

## Coordination in Public Policy

**Keywords:** Structure; Process; Actors; Results; Hierarchy; Market; Network

**Cross-references:** Governance; Policy change; Policy Networks; Public Private Partnerships; Wicked Problems in Public Policy; Policy success / failure (if available).

Philipp Trein

University of Lausanne, Switzerland

[josefphilipp.trein@unil.ch](mailto:josefphilipp.trein@unil.ch); <https://people.unil.ch/josefphilipptrain/>

### Definition

Coordination is a vital aspect of public policy analysis that researchers have been studying for decades. They investigate how different actors coordinate their political and policy-related activities in various institutional settings and analyze the results of coordination. Coordination involves the working together of actors to achieve shared policy goals and implies the political and social interaction of organizations. In public policy research, coordination entails the presence of a shared result of the coordination process, for example a common position or a shared public policy.

While the mentioned definition is a useful way to understand the policy process, scholars working on rational choice institutionalism have used the term coordination to denote any social interaction within specific institutional contexts such as markets, hierarchies, or networks. This broader understanding of coordination is also relevant in public policy analysis. Therefore, it is

important to be aware that the term coordination can have multiple meanings in public policy discussions. Nevertheless, in order to be an effective concept for policy analysis, the term coordination needs to mean that actors coordinate their behavior in a, “nontrivial manner” (Nohrstedt and Olofsson 2016, 21).

## **1. Coordination and Structure**

An important aspect of coordination in public policy entails a structural understanding. Therefore, researchers have referred to rational choice institutionalism, which suggests that actors coordinate based on institutional rules. Institutions act as the rules of the game for rational actors which aim at maximizing their preferences (even though their rationality is limited). The literature identifies several institutional contexts relevant to coordination in the policy process. Notably, these are hierarchies, networks, parliaments, markets, and courts. Each of these structures has some relevance for the coordination of actors in the policy process. In these different contexts, actors coordinate their activities to reduce conflicts and to find shared solutions for policy problems (Peters 2013, 2018; Scharpf 1997).

The first institutional context that plays an important role in coordinating actors during the policy process is parliamentary democracy. This includes parliaments and institutions of direct democracy where actors find common ground or decide through voting. The second context is bureaucracies (hierarchies), where strategic agencies may be subordinated to a ministry and professionals must follow instructions from heads of departments or politicians. The third context is networks, which have been emphasized in public policy literature, especially in the

European Union. Scholars have demonstrated the importance of coordination in networks in the policy process. The fourth context of coordination is courts, which decide conflicts that cannot be resolved in other arenas. In the US political system, the courts and the Supreme Court are important elements of coordination. The fifth context is markets, which may not seem important at first but can be relevant coordination mechanisms in public policy. Competition between jurisdictions or countries can produce policy innovations that are later applied in other areas. This form of coordination is indirect rather than finding a common solution directly (Mayntz and Scharpf 1975; Peters 2013).

In the policy process, these structures of coordination are relevant in analyzing differences between political systems. Political science research has distinguished between consensual democracies and majoritarian democracies. In consensual democracies, the policy process involves including a variety of actors. Governments are often composed of different political parties in a coalition government, and there is widespread consultation of interest groups and subnational governments before a reform. Lower levels of government charged with implementing public policy may also be included in the process. The institutional structure of the country determines how involved actors in the political system coordinate and produce shared policy outputs. Examples of this coordination can be found in Switzerland and Germany (Schmidt 2002; Vatter 2018).

In majoritarian democracies, power is concentrated in the hands of one party, and other parties in parliament are in opposition. Governments have more liberty to impose reforms onto society and may not seek consultation in the policy process. Examples of majoritarian democracies

include the Westminster system in the UK and political systems such as France, where the president has the power to form a government and impose policy changes. In this type of institutional structure, the coordination of actors works differently as the demand for coordination of diverse actors to achieve effective policy outputs is lower. By distinguishing between consensual democracies and majoritarian democracies, scholars of public policy can identify existing institutional contexts, including formal and informal institutions, which can guide the theory for empirical projects (Lijphart 2012).

The distinction between different forms of market economies, such as coordinated market economies and liberal economies, is another important typology for understanding institutional context and coordination. In coordinated market economies, there is institutionalized cooperation between firms, economic peak associations, and the state to create norms and facilitate technology transfer. In liberal market economies, firms cooperate on specific projects and negotiate the creation of norms and technology transfer individually. Although the distinction between coordinated and liberal market economies is not an explicit framework for policy analysis, public policy scholars can draw important lessons from the typology, for example it could allow them to analyze how policy innovations emerge in different political systems and how interest groups are included into decisionmaking processes (Hall and Soskice 2001).

## **2. Different processes of coordination**

A second aspect in the analysis of coordination are the study of coordination processes. From this perspective, the process of coordination is a decision-making process. In hierarchical

systems, such as bureaucratic organizations, the formal process of coordination is based on command and control. In other words, this process of coordination is a top-down approach which implies that subordinates must follow directives from higher-ups (Peters 2013). In parliament, the main process of coordination is majority voting, which reduces conflict and produces a common result (Scharpf 1997). Elected officials vote about policy proposals.

Negotiation is the principal coordination process in network contexts. Scholars distinguish between negotiation, which aims to reduce differences while creating new policies that address problems, and bargaining, which focuses on maximizing individual interests without considering the common good (Schout et al. 2006). Courts coordinate actors in conflict through arbitration by a professional judge or dispute resolution by a third independent party (e.g., lay judges).

Competition is the essential process of coordination in markets where normally firms are in competition for customers. Nevertheless, competition also applies to polities, for example if subnational governments compete to make better policies (e.g., Canada, Switzerland, United States) (Gilardi and Wasserfallen 2016). In the United States, for instance, increasing cigarette taxes by California led other states to follow suit for the benefit of public health (Abadie, Diamond, and Hainmueller 2010).

The various processes of coordination discussed in the previous paragraph rarely occur in isolation. Empirical research has shown that the coordination process that is built into formal institutions is often not the only way individuals and organizations can coordinate their activities within a given context. Notably, research on coordination processes within the German bureaucracy has demonstrated that actors coordinate by negotiating in the shadow of hierarchy. This means that although the authority relationship between the actors involved is one of

command and control, there is negotiation between actors from different levels of hierarchy (Mayntz and Scharpf 1975). This mechanism can also be illustrated by examining policy implementation coordination in federal systems like Switzerland and the United States. In such systems, subnational governments are legally required to implement national legislation. However, implementing organizations have significant discretion in how they apply legal provisions and regulatory standards in practice. This is true not only in federal countries but also in non-federal states (Thomann 2015).

Negotiation in the shadow of hierarchy is the most prominent example of the co-occurrence of different coordination processes. However, it is not difficult to imagine that in other institutional contexts, there are also secondary coordination processes. For example, in the process of parliamentary democracies, there are often negotiations between different party groups before voting, which implies that there is negotiation in the shadow of majority voting. Similarly, in international organizations or states, decisions may need to be made anonymously through negotiations, even though the decision ultimately needs to be taken by a vote.

The structures and processes of coordination discussed in the previous and current sections can take two different directions. Scholars have distinguished between horizontal coordination, which occurs between different ministries and other bureaucratic organizations at the same level of government as well as between political parties or even individuals (Trein, Meyer, and Maggetti 2019). In contrast, vertical coordination refers to coordination between different levels of government or different jurisdictional levels. Research on vertical coordination is exemplified in scholarship regarding federalism and—more recently—multilevel governance. In the literature

on multilevel governance, authors have analyzed coordination between different actors involved in European Union policy processes (Trein, Thomann, and Maggetti 2019). Multilevel governance also entails coordination between public and private organizations and can be applied to the realm of international policymaking. One main insight from the governance literature is that it emphasizes the role of negotiations and networks in the policymaking process. A growing literature on network governance has pointed out that policymaking in the age of governance is primarily a negotiation in networks, and negotiations in networks of actors overshadow the formal coordination processes in national parliaments and bureaucracies (Maggetti, Di Mascio, and Natalini 2020).

### **3. Who acts? Organizations and coordination**

The third aspect that is highly relevant to studying coordination in public policy concerns considering the actors involved in the coordination process. By starting with the different institutional contexts, such as truth networks or hierarchies, researchers can identify the actors that are potentially the most important for coordination in each venue. For example, in parliament, parliamentarians are the key actors involved in the coordination process, while in a federal state, different governments play this role. Within hierarchies, coordination involves various departments and individuals, including bureaucrats and other public sector employees.

In the case of networks, the different actors involved are more diverse. From the perspective of network governance, we consider the coordination process of various actors within a network situated in different venues, such as parliament, civil society, interest groups, and others.

In the context of coordination in networks, one of the most prominent approaches to public policy analysis is the advocacy coalition framework. According to this framework, the policy process is a coordination process of various actors within a specific policy subsystem. A policy subsystem contains actors from different backgrounds who are interested in or affected by a specific policy process. For example, actors involved in tobacco control policies, such as smoking bans, would participate in the policy subsystem related to tobacco control (Jenkins-Smith et al. 2018).

Within a policy subsystem, there are often opposing advocacy coalitions. These coalitions consist of actors who either support or oppose a policy proposal. For instance, research on tobacco control policy worldwide has shown that there is a coalition of advocates in favor of tobacco control and another coalition that opposes it. Actors who participate in these coalitions can come from diverse backgrounds, such as members of parliament, professionals like doctors, patients' rights groups, and others. On the other hand, the tobacco industry and other business groups form an opposing coalition that is against tobacco control policy. A key feature of the advocacy coalition approach is that actors coordinate meaningfully to develop a shared policy position (Weishaar, Collin, and Amos 2016).

The advocacy coalition approach has also been used to understand climate change policies and could be applied to analyze emerging issues such as policymaking related to artificial intelligence. From the standpoint of policy coordination, it is essential to remember that the focus of the advocacy coalition approach is on coordination in general, rather than comparing



different coordination processes as discussed earlier. In this perspective, it is important for actors to work together in a meaningful way and achieve shared results, such as a common policy position (Ingold and Varone 2012).

Another approach in public policy analysis that can help understand the coordination of different actors is collaborative governance. The literature on collaborative governance is focused on collaborative approaches to policymaking, rather than exploring adversarial approaches and aspects of public policy. This theoretical approach aims to understand the conditions under which different actors in a network, such as public bureaucracies and non-state organizations, can find shared policy solutions. It often applies to local contexts where complex problems require creative solutions (Ansell and Gash 2008). Although coordination is not a central element of the study of collaborative governance, the literature provides interesting and important examples of how it is possible to develop a coordinated approach to public policy that involves many different actors.

#### **4. Results of coordination**

Finally, the results of coordination are an important theme for the study of coordination in public policy. Public policy studies have devoted considerable effort to distinguishing different outcomes of the coordination process. Notably, the literature distinguishes between negative and positive coordination, the relevance of the scope and substance of coordination, the absence of coordination, strategic coordination, as well as the difference between administrative coordination and policy integration.

A well-known distinction of the different results of coordination concerns the separation of negative and positive coordination. Scholars studying policymaking in coalition governments have realized that there are two main forms of coordination. Negative coordination pertains to considering the position of other actors, such as other ministries, in the policy process. For example, Ministry A wants to develop a policy proposal, and when drafting it, it will already consider the position of Ministry B and Ministry C without consulting them previously. In this way, the ministry avoids conflicts and refusal of its policy proposal. Although the result is not necessarily presented as a shared policy proposal. On the other hand, positive coordination entails that actors from different ministries propose a common policy proposal which they all co-sign. Positive coordination is a much more active and explicit form of policy output (Braun 2008). The results of coordination, as understood in the advocacy coalition framework and in the collaborative governance approach, clearly refer to positive coordination because actors within coalitions or in a collaborative governance process come up with shared positions.

Starting with the distinction between negative and positive coordination, some scholars have developed more elaborate scales of coordination. These scales often range from no coordination (absence of interaction) to competition, negative coordination, positive coordination, and ultimately strategic coordination. Strategic coordination suggests that actors should participate in the coordination process to develop a common strategy, such as an integrated policy strategy. This approach suggest different forms of coordination that build on each other (Braun 2008; Schout et al. 2006). However, there is a possibility that there is strategic coordination in the presence of a policy strategy but no positive coordination regarding its implementation.

Another contribution that focuses on the results of coordination distinguishes the scope of coordination and the substance of coordination. The scope of coordination refers to the actors involved in the solution, while the substance of coordination focuses on the extent of their agreement. This distinction can be useful for analyzing the policy process as a coordination process to understand which actors agree with the particular result (Sager 2006).

Finally, a more recent strand of literature focuses on the output of policy coordination. Scholars have built on the methodological approach of policy diffusion research to measure the frequency of policy coordination and policy integration reforms within a given policy sector. The analysis distinguishes between policy integration, which refers to changes in how different policy instruments are integrated into a policy strategy, and administrative coordination, which refers to changes in how different departments in the administration formally coordinate. This approach is both empirical and focused on the institutional and output dimensions. It complements the previously discussed approaches to policy coordination by examining the results of the policy coordination process in a comprehensive manner (Trein and Ansell 2021; Trein, Maggetti, and Meyer 2021).

## **5. Conclusion**

In conclusion, this article has distinguished between the context for coordination, the process of coordination, the actors involved in coordination, as well as the results of coordination. When using the term coordination for the analysis of the policy process, it is crucial to explicitly spell

out how the interaction between actors is analyzed and how this coordination consists of a meaningful way of interaction. It is also important to keep in mind that the distinction between positive and negative coordination or explicit and inexplicit coordination can be helpful to decide whether the term can be used in a meaningful way. Scholars should avoid referring to coordination as a general and trivial way of interaction. If used carelessly, the term coordination becomes ubiquitous and, therefore, analytically useless for the understanding of policy coordination. Successful research on coordination in the policy process has always applied it to specific examples, such as a specific policy process or a specific institutional context. By following these recommendations, scholars can use policy coordination as a powerful tool to understand the policy process.

The study of coordination is an evergreen in public policy research. In complex political systems and policy environments, questions regarding coordination and different coordination problems almost inevitably become an important issue at some point. This is true, for example, regarding policy actions related to climate change and health care. Beyond such specific examples, it is worthwhile to pursue theoretically research questions concerning policy coordination such as the following two questions. Firstly, there is an implicit assumption in the literature on policy coordination suggesting that the presence of coordination equates policy success. Nevertheless, this link is – up to now – poorly theorized. Future research on policy coordination could therefore link different themes in the literature on policy coordination with the scholarship on policy success (and failure). Secondly, policy coordination research has collected a variety of barriers and drivers of policy coordination. There is still room in the literature for a contribution that accumulates these theories through examples from different policy fields.



## Bibliography:

- Abadie, Alberto, Alexis Diamond, and Jens Hainmueller. 2010. "Synthetic Control Methods for Comparative Case Studies: Estimating the Effect of California's Tobacco Control Program." *Journal of the American Statistical Association* 105(490): 493–505.
- Ansell, Chris, and A. Gash. 2008. "Collaborative Governance in Theory and Practice." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 18(4): 543–71.
- Braun, Dietmar. 2008. "Organising the Political Coordination of Knowledge and Innovation Policies." *Science and Public Policy* 35(4): 227–39.
- Gilardi, Fabrizio, and Fabio Wasserfallen. 2016. "How Socialization Attenuates Tax Competition." *British Journal of Political Science* 46(1): 45–65.
- Hall, Peter A., and David Soskice, eds. 2001. *Varieties of Capitalism: The Institutional Foundations of Comparative Advantage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ingold, Karin, and Frédéric Varone. 2012. "Treating Policy Brokers Seriously: Evidence from the Climate Policy." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 22(2): 319–46.
- Jenkins-Smith, Hank C., Daniel Nohrstedt, Christopher M. Weible, and Karin Ingold. 2018. "The Advocacy Coalition Framework: An Overview of the Research Program." In *Theories of the Policy Process*, Boulder: Westview Press, 135–71. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/> (March 20, 2020).
- Lijphart, Arent. 2012. *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries*. 2nd ed. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Maggetti, Martino, Fabrizio Di Mascio, and Alessandro Natalini. 2020. "National Regulators, Regulatory Networks, and European Agencies: Connecting the Dots." *Public Policy and Administration*: 095207671988674.
- Mayntz, Renate, and Fritz W. Scharpf. 1975. *Policy-Making in the German Federal Bureaucracy*. Amsterdam: Elsevier.
- [https://pure.mpg.de/pubman/faces/ViewItemOverviewPage.jsp?itemId=item\\_3026663](https://pure.mpg.de/pubman/faces/ViewItemOverviewPage.jsp?itemId=item_3026663) (March 23, 2021).
- Nohrstedt, Daniel, and Kristin Olofsson. 2016. "A Review of Applications of the Advocacy Coalition Framework in Swedish Policy Processes." *European Policy Analysis* 2(2): 18–42.
- Peters, B. Guy. 2013. "Toward Policy Coordination: Alternatives to Hierarchy." *Policy & Politics* 41(4): 569–84.
- . 2018. "The Challenge of Policy Coordination." *Policy Design and Practice* 1(1): 1–11.
- Sager, Fritz. 2006. "Policy Coordination in the European Metropolis: A Meta-Analysis." *West European Politics* 29(3): 433–60.
- Scharpf, Fritz W. 1997. *Games Real Actors Play: Actor-Centered Institutionalism In Policy Research*. London: Routledge.
- Schmidt, Manfred G. 2002. "Political Performance and Types of Democracy: Findings from Comparative Studies." *European Journal of Political Research* 41(1): 147–63.
- Schout, Associate Professor Adriaan, Andrew Jordan, Adriaan Schout, and Johannes Adriaan Schout. 2006. *The Coordination of the European Union: Exploring the Capacities of Networked Governance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Thomann, Eva. 2015. "Customizing Europe: Transposition as Bottom-up Implementation." *Journal of European Public Policy* 22(10): 1368–87.
- Trein, Philipp, and Christopher K. Ansell. 2021. "Countering Fragmentation, Taking Back the State, or Partisan Agenda-Setting? Explaining Policy Integration and Administrative Coordination

Reforms." *Governance* 34(4): 1143–66.

Trein, Philipp, Martino Maggetti, and Iris Meyer. 2021. "Necessary Conditions for Policy Integration and Administrative Coordination Reforms: An Exploratory Analysis." *Journal of European Public Policy* 28(9): 1410–31.

Trein, Philipp, Iris Meyer, and Martino Maggetti. 2019. "The Integration and Coordination of Public Policies: A Systematic Comparative Review." *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice* 21(4): 332–49.

Trein, Philipp, Eva Thomann, and Martino Maggetti. 2019. "Integration, Functional Differentiation and Problem-Solving in Multilevel Governance." *Public Administration* 97(2): 339–54.

Vatter, Adrian. 2018. *Swiss Federalism : The Transformation of a Federal Model*. London: Routledge. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9781315231693> (April 3, 2020).

Weishaar, Heide, Jeff Collin, and Amanda Amos. 2016. "Tobacco Control and Health Advocacy in the European Union: Understanding Effective Coalition-Building." *Nicotine & Tobacco Research* 18(2): 122–29.