions of earlier analyses by political scientists of several policy domains in which Canadian governments have historically intervened. However, examining recent scholarship serves the objective of providing a profile of the current preoccupations, contributions and gaps in Canadian policy scholarship. Policy studies have been an especially dynamic discipline in recent decades, characterized by rigorous debate about useful theoretical and methodological approaches to comprehend the admitted complexity of policy making (Cairney, 2012; Weible and Sabatier, 2018). Notwithstanding their different ontological, epistemological and methodological approaches (Fischer et al., 2015; Jones and Radaelli, 2015; Yanow, 2003), positivist/mainstream and interpretivist studies have a common goal of understanding the processes through which policies emerge and die off (Durnova and Weible, 2020). In a manner consistent with the broader endeavour in social science to identify the causal mechanisms or pathways that operate over time to produce a given effect (Hedström and Swedberg, 1998), public policy scholars have turned their attention to uncovering how the motivations, strategies and actions of individual and/or corporate

political actors are collectively aggregated in a given context into policy development (Capano and Howlett 2020a). Novel methodologies—for example, with respect to computer-assisted analyses of texts—are additional tools being used to uncover policy discourses in the policy process (Skogstad and Wilder, 2019). Focusing on the more recent Canadian literature sheds a spotlight on its contributions to these current theoretical debates and methodological tools.

As described in [Appendix I](#), several search methods were used to arrive at the corpus of more than 100 titles that are included in this stocktaking analysis. There is no attempt to measure the influence of the surveyed literature in terms of citations: a decision consistent with critics of Charbonneau et al.'s (2018) citation-based assessment of the influence of Canadian public administration scholarship (Howlett, 2018; Roberts, 2018).

The article proceeds as follows. Section 1 provides a profile of the surveyed literature, categorized by features of the policy process under examination, by policy sector and by methodology. It demonstrates the broad array of policy issues and domains investigated by Canadian policy studies. The subsequent three sections of the article assess the contribution of the surveyed literature to our understanding of policy processes and outputs. Section 2 examines what we learn from Canadian policy studies about (a) influential political actors and the nature of their interaction in different policy domains and Canadian jurisdictions and (b) how the motivations of political actors are shaped, empowered and/or constrained by Canada's economic structures, institutional rules and norms, and prevailing cultural and epistemic ideas. Section 3 examines the contribution of the surveyed literature to explaining the selection of policy instruments and their distributive consequences, while section 4 focuses on the contribution of the literature to understanding mechanisms and processes of policy continuity and change. Section 5 concludes with suggestions for future lines of inquiry.

1. A Profile of Canadian Policy Studies

What policy domains and features of public policy and public policy processes receive attention from Canadian policy scholars? Are there policy domains that do not receive the attention that their social and economic significance would suggest they should? [Table 1](#) provides an answer to these questions. It categorizes the surveyed corpus by common elements of public policy that policy studies scholars seek to explain (Simeon, 1976; Weible and Sabatier, 2018). Within each element/column, individual studies are grouped by conventional policy domains and their methodology noted.

Studies in the first category/column, labelled policy dynamics, are those whose goal is to explain innovation, reform, and/or continuity in policy goals, interpretive frameworks, and/or regimes either over an extended period or at a discrete point in time. Explaining these dynamics normally entails an account of the policy process. Studies in the second category/column have as their foremost objective to explain the choice or design of policy instruments, including instrument mixes, and their settings. Policy instruments are understood here as the substantive (for example, regulatory, market-based, informational) means or tools that governments use to achieve their policy goals. Insofar as governments also use procedural policy

Table 1 The Scope and Methods of Studies of Canadian Public Policy

Policy dynamics of innovation, reform and continuity	Instruments, settings, design	Distributive effects	Diffusion, divergence/convergence
<p><i>Social policy</i> (social assistance, income security, contributory pensions)</p> <p>Arsenault 2018-P-QL* Banting 2020-N-QL Béland & Myles 2012-N-QL Béland & Daigneault 2015-CP-QL Béland & Weaver 2019-CNP-QL Béland, Prince et al. 2021-N-QL Daigneault 2015-P-QL Christensen 2020-P-QL Jacobs 2011-CN-QL* Karimi 2016-CN-QL*</p> <p><i>Education</i> Thompson & Wallner 2011-M-QL</p> <p><i>Health care</i> Boothe 2013-N-QL Boothe 2015-CN-QL* Tuohy 2013-CN-QL Tuohy 2018-CN-QL* Scala 2019-N-QL*</p> <p><i>Family and ECEC policy</i> Mahon et al. 2012-CN-QL L. Pasolli 2015-P-QL* White 2012-CN-QL White 2017-CN-QL* White & Prentice 2016-CP-QL</p> <p><i>Immigration and multiculturalism</i> Boucher 2013-CN-QL Ellerman 2021-CN-QL* Paquet 2015-CP-QL</p>	<p><i>Social policy</i> Scala et al. 2019-N-QL</p> <p><i>Family and ECEC policy</i> K. E. Pasolli 2015-CP-QL White & Friendly 2012-CN-QL <i>Education</i> Teyassier 2011-CP-QN</p> <p><i>Immigration</i> Rheault 2013-N-QN</p>	<p><i>Social policy</i> Banting & Myles 2013-CNP-QL Béland et al. 2014-CN-QL Béland & Daigneault 2015-CP-QL Béland & Lecours 2016-N-QL Béland & Weaver 2019-CNP-QL Béland et al. 2019-CP-QL Haddow 2014-CP-QN Noel 2020-CP-QN</p> <p><i>Health care</i> Hankivsky 2011-N-QL Hindmarch et al. 2017-N-QL Sheridan & Shankardess 2015-N-QL</p> <p><i>Family and ECEC policy</i> Mahon 2013-P-QL Prentice & White 2019 CP-QL Snow 2016-CP-QL White & Friendly 2012-CN-QL</p> <p><i>Immigration</i> McCoy 2018-N-QL* Gaucher 2018-N-QL*</p>	<p><i>Social policy</i> Béland & Waddan 2019-CPN-QL Béland & Daigneault 2015-CP-QL Béland, Marchildon et al. 2021-CN-QL <i>Education</i> Wallner 2014-CP-QL*</p> <p><i>Health care</i> Tuohy 2019-CN-QL</p> <p><i>Family and ECEC policy</i> Mahon et al. 2012-CN-QL Mahon et al. 2016-CN-QL</p> <p><i>Immigration and multiculturalism</i> Banting 2014-CN-QL</p>

(Continued)

Table 1 (Continued.)

Policy dynamics of innovation, reform and continuity	Instruments, settings, design	Distributive effects	Diffusion, divergence/convergence
Paquet 2019-CP-QL* Paquet & Larios 2018-N-QL Triadafilopoulos 2012-CN-QL* Triadafilopoulos 2013-CN-QL* Woroby 2015-CN-QL Young & Tolley 2019-CPCM-QL			
<i>Housing</i>			
Doberstein 2016-CM-QL			
<i>Climate change</i>	<i>Climate change</i>		<i>Climate change</i>
Boyd 2019-P-QL	Harrison 2012-CPF-QL		Harrison 2013-CPN-QL
Carter 2018-CP-QL	Houle et al. 2015-CPF-QL		Harrison 2020-CPN-QL
Jones 2014-CPF-QL	Karapin 2020-CPF-QL		
Winfield & Macdonald 2020-N-QL	Purdon et al. 2021-CPF-QL		
	Pischke et al. 2019-CN-QL		
<i>Environment</i>			<i>Environment</i>
Carter 2020-CP-QL*			Carter et al. 2017-CP-QL
Doern et al. 2015-N-QL*			Olive 2014-CN-QL
Johns 2019-M-QL			
Macdonald 2020-CP-QL*			
Schwartz 2016-CM-QL			
Schwartz 2019-CM-QL			
Winfield 2012-P-QL*			
<i>Energy and other resources</i>	<i>Energy and other resources</i>		
Bognar et al. 2020-CN-QL	Martens et al. 2015-CP-QL		
Carter & Eaton 2016-P-QL	Rayner et al. 2017-P-QL		
Clancy 2011-P-QL*	Stokes 2013-P-QL		
Heinmiller 2013-P-QL			
Hoberg & Phillips 2011-P-QL			
Urquhart 2018-P-QL*			
Wellstead et al. 2016-P-QL			
<i>Science, technology, industrial and innovation policy</i>			

Bradford & Wolfe 2013-N-QL		
Doern et al. 2016-N-QL		
<i>Economic and fiscal</i>	<i>Economic and fiscal</i>	<i>Economic and fiscal</i>
Constantelos 2014-CPF-QL	Haddow 2020-CP-MX	Haddow 2018-CP-QN
Skogstad & Whyte 2015-N-QL	Jacques 2020-CP-QN	
Skogstad 2021-N-QL	Simon & Tatalovich 2014-CP-QN	
<i>Mix of policies</i>		<i>Mix of policies</i>
Haddow 2015-CP-MX*		Boyd & Olive 2021-CP-QL
	<i>Official languages policy</i>	
	Cardinal et al. 2015-N-QL	

Key

N: Canada case study
P: one province case study
M: one municipality case study
C preceding N, P or M: a comparative study
QL: qualitative methods
QN: quantitative methods
MX: mixed (both qualitative and quantitative methods)

Combined annotations

P-QL: single province, qualitative methods
N-QL: Canada, qualitative methods
M-QL: single municipality, qualitative methods
CP-QL: two or more provinces, qualitative methods
CPM-QL: two or more provinces and municipalities, qualitative methods
CPF-QL: one or more Canadian provinces and a foreign jurisdiction
CN-QL: Canada one of other national cases, qualitative methods
CM-QL: two or more municipalities, qualitative methods
CNP-QL: Canada and one or more provinces, qualitative methods
CP-QN: two or more provinces, quantitative methods
CP-MX: two or more provinces, qualitative and quantitative methods
* Monograph

instruments, such as consultative mechanisms (Howlett, 2000), to achieve their policy goals, studies within the second column often also shed light on the nature of the policy process. Studies in the third category/column document and account for the distributional effects of policies: that is, their winners and losers. In the fourth category/column are studies whose goal is to document and/or account for cross-jurisdictional diffusion and/or convergence/divergence in one or more elements of public policy. This element of public policy is of particular interest to federal systems like Canada's, given their underlying rationale is to balance values of diversity and unity. It is also of interest to the question of the influence of extraterritorial political actors on policy processes and their selected policy instruments.

The four elements used to categorize the surveyed literature are *not* fully discrete. Monograph-length studies usually address more than one policy element. Indeed, the dynamics of continuity and change investigated by comparative studies in the first column of Table 1 usually extend to the choice of policy instruments, the distributional effects of policies, and sometimes, as well, patterns of diffusion and/or divergence/convergence across jurisdictional cases.

Publications are annotated (after their date) to indicate their jurisdictional focus (P for provincial, N for national, M for municipal), whether they are comparative (denoted by C before their jurisdictional focus) and their methods (QL for qualitative methods, QN for quantitative methods, and MX for both quantitative and qualitative [mixed] methods).¹ Book-length single or comparative studies are denoted by *. The notes accompanying Table 1 provide details on how to interpret the annotations.

Table 1 shows that a significant amount of literature (as denoted by the annotation C), including monographs, seeks to explain how and why public policies of Canadian jurisdictions differ from, or are similar to, one another and those beyond the country's borders. This comparative orientation is consistent with an earlier examination of journal articles examining Canadian public policy (Montpetit et al., 2016). Interprovincial comparisons make up a good portion of the comparative research. At the same time, there is a continuing persistence of the descriptive case studies that Montpetit et al. (2016) also observed, some of which use interpretivist approaches.

Notwithstanding their different objectives, Table 1 indicates that Canadian public policy studies overwhelmingly rely on qualitative methods to analyze small-*N* case studies. Interviews and documents are primary sources used by qualitative research to trace the development of policies over time. Only a small minority of the literature uses quantitative or mixed methods to draw causal inferences across larger-*N* cases. These exceptions are comparative studies of provincial or national economic and fiscal policies (Haddow, 2014, 2015, 2018, 2020; Jacques 2020; Simon and Tatalovich, 2014) and minimum income protection (Noel, 2020).

Table 1 shows that the Canadian public policy discipline spans the breadth of sectors in which government policies touch the lives of Canadians. They include policy domains that have long been arenas of both federal and provincial involvement, such as social assistance, seniors' income security, contributory pensions, health care, immigration and multiculturalism, natural resource and energy development, environmental protection, and economic and fiscal policy. They also include other issues that have risen higher on the policy agendas of governments in recent years, such as early childhood education and care and family policy,

climate change, and innovation policy. In keeping with provinces' exclusive or shared jurisdiction in several of these policy areas—indeed, provinces have been described as “the most crucial generators of public policy in Canada” (Atkinson et al., 2013: xvi)—their policies are important sites of study for all four policy elements. Given the limited jurisdiction of Canadian municipalities, it is also understandable that only a handful of studies in the corpus of literature examine municipal-level policies. Less understandable, given their importance, is the paucity of studies of national economic, industrial and innovation policies.

As the column titles indicate, the specific elements of public policy that scholars of Canadian public policy seek to explain differ. For some, it is to account for the temporally specific decisions of a government to adjust its policy goals or alter its policy instruments in a specific policy domain.² For others, it is to account for the dynamics of policy innovation, continuity, and/or change over an extended period, including in overarching interpretive frameworks/policy paradigms and policy regimes.³ For the latter, the puzzle is similarities or differences in elements of public policies across space, including across Canadian jurisdictions⁴ or between Canada and other liberal welfare states.⁵ To explain these differences and provide answers to questions about policy choices in the short term or over the *longue durée*, public policy scholars examine policy processes.

2. Documenting and Explaining Canadian Policy Processes

Policy processes are complex, but their constitutive features can be defined as “the interactions that occur over time between public policies and surrounding actors, events, contexts, and outcomes” (Weible, 2018: 2). The endeavour to describe and explain the policy process centres on uncovering the (differing) motivations and goals of influential individual and collective political actors, as well as the internal (cognitive, affective) and external (contextual) factors and events that affect their actions in the policy process. While the resulting frameworks and theories generally assume internal factors of bounded rationality, they differ in their assumptions about what motivates policy actors and how their capacities to act on and realize their motivations are impacted by institutional and other features of the policy-making landscape (Heikkila and Cairney, 2018; Millar et al., 2019; Weible and Sabatier, 2018). Depending upon how one conceptualizes the motivations of political actors, “interactions” in the policy process are depicted as struggles for power, authority or voice among those with rival interests and different beliefs (Atkinson, 2016: 710, 708) or as “pragmatic” (non-ideological) exercises of “collective puzzling” (Montpetit, 2016: 160, 158).

To assess the empirical and theoretical contributions of the surveyed corpus of literature to our knowledge of policy processes in Canada and elsewhere, this section examines answers to the following questions: First, what do we learn from this literature about the influential actors in Canadian policy processes, their motivations and goals, and the nature of their interactions in different policy domains? Further, how, if at all, do policy processes differ across jurisdictions, governing administrations, and policy domains? Second, what factors—internal and external to actors—does it highlight as motivating, enabling and circumscribing the actions in the policy process?

The second question addresses how policy scholars link micro- (individual-) level actions in the policy process to sectoral and macro-level institutional, ideational, and structural contextual factors. In the case of Canada, foremost among the last category are Canada's institutions of executive-dominated parliament, its federal system wherein national and provincial governments exercise independent authority in a number of policy domains but concurrent and overlapping authority in other domains, and distinct provincial/regional political cultures and economies.

A. Variable policy processes across policy domains and jurisdictions

The surveyed Canadian literature documents multiple Canadian policy processes insofar as the influential political actors and the nature of their interactions vary across policy domains and Canadian jurisdictions. Unsurprisingly, given Canada's executive-dominated parliamentary governments, elected state actors are at the centre of policy processes; their electoral goals, normative motivations, left/right ideologies, and strategies affect agenda-setting, policy formulation, policy adoption and policy implementation.

In policy domains where federal and provincial governments enjoy independent authority, there is variation across policy sectors and jurisdictions in terms of the active and influential non-state policy actors in the agenda-setting and policy formulation stages of the policy process and the nature of their interactions with state officials. Given journal space constraints, the illustrative examples provided here focus on the variability of their role in policy making in policy domains of historic and current importance to Canadians and their governments.

Social policies provide examples of variation in the influential non-state actors in policy processes across jurisdictions. Non-state actors have played an influential role in the development of Quebec's "distinctive" social policy model and participate in collaborative policy processes in Quebec (Arsenault, 2018; Haddow, 2015) but lack similar influence in Ontario's more conflictual policy processes (Haddow, 2015). Civil society groups have played a far more significant role in the development of early childhood education and care policy in Quebec than they have in English-speaking provinces (Mahon et al., 2012; White, 2017). Across policy domains that fall under the jurisdiction of the government of Canada, civil society actors have been more influential in policy developments with respect to income security policies for seniors than for the unemployed (Béland and Myles, 2012). While non-state stakeholders have been influential in the development of Canada's widely touted, exemplary immigration policies (Rheault, 2013; Triadafilopoulos, 2013), analysts also point to the significant influence of bureaucratic state officials in the adjustment of immigration policies over time (Boucher, 2013; Ellermann, 2021; Paquet, 2014, 2019). At the municipal level, Doberstein (2016) documents differences in the extent of engagement of municipal officials and community stakeholders in homelessness policy in Toronto as compared to Vancouver and Calgary.

Policies with respect to energy/natural resource development and, relatedly, environmental protection also show considerable interprovincial variation. Examining policies with respect to the development of the northern Alberta tar sands, Hoberg and Phillips (2011) find capital investors and developers enjoying

a “near monopoly” in a closed policy subsystem. Carter (2018, 2020) argues that the exclusion or marginalization of environmental groups in environmental policy making is a common feature of the three Canadian petro-states of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Newfoundland and Labrador. By contrast, in non-petro-states, such as Ontario, environmental groups have more influence in more pluralist and open policy processes (Winfield, 2012). At the national level, Doern et al. (2015) document the shifting role and influence of various non-state actors in federal environmental policy regimes over several decades.

The lesser research into other exclusive federal or provincial policy domains warrants caution in drawing conclusions about their policy processes. Still, studies of federal policies with respect to science, technology and innovation indicate variation in the extent to which civil society actors are participants in policy making. For example, they are present in the development of agricultural biotechnology policies but not those for genomics and life sciences (Doern et al., 2016).

In the several policy domains in which both national and provincial orders of government are involved, either by virtue of concurrent jurisdiction or Ottawa’s assumption of responsibility through its spending power, state actors’ motivating ideas and interests are, unsurprisingly, major influences on policy outputs. While it is safe to assume governmental actors are responding to their differing constituents’ interests and ideas, tracing and documenting the latter’s impact on the nature and outcomes of interactions in the policy process can often be a secondary consideration (Skogstad and Bakvis, 2020).

B. Actor motivations, contextual factors and policy decisions

Canadian policy scholars have directed their attention to unravelling how the partisan and electoral goals of political actors and/or their cognitive and normative beliefs are shaped, empowered and/or constrained by Canada’s economic structures, institutional rules and norms, and prevailing cultural and epistemic ideas. The following examples are illustrative of these interactive dynamics in different policy domains.

Examinations of provincial policies with respect to energy resources development are instructive of how economic structures interact with institutions and ideas in the policy process. Urquhart’s (2018) account of the development of the tar sands in northeastern Alberta attributes causal power to the economic interests and ideas of market fundamentalism of developers, the business community and governments. Also focusing on petro-states, Carter (2018, 2020) links their significant dependence on revenues from oil extraction, in combination with dominant norms of staples-led economic development and neoliberal ideologies, to the erosion of environmental protection in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Newfoundland and Labrador. In a similar vein, Clancy (2011) argues that the structural power of capital investors and developers has given them a privileged position in offshore oil and gas development in the Nova Scotian Basin and limited the influence of non-business interests on policy agendas.

Turning to national policies, Macdonald (2020) argues that a combination of structural factors (the competing material interests of provinces dependent on fossil fuels and those that rely on hydro power) and institutional factors (constitutional

arrangements that give provinces jurisdiction in the policy field, as well as weak and ineffective intergovernmental processes related to energy and climate change) explain why the government of Canada has consistently missed its climate change targets. The interaction of structural and institutional causal factors also figures large in Doern et al.'s (2015) explanation of the government of Canada's "green-lite" environmental policy regime. The authors attribute it to "the importance and power of Canada's natural resources and the staples theory that underpins them," as well as to the fragmented and diffused institutional context of federal environmental policy making (14).

The conditioning impact of Canada's federal system on the motivations, resources and behaviour of political actors and attendant policy outcomes has received considerable attention. The allocation of authority, including fiscal resources, across the two orders of government has been linked to motivations of competitive state-building and collusive benchmarking on the part of federal and provincial governments with respect to social policies (Béland and Weaver, 2019; Christensen, 2020). Concurrent jurisdiction has also created incentives and opportunities for bureaucratic entrepreneurship in provincial immigration and integration policies (Paquet, 2014, 2019). As discussed further below, Canada's federal system is also implicated in dynamics of policy innovation, continuity and change; processes of policy diffusion; and inequities in the distribution of social policy benefits.

Scholars have also elucidated how the parliamentary and electoral systems impact the motivations and strategies of political actors in the policy process. For example, while the Westminster parliamentary system affords majority governments the opportunity to align their ideological, partisan and electoral goals in pursuit of desired policy reforms (Skogstad and Whyte, 2015), the intersecting logics of Canada's simple plurality electoral and regionalized party systems can also impede such alignments (Skogstad, 2021). The concentration of authority in Canada's executive (and delegated bureaucracy) for aspects of immigration policy, Ellermann (2021) argues, has provided these decision makers with "political insulation" from restrictionist or liberalizing pressures from public opinion, interest groups, immigrant-sending countries and other immigrant-receiving countries.

There is also attention to the causal role of ideas, discourses and knowledge in the policy process. Scholars have, for example, documented the existence and effects on policy developments of gendered assumptions about childcare work (L. Pasolli, 2015; White and Prentice, 2016; White, 2017) and elder care (Scala et al., 2019), norms of universality in social welfare (Béland et al., 2014, 2019; Béland, Marchildon et al., 2021), paradigms of social assistance in provincial social assistance reforms (Daigneault, 2015), norms of legitimate conjugal (family) relationships on refugee determination, immigration and citizenship policies (Gaucher, 2018), assumptions about what constitutes authoritative knowledge in the regulation of assisted reproduction technologies (Scala, 2019) and the development of many provincial early childhood education and care policies (Prentice and White, 2019), and media framing of biofuels policies (Bognar et al., 2020). These examples show the policy process to be a tug-of-war of rival normative and cognitive policy ideas whose influence is bounded by institutional rules and cultural norms.

3. Policy Instruments: Their Selection and Distributive Effects

Accounting for the policy instruments (means, tools) selected to realize policy goals, their underlying logics (expected rewards and sanctions), and their distributive and other consequences is an important endeavour of policy studies (Capano and Lippi, 2017). These objectives are usually a part of studies that examine policy dynamics and developments over time (the subject of the next section of this article). Here, attention is on the contribution of the Canadian literature to (a) documenting the distributive effects of policy instruments and (b) explaining decision makers' choice of policy instruments, including with respect to extra-jurisdictional diffusion and policy transfer processes.

Canadian policy studies have documented the uneven effects of policy instruments and their settings when it comes "who gets what" in terms of fiscal (Haddow, 2015, 2018; Jacques, 2020) and social policies with respect to minimum income protection (Béland and Daigneault, 2015; Haddow, 2014; Noel, 2013, 2020) and family policies, including for parental leave and child care and education (K. E. Pasolli, 2015; Prentice and White, 2019; Snow, 2016; White and Friendly, 2012). A consistent finding is the uneven treatment of Canadians across provinces, with some provinces taking greater efforts and having more success in reducing economic inequality. Quebec is found to stand apart in terms of its greater redistributive efforts and more generous social welfare state (Haddow, 2014; Noel, 2013, 2020). In other policy domains, such as health care (Marchildon, 2019) and public education (Wallner, 2014), where Ottawa's spending power has equalized the fiscal capacity of provinces, the effect has also been to reduce inequities in the treatment of Canadians.

While both quantitative and qualitative methods have been used to document the uneven benefits and burdens of Canadian governments' policy instrument choices, interpretivist qualitative methods have proved especially fruitful in demonstrating the privileging of some forms of knowledge and frames over others in the selection of policy instruments, with consequent impacts on the Canadians directly affected by these choices. Examples of these studies include documentation of the gendered effects of elder care policy frames and instrument mixes (Scala et al., 2019), inequities in health care owing to the intersectionality of unequal race, gender and class power relations (Hankivsky, 2011), persistent inequities across jurisdictions in services available to individuals directly affected by HIV/AIDS (Hindmarch et al., 2017), the discriminatory impacts of the Harper government's national security policies in the post-9/11 period on religious minorities (McCoy, 2018) and the barriers faced by migrants and refugees who did not conform to policy norms of the Harper government regarding legitimate conjugal (family) relationships (Gaucher, 2018).

To explain interprovincial differences in redistributive efforts, scholars have demonstrated the importance of the left/right ideology of governing parties. They have shown that left-wing governments are more likely to pursue countercyclical fiscal strategies than are conservative parties (Haddow, 2020) and to prioritize social policy (education, health, social assistance) spending when facing fiscal pressures. By contrast, conservative governments retrench their spending when facing fiscal pressures in order to avoid deficit spending (Jacques, 2020; Simon and

Tatalovich, 2014). There is agreement that interprovincial differences in the combined power resources of unions and governing parties of the left or centre account for Quebec's greater minimum income protection and redistribution efforts relative to other provinces (Haddow, 2014; Noel, 2020). At the same time, as noted above, motivations of state-building on the part of Quebec state actors are also seen to play a role in social policy expansion in that province (Béland and Lecours, 2016; Béland and Weaver, 2019; Béland, Prince et al., 2021). Most often, though, as demonstrated by contributors to Banting and Myles' (2013) account of how Canada's efforts at income redistribution fell behind other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, there is no single explanation for the selection and settings of redistributive policy instruments, but rather a combination of partisan, institutional, structural and ideational factors.

Dual, instrumental and normative logics—sometimes complementary, often at odds—are found to be at play in the selection of policy instruments in other policy domains. Harrison (2012) argues that governments' willingness to use carbon taxes is facilitated both by a personal normative commitment on the part of a party leader and by electoral incentives. A combination of normative goals and material factors has also been credited with explaining variation in subfederal climate policy instruments of members of the Western Climate Initiative (Houle et al., 2015). Looking at a very different policy domain—the Harper Conservative government's official languages policy—Cardinal et al. (2015) demonstrate how policy instruments, as embodying values, can be used to promote the instrumental political goals of politicians. Competing logics of instrumentality and normative legitimacy, including with respect to gender, are also evident in the selection of provincial policy instruments for early childhood education and care (White, 2017) and federal and provincial elder care (Scala et al., 2019).

The comparative public policy literature has drawn attention over the past decade to the complex policy instrument mixes that emerge when new policy goals and new policy logics are patched or layered onto earlier ones (Capano and Howlett, 2020b). Canadian policy scholars are contributing to the theoretical and empirical development of this literature—for example, by illustrating through case studies the effects on policy development of the addition of environmental goals onto energy policy goals (Johns, 2019; Rayner et al., 2017; Wellstead et al., 2016) and the deployment of procedural policy instruments to realize them (Martens et al., 2015). Given the limited case studies to date, however, complex policy mixes and their evolution and effects warrant greater attention.

A further question regarding policy instrument selection is the extent to which Canadian decision makers are motivated to emulate, learn from, or compete with other jurisdictions in their preferred policy instruments. Canadian policy scholars have addressed this question by examining the transfer and diffusion of policy instruments and their underlying logics both internally (across Canadian jurisdictions) as well as transnationally (from external jurisdictions into Canada). Beginning with the first, Wallner (2014) demonstrates how provincial education policies have converged under the incentives and opportunities created by Canada's federal system for cross-provincial policy learning. A recent edited collection also provides some evidence of learning, emulation and competition motivations behind interprovincial policy transfers in a handful of policy domains

(Boyd and Olive, 2021). Nonetheless, the scope for cross-provincial policy transfer appears to be specific to policy issues and to be delimited by the latitude and incentives afforded governments by their different political economies (Boyd, 2019; Carter et al., 2017; Harrison, 2013).

Turning to the second question, studies also stress the contingent effects of extra-jurisdictional developments and pressures on Canadian public policies, including their preferred policy instruments. Comparing the policies of Ontario and Quebec, Canada's most industrialized provinces, over the 1990–2010 period of economic pressures of globalization and postindustrialism, Haddow (2015) finds significant differences in the two provinces' interventionist policies with respect to economic development. He argues that these policy differences can be attributed to differences in the two provinces' party systems and organization of labour and business, which result in a coordinated market economy and collaborative policy process in Quebec, as compared to a liberal-market-oriented economy and uncoordinated policy process in Ontario. Elsewhere, the effects of local institutional and political/partisan factors in mediating the impact of transnational policy ideas are revealed in discourses and policies for child care (Mahon et al., 2012, 2016; White, 2017), social security (Béland, Marchildon et al., 2021) and immigration (Triadafilopoulos, 2012).

While individual studies suggest variation across governments in their preferred policy instruments, and few extraterritorial pressures on the (settings of) instruments they adopt, there are important gaps in our knowledge of this element of the policy process.

4. Mechanisms, Processes and Pathways of Policy Continuity and Change

An important question for public policy scholars is why and how public policies—as constituted by their interpretive frameworks, policy goals and/or policy instruments—become sticky and resistant to reform even as changing circumstances undermine their ability to realize their goals or, conversely, prove unstable and vulnerable to the reforms that policy makers deem desirable or necessary. Sticky policies are especially a puzzle in Westminster parliamentary systems, such as Canada's, where majority federal and provincial governments can undertake transformative changes to policies that fall within their exclusive legal authority—but sometimes do not. By contrast, the ability of governments to effect significant reforms to policies that are “locked in”—for example, by joint decision-making rules—is also a puzzle. This section of the article discusses how Canadian policy scholarship is contributing to building theory to solve puzzles surrounding processes of policy continuity and change.

One way researchers are doing so is by drawing on historical institutionalist theorizing about how policies evolve and change gradually over time under mechanisms and processes such as policy drift (Myles, 2013), layering and conversion (Johns, 2019) and patching and stretching (Wellstead et al., 2016; Rayner et al., 2017). Studies such as these add to our knowledge of the circumstances under which these mechanisms are deployed and prove effective in bringing about change over time.

A second contribution comes in the form of longitudinal comparative studies whose explicit goal is to build theoretical accounts of the circumstances under

which policy makers are willing and capable of undertaking significant policy change. Particularly noteworthy here are monograph-length studies that have examined social policies, including health care, contributory pensions, and early childhood education and care.

Canada's universal single-payer model of health care has proven durable and highly resistant to reforms since it was established in the 1960s, including changes intended to strengthen and expand it. Tuohy's (2018) comparative analysis of the pace and scale of health care reforms in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands provides an explanation for why Canada's health care system has undergone far less change than other countries when it comes to the introduction of market mechanisms. Her account gives causal weight to the strategic judgments of decision makers with respect to the rewards and sanctions of choosing one set of actions over others. She argues that the pace and scale of reforms are contingent upon decision makers' shared willingness to engage in change and upon their beliefs about their current and future capacity to enact and implement the scope and pace of change they have in mind. These strategic judgments, Tuohy stresses, are importantly affected by government-wide political and institutional circumstances. In the case of Canada, with the single-payer system enjoying wide public support, the result is an embedded model of accommodation between the medical profession and the state.

Also examining intertemporal policy dynamics in health care, Boothe (2015) mounts a slightly different argument to explain how earlier decisions with respect to whether to engage in incremental or radical reforms affect the scope of later policy reforms. She argues that incremental processes of policy development, as characterized by those around Canada's universal hospital and medical insurance coverage, beget a restricted understanding of the scope of health care services over time. Mechanisms of elite and public adaptive expectations about feasible and desirable policies, she argues, explain why Canada has not adopted a nationwide universal pharmaceutical program while the United Kingdom and Australia have.

The integrated Canada Pension Plan (CPP) and Quebec Pension Plan (QPP) set up in the 1960s provides an example of a policy undergoing significant change despite the hurdles of a joint decision-making system. Comparing contributory pension design and reforms in Canada, Britain, Germany and the United States, Jacobs (2011) describes the CPP/QPP reforms in the late 1990s as the "most dramatic instance of policy investment" across the four countries. In his explanation of how Canada was able to impose "large and immediate visible costs on constituents to solve a problem still decades away" (194), Jacobs theorizes the causal role of policy makers' pre-existing "mental models" in their decisions to make social investments that impose costs on voters and groups in the short term, in anticipation of future benefits. He argues that decision makers made intertemporal investments when they believed doing so would generate net benefits for society—but also only when they enjoyed both electoral safety with respect to the next election and the institutional capacity to resist organized opposition to their proposals.

Seeking to explain interjurisdictional lags, including among Canadian provinces, in public investment in early childhood education and care (ECEC), White (2017) highlights the intersecting effects of cultural, discursive and institutional factors.

She argues that social investment in ECEC requires a change of cognitions to view ECEC as a worthwhile investment in human capital and of normative beliefs to regard ECEC as an appropriate responsibility of the state and not markets or families. These cultural shifts, in her view, require experts who alter cognitive and principled beliefs regarding ECEC, political leaders with autonomy from political and public opposition, policy advocates who promote new norms, and political leaders and policy entrepreneurs whose framing strategies change beliefs and practices. Variations in the development of ECEC policies across jurisdictions, including Canadian provinces, can be accounted for by the contextually contingent presence or absence of these mechanisms.

Studies such as the foregoing are making at least two important contributions to Canadian and comparative public policy scholarship. One is to demonstrate the causal significance of state actors' strategic judgments (Tuohy, 2018), adaptive expectations (Boothe, 2015), mental models (Jacobs, 2011) and cognitive and normative beliefs (White, 2017) in variously facilitating or impeding policy change. A second is to illustrate the extent to which these mechanisms of policy change and stability strategies are facilitated or constrained by the institutionalization of antecedent policy choices, institutional rules, and dominant cognitive and normative beliefs about feasible and desirable public policies.

5. Conclusion

This article has appraised the state of English-language policy studies by examining its theoretical and empirical contributions to our knowledge of policy processes in Canada. Focusing on a survey of literature published over the 2011–2021 period, the article has documented the collectively broad scope of Canadian scholarship, illustrating how case studies span the important domains in which federal and provincial public policies affect the lives of Canadians. It has also demonstrated the theoretical pluralism of Canadian policy scholarship, with studies giving different weight to the role of structurally shaped interests, normative and cognitive ideas and discourses, and institutional rules and norms in determining the motivations and interactions of influential actors in the policy process. While particularities of the institutional context have long been examined as an explanation of cross-case similarities or differences in policy processes and outputs, Canadian policy scholars are also contributing to the comparative literature's increasing attention to how political actors' strategies and interactions in the policy process (and ensuing outputs) are affected by similarities and differences in the cultural, ideational and discursive features of the policy-making context (Wilder, 2017).

In its individual and collective documentation of different policy processes across policy domains and Canadian jurisdictions, the literature also details differences across Canadians in terms of whose interests, ideas and/or knowledge prove influential and, consequently, who benefits from public policies. Case studies of social and environmental policy domains within provincial jurisdiction reveal differences in the social and economic actors who are included or marginalized in the policy processes and that result, by extension, in disparities in whose interests and/or ideas are promoted by public policies. Less extensively investigated and discussed here are the uneven/even impacts on the influence of social actors of the multitiered

processes (provincial, federal, intergovernmental) in areas of shared or overlapping federal and provincial jurisdiction.

The plural theoretical approaches to explaining Canadian public policies do not extend to favoured methods. Few studies use quantitative methods; a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods (Haddow, 2015, 2020) is even more rare. Nor is there evidence of the use of unsupervised machine (computer) learning to analyze large texts—for example, to determine the dimensions of policy discourses. Rather, the methodological contribution of Canadian policy studies consists overwhelmingly of demonstrating how qualitative methods of data gathering prove useful both in illuminating how some stakeholders (and their ideas and interests) are marginalized in the policy process, as well as in tracing the causal mechanisms and pathways from inputs into the policy process to its outputs (an excellent example is Schwartz, 2016).

Several policy issues that have been the subject of scholarly analyses in the literature surveyed here will remain on the agenda for the foreseeable literature. The COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020 and the continuing aging of the Canadian population have intensified reformist pressures on policies with respect to both health care and pensions. Finding synergies and tackling trade-offs among goals of economic growth, energy resource development, environmental sustainability, and/or climate change will also be high priorities for Canadian citizens and their governments. Complex problems of this sort will continue to require collective action across the multiple orders of federal, provincial and/or municipal governments. They will do so amid contestation not just over competing economic and political interests and rival normative ideas but also over the extent to which the knowledge of scientific experts versus that of other stakeholders should be relied upon. Documenting and accounting for the policy processes and outcomes in these policy domains is an important opportunity for Canadian scholars to make empirical and theoretical contributions to policy studies.

Another opportunity for Canadian policy scholarship to contribute to understanding policy dynamics in contexts of multilevel governance lies in policy domains in which municipal governments have a large stake but require the financial and other support of federal and/or provincial governments to realize their policy goals. While existing literature on the topic has pointed to multilevel governance in municipal matters (Henstra, 2013; Horak and Young, 2012; Lucas and Smith, 2019; Young and Tolley, 2019), the interactions among social and governmental actors throughout the process of policy agenda-setting, formulation and adoption, and/or implementation of municipal policies warrant closer attention.

Insofar as policy instruments have significant consequences for who benefits from public policies, as well for subsequent policy dynamics, they should receive greater attention from political scientists. While individual Canadian political scientists have made important contributions to theory-building regarding the design of policy instruments (Capano and Howlett, 2020b) and their feedback effects (Béland and Schlager, 2019), these theoretical insights remain relatively underdocumented in studies of Canadian public policy. So, too, do the complex policy mixes that develop as policies are patched up over time. Insofar as policy mixes and patching are an effort not only to adjust policy instruments but also to shore up their legitimacy and that of the policy process, they warrant more attention from scholars of Canadian public policy.

Finally, to contribute to building theory of policy dynamics of continuity and change, it is recommended that Canadian policy scholars go beyond comparisons with other federal or liberal economies and turn their comparative lens to the multilevel European Union (EU). Comparative case studies, for example, of EU and Canadian climate policies—where the EU has been a world leader and Canada a comparative laggard—afford an opportunity to shed further light on the causal entanglement of cultural/discursive and institutional causal factors in processes of policy innovation and reform.

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Notes

1 Studies that use NVivo to code documents are coded as using qualitative methods, as are those that provide descriptive statistics of their small-*N* case studies. Coded as quantitative studies are studies that use multivariate statistical techniques to draw causal inferences about their cases. Mixed methods studies use a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. Contrary to Yanow (2003), the category *qualitative* does not distinguish between positivist qualitative studies that use small-*N* cases to derive generalizable conclusions and interpretivist scholars that emphasize the importance of contextually specific understandings and knowledge of events. While their methods of analyzing data (and research goals) differ, positivist-oriented scholars also tend to make use of interpretivist methods to access data: that is, observing/participating, interviewing, and reading documents.

2 Studies of discrete reforms, including to policy instruments, examine income maintenance in Saskatchewan (Daigneault, 2015), contributory pensions in Ontario (Christensen, 2020), schools in Ontario (Thompson and Wallner, 2011), federal product risk regulation (Kiss, 2014), protection of water resources in Alberta (Heinmiller, 2013), climate change instruments in Alberta (Boyd, 2019), grain marketing (Skogstad and Whyte, 2015) and processes for developing energy resources in some provinces (Hoberg and Phillips, 2011; Martens et al., 2015).

3 See monographs on Quebec's social economy (Arsenault, 2018), the social and economic policies of Quebec and Ontario (Haddow, 2015), national policies with respect to assisted reproductive technologies (Scala, 2019), early childhood education and care in British Columbia (L. Pasolli, 2015), immigration (Gaucher, 2018), multiculturalism (McCoy, 2018), primary and secondary education (Wallner, 2014), provincial energy resource development (Clancy, 2011; Urquhart, 2018), national (Doern et al., 2015) and provincial (Carter, 2020; Winfield, 2012) environmental protection, and national climate change policy (Macdonald, 2020). Article-length single-case studies with this objective include accounts of the absence of pharmacare in Canada (Boothe, 2013) and fracking policy in Saskatchewan (Carter and Eaton, 2016).

4 Table 1 reveals the multiple policy areas that have been the subject of interprovincial comparisons. Municipal policies subject to comparison are fewer and include housing (Doberstein, 2016), environmental and climate change (Schwartz, 2016, 2019; Johns, 2019) and emergency management (Henstra, 2013).

5 See comparative studies of pharmacare (Boothe, 2015), family and ECEC policy (Mahon et al., 2012, 2016; White, 2012, 2017), health care (Béland and Waddan, 2019; Tuohy, 2018, 2019), pensions (Béland and Weaver, 2019; Jacobs, 2011), climate policy (Harrison, 2020; Houle et al., 2015; Jones, 2014; Karapin, 2020; Purdon et al., 2021) and endangered species protection (Olive, 2014).

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Appendix I. The Selection of the Surveyed Literature

The foremost consideration for including literature in this stock-taking is its direct contribution to explaining and elaborating processes and outputs of domestic public policy making by Canadian, provincial and/or municipal governments. Excluded from the corpus of surveyed literature are thereby studies that investigate possible determinants of public policy—like public opinion, the attitudes and strategies of groups and social movements and media framing of issues—but stop short of examining their role in the policy process and their impact on policy choices and developments. Also excluded are publications on Indigenous-government relations in specific policy areas. They can be justifiably viewed as matters of intergovernmental relations and their importance is such as to warrant their own stock-taking account. Nor are studies of Canadian equalization policy, a policy area that is a matter of intergovernmental relations, included in the surveyed corpus.

The following research search techniques were used to select the surveyed literature. First, a search of Google Scholar was conducted using the terms "Canada" AND "policy" AND "case" for the period 2010–August 2021 (when the research first began for this study). It resulted in an excess of two million titles, some of which were repetitive, that included peer-reviewed as well as non-peer-reviewed books, policy papers and theses. A manual sorting of the Google Scholar results identified titles that included Canada as part of a comparative study. Second, a search of the PAIS index using the terms "Canada" AND "policy" was conducted for peer-reviewed books, journal articles and book chapters published over the period 2011–2021; publications of research institutes, think tanks and governments were excluded. Its yield of over 10,000 titles was similarly inefficient. Individual entries in the PAIS search were then investigated, with publications included in the corpus of analyzed literature confined to those whose objective is to explain one or more features of Canadian domestic public policy processes and policy development. The end date of 2021 for the selection of literature led to the elimination of articles on governments' responses to COVID-19 on the grounds that the pandemic had not yet concluded by 2021.

Third, a search was undertaken of the abstracts of several journals to find relevant titles. The journals and the rationales for searching them specifically are as follows. *American Review of Canadian Studies*, *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, *Canadian Political Science Review*, *Canadian Public Administration* and *Canadian Public Policy* have a mandate to publish Canadian content. *Critical Policy Studies* is likely to be the publication venue of choice for those within the critical scholarship tradition. *Energy Policy* is a possible venue of choice given the significance of energy policy to Canada. *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis*, *Governance*, *Review of Policy Research*, *Policy Sciences* and *Policy Studies Journal* are the foremost journals of public policy. *Politique et Société* could be a major outlet for French-language public policy scholarship.

Fourth, the PAIS and Google Scholar searches were supplemented by examining book reviews in the *Canadian Journal of Political Science* and the websites of Canadian university presses (UBC Press, UTP and McGill-Queen's). And fifth, citations in selected publications that referenced Canadian, provincial or municipal public policies were also examined for possible inclusion in the corpus.

These multiple methods yielded a corpus of over 100 publications judged by the author to provide a reasonably representative sample of English-language publications over the 2011–21 period whose objective is to explain one or more features of Canadian, provincial and/or municipal public policy processes and policy outputs.