Learning Heuristics, Issue Salience and Polarization in the Policy Process

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Philipp Trein

Department of Political Science and International Relations

University of Geneva

40 boulevard du Pont d'Arve

CH-1211 Geneva 4

josefphilipp.trein@unige.ch

Thenia Vagionaki

University of Lausanne

eleftheria.vagionaki@unil.ch

Philipp Trein is a senior research at the University of Geneva and a senior fellow at UC Berkeley. His research interests cover policy coordination and integration, the politics of digital public policy, health policy, and federalism as well as multilevel governance. His research has been published in leading political science and public policy journals as well as with major university presses. More information can be found here: www.philipptrein.com

Thenia Vagionaki is a postdoctoral researcher at the Institute of Political Studies at the University of Lausanne in Switzerland. Her research focuses on policy learning and EU studies. Her most recent work has been published in *Political Studies Review* and with *Palgrave Macmillan*.

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Abstract

This paper proposes a theory that links issue salience and actor polarization to the uses of learning heuristics in the policy process. In harkening back to research on public policy, behavioral economics, and crisis management, we argue that policymakers use two learning heuristics when they update their policy ideas: policy-oriented learning and power-oriented learning. The paper develops theoretical expectations that link issue salience and polarization of actor constellations to policy-oriented and power-oriented learning. To illustrate the theoretical expectations, the article discusses EU anti-crisis policies dealing with the 2007-2009 global financial and economic crisis and its aftermath, as well as the responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany and the U.S. as pathway cases. Overall, this paper contributes to the understanding of learning and the political uses of ideas in the policy process.

1. Introduction

Ideas and learning have been a cornerstone of political analysis for a long time (Simon 1957, 1947; Deutsch 1966; Heclo 1974; Goyal and Howlett 2018b; Vagionaki and Trein 2020). Research dealing with ideas in political science and public policy has used learning as a mechanism of how society embraces new and disposes of old ideas (e.g., Hall 1993; Kamkhaji and Radaelli 2020). In the political sphere, learning can involve changes at different levels of ideas, such as policy ideas, or, which is much rarer, actors' core beliefs (Jenkins-Smith et al. 2018). One contemporary criticism of the learning literature points to a lack of understanding regarding policymakers' intentions when they learn from new information (Goyal and Howlett 2018a).

Up to now, the link between policymakers' *political- and policy-oriented intentions* has played a rather implicit role in the policy learning literature (Rose 1991; Bennett and Howlett 1992; May 1992; Zito and Schout 2009; Moyson et al. 2017). Nevertheless, the research on policy evaluation and knowledge transfer has acknowledged more explicitly that political uses of knowledge are important to understand how decisionmakers use ideas (Boswell 2009; Daviter 2015; Eberli 2018). Recent theoretical work on policy learning by Dunlop and Radaelli has focused on different modes of learning and accounted for decisionmakers *policymaking intentions* (Dunlop and Radaelli 2013; Dunlop and Radaelli 2018b; Dunlop et al. 2018). This theory distinguishes four different modes of learning in the policy process, notably, epistemic, hierarchical, bargaining, and reflexive learning. The variance of learning modes can be explained by the tractability of a policy issue as well as by the certification of actors. The micro-level foundation of this theory is *homo discentis*, "the learning, studying, and practicing person" (Dunlop and Radaelli 2018b).

This paper contributes to theorizing learning in proposing a framework that accounts more comprehensively for decisionmakers' political intentions when they learn in the policy process and relates political to policymaking intentions. Therefore, this article assumes that policy-and decision-makers are *homo discentis*. The paper reviews different theories of the policy process (Weible and Sabatier 2018), in which learning is mentioned explicitly. To conceptualize policymakers' intentions, the article harkens back to the distinction between policy success and political success (Marsh and McConnell 2010). This perspective understands the policymaking process as a learning process, in which actors constantly update (but not necessarily change) their beliefs and preferences once they face new information. Against this background, this paper distinguishes between *policy-oriented learning*, which captures intentions to improve policies in order to solve a policy problem, and *power-oriented learning*, which entails learning intended to improve the political influence, regardless of the problem-solving contribution of policy decisions.

Subsequently, this paper argues that policy-oriented learning and power-oriented learning are two learning heuristics that serve as orientations for policy- and decisionmakers (Gigerenzer and Goldstein 1996; Marewski et al. 2010; Boin et al. 2016; Ansell and Boin 2019). These actors always use these two learning heuristics as filters when they update their policy ideas, for example based on new information about policy research or experiences (Braun and Gilardi 2006) throughout the policy process. Importantly, policymakers might face the challenge to balance both heuristics, for example if there is a tradeoff (Margalit 2013) between policy- and power-oriented goals. To address this problem, the article argues that it depends on issue salience (Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Culpepper 2010; De Wilde et al. 2016) and the polarization of actor constellations (Druckman et al. 2013; Jenkins-Smith et al. 2018) how decisionmakers poise these two heuristics. Against this theoretical background, the paper develops four expectations about how policy-

oriented and power-oriented learning are balanced in the policy process. To empirically illustrate the theoretical framework, the article studies policy responses to the Euro crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic as pathway cases (Gerring 2007b, 2007a).

This paper contributes to the topic of this special issue (Kamkhaji and Radaelli 2020) in theorizing causal relations about how decisionmakers update their ideas related to specific policy changes. Specifically, the article proposes insights into the potentially conflicting intentions that decisionmakers face when they learn in the policy process. The theoretical expectations developed in the paper can be used for the comparative empirical analysis of countries and policy issues to assess causal mechanisms for why and how decisionmakers update policy-relevant ideas.

2. Learning, ideas, and intentions in the policy process

Learning and ideas are two analytical categories, which scholars frequently use in political analysis (Hall 1993; Palm 2017; Dunlop et al. 2018; Vagionaki and Trein 2020). According to Braun and Busch, ideas are actors' perceptions of reality; these perceptions might vary between different individuals and groups, which might have opinions that differ from the objective reality. Therefore, political actors need to deal with a mix of an objective reality, on the one hand, and their ideas that deviate from this reality (Braun and Busch 1999), on the other.

A common definition denotes learning, "as the acquisition of new relevant information that permits the updating of beliefs [respectively ideas] about the effects of a new policy" (Braun and Gilardi 2006, 308). Another and more encompassing definition of learning holds that learning in policymaking is,

"1) a collective process, which may include acquiring information through diverse actions (e.g. trial and error), assessing or translating information, and disseminating knowledge or opportunities across individuals in a collective, and 2) collective products that emerge from the process, such as new shared ideas, strategies, rules, or policies" (Heikkila and Gerlak 2013, 486).

As these two definitions illustrate, ideas are related to policy learning, i.e., they are the contents of learning (Vagionaki and Trein 2020). The literature often deals with policy learning as a binary concept denoting its presence or absence (Rietig and Perkins 2018) or as a scale assessing different degrees of learning (Braun and Gilardi 2006; Vagionaki and Trein 2020; Zito and Schout 2009).

This article takes a different approach as it understands learning as a process, which is embedded in the policymaking process. Rather than focusing on the question whether learning is present or not, this article distinguishes how policymakers learn and whether policy- or political- oriented intentions maintain the upper hand. Therefore, the article uses the concept of *homo discentis* as the starting point and micro foundation for the paper. The notion of *homo discentis* originates from behavioral theories of psychology and adult education. It contains that each individual is full of prior knowledge and beliefs, which are constantly updated in the face of new information. This updating does not mean that these beliefs change against the background of new information or that the individual necessarily learns the "right" lesson. Individuals rather filter new information through existing information and beliefs, which serve as a heuristic to shortcut and process incoming information (Dunlop and Radaelli 2018, S53; Jones 2001). In this paper we theorize the role of heuristics more explicitly and reflect on the intentions of learning in public policy.

3. Policy-oriented and power-oriented learning

This article uses the distinction of *policy-oriented* and *power-oriented* learning to understand the heuristics and intentions according to which decisionmakers use ideas and learn in the policy process. An important theme in the public policy literature is the distinction of "powering" and "puzzling." Hugh Heclo and others have used the term puzzling to point to a mode of reasoning that entails the search to reach political decisions that actually solve a collective problem and come up with a policy solution that addresses this problem. On the other hand, powering entails a mode of reasoning that seeks the maximization of political interests, even if it comes at the cost of contributing to "taming" or "solving" the problem addressed by a policy reform (Heclo 1974; Culpepper 2002; Trein et al. 2019). Research on political parties has pointed to a similar distinction that is the vote- and office- seeking parties on the one hand, and policy- seeking parties on the other (e.g., Strom 1990). The governance literature is another body of work that chimes with the distinction of policy-oriented and power-oriented learning. Specifically, governance research is oriented towards policy problem-solving (Thomann et al. 2019; Trein et al. 2019) whereas the power-oriented dimension plays a more implicit role (Goetz 2008). In the following, we review existing theories of the policy process, to further substantiate the distinction of policy-oriented and power-oriented learning.

a. Policy-oriented learning

Policy-oriented learning is a term that scholars have used to explain policy change in the Advocacy Coalition Framework (Moyson 2017). According to Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, policy-oriented

learning entails, "enduring alternations of thought or behavioral intentions that results from experience and which are concerned with the attainment or revision of the precepts of the belief system of individuals or of collectives" (Jenkins-Smith et al. 2018, 151; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993, 42). This form of learning focuses on improving policy solutions to better deal with policy problems; it also entails the acquisition of political strategies to put into place renewed policy solutions. In this case the latter are a function and consequence of searching better policy solutions (Jenkins-Smith et al. 2018). Learning in the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF), "… is likely to happen incrementally […] and policy analysis seldomly influences specific governmental decisions but often serves an `enlightenment function´ by gradually altering the concepts and assumption of subsystem participants" (Jenkins-Smith et al. 2018, 146)

Scholars of the ACF have put forward four explanatory factors that determine whether learning occurs: 1. the attributes of forums, namely whether they are open or closed and whether participants share common norms and training; 2. the level of conflict between coalitions; 3. the quality of the stimuli, e.g., the quality of available data; 4. attributes, namely, beliefs of actors. The more extreme actors' beliefs are the less likely they are to learn (Jenkins-Smith et al. 2018, 151–52). Although it mentions political elements, learning in the ACF is mainly focused on policy innovations (Torfing and Ansell 2017, 44).

Policy-oriented learning is also part of innovation and diffusion models, which form a different group of theories for the analysis of the policy process. The diffusion literature has isolated policy-oriented learning as one particular mechanism of policy diffusion. Therein, governments adopt policies from other jurisdictions, such as regions, municipalities, or countries because these policies have proven successful abroad (Braun and Gilardi 2006; Berry and Berry 2018). Policy success

means that a policy will be adopted once it has reached policy success elsewhere but also if it leads to re-election or the achievement of higher office (Gilardi 2010; Gilardi et al. 2009). Nevertheless, it makes sense to understand learning in the diffusion process as a policy-oriented form of learning because otherwise it overlaps with other diffusion mechanisms, especially with imitation and normative pressure (Maggetti and Gilardi 2016; Berry and Berry 2018).

The notion of policy-oriented learning is similar to the concepts of instrumental and social learning, which researchers use in the policy analysis literature. Instrumental learning refers to the update of beliefs concerning the "viability of policy interventions or implementation designs" and social learning to the "social construction of a policy problem" through the use of specific policy instruments (May 1992, 336; Zito and Schout 2009; Hall 1993). The intentions that guide policy-oriented learning is to update beliefs in order to achieve programmatic success of policies with regard to a successful implementation, achievement of outcomes, and efficient use of resources (Marsh and McConnell 2010, 571).

b. *Power-oriented learning*

Power-oriented learning is a different way of how scholars have conceptualized learning in the policy process. In a nutshell, it refers to the update of beliefs with the aim to increase political influence rather than to improve policies with the aim to solve a problem. The intention behind this form of learning is to achieve political success (Marsh and McConnell 2010, 571). This form of learning is most prominent in Policy Feedback Theory. This theory assesses, "how policies affect crucial aspects of governance, such as whether they promote civic engagement or deter it, whether

they foster the development of powerful interest groups, and how they affect institutional governing capacity" (Mettler and SoRelle 2018, 104).

This theory is built around the argument that existing policies can shape politics and that feedback effects from a pre-existing policy influence the political activity and strategy of interest groups and elected officials (Lowi 1972; Steinmo et al. 1992; Pierson 1993). Notably Paul Pierson (Pierson 1993) postulates,

> *"… that enacted policies have the ability to shape the political behaviors of government elites, organized interests, and mass public through two primary pathways: interpretive effects, as policies serve as sources of information and meaning, thus affecting political learning and attitudes; and resource effects providing means and incentives for political activity"* (Mettler and SoRelle 2018, 105–6).

This form of learning is more power-oriented as the update of beliefs through the acquisition of information about policies results in learning about political strategies and opportunities. According to Peter May, political learning is a, "strategy for advocating a given policy idea or problem" (May 1992, 336). Power-oriented learning entails the update of beliefs with the goal to pursue a policy agenda but the motivation behind it is primarily political. In this sense, policymaking serves the goal to pursue special interests (Hacker and Pierson 2014), while improving the common good is of secondary importance to policymaking. Insights from the literature on policy evaluation shows that policy uses of evidence is a common practice and that elected officials use results from policy research that fits their political interests (Boswell 2009; Eberli 2018).

4. Policy- and power-oriented learning as learning heuristics

Against this background, we argue that policy-oriented and power-oriented learning represent two learning heuristics decisionmakers use when updating their ideas about policies. Research on cognitive psychology has pointed out that individuals are boundedly rational (Simon 1956, 1990) and use heuristics and cues (Kahneman and Tversky 1982) to compensate uncertainty and a lack of knowledge (Braun and Gilardi 2006; Marewski et al. 2010). Heuristics are simple strategies that allow actors to ignore information selectively in order to come to an effective result quickly (Gigerenzer and Goldstein 1996; Marewski, Gaissmaier, and Gigerenzer 2010, 103). Scholars of public policy have acknowledged this insight before. For example, cognitive limitations impact on how policymakers react to external events that require a policy response under pressure or complexity (e.g., Kamkhaji and Radaelli 2017; Birkland 2009; Baumgartner et al. 2018). Similarly, in the literature on crisis politics, authors have pointed out that heuristic thinking is quite common and they have assessed how decision-making systems need to be safeguarded against the pitfalls and dangers of cognitive shortcuts (Boin et al. 2016; Ansell and Boin 2019).

We build on these insights to explain how *homo discentis* (Dunlop and Radaelli 2018b), uses these heuristics in the policy process. If we assume that the policy process is also a learning process that requires participating actors to constantly process new information and update their beliefs, actors will use heuristics to deal with information effectively. Therefore, this article holds that policymakers process information based on two heuristics: a.) a policy-oriented heuristic that selects information to satisfy policy seeking intentions, i.e., to make policies that effectively solve problems; the second heuristic b.) is power-oriented and satisfies office and power-seeking

intentions, for example to secure political influence and to respond to the political demands of a constituency or organization. Once a new piece of information arrives, for example a study informing about the impact of a specific policy design on outputs, decisionmakers update their ideas based on the policy-oriented and the power-oriented learning heuristics.

When it comes to specific preferences for policies, actors have to balance their policy-oriented and power-oriented intentions. Hence, an important question is under which conditions decisionmakers follow either a policy-oriented or a power-oriented learning heuristic in actual policy- and decision-making. In the following, the article develops expectations to theorize this relationship.

5. Linking policy- and power-oriented learning

The above-discussed theories of the policy process allow to separate policy-oriented and power-oriented learning. Nevertheless, these theories do not link the two forms of learning in an explicit manner. For example, the Advocacy Coalition Framework as well as policy diffusion and innovation models do not propose expectations about how policy-oriented and power-oriented learning are related (Berry and Berry 2018; Jenkins-Smith et al. 2018). Research on policy diffusion (Gilardi 2010) and policy learning (May 1992) indicates that problem-solving- and powering-oriented learning are related, however, once again without proposing precise expectations about this relationship. Another indication regarding the overlap of policy-oriented and power-oriented learning is in the Narrative Policy Framework. This theory posits that "'narrative policy learning' may be a way to begin linking policy processes to policy change […] Policy narrative learning occurs with the adoption of or a convergence on a new narrative configuration…" (Shanahan et al. 2018, 209). It is possible that such a new narrative configuration

combines policy- and power-oriented insights. Previous research on policy learning modes linked learning to the tractability of the policy problem as well as to the certification of actors (Dunlop and Radaelli 2018a; Dunlop and Radaelli 2018b).

This paper takes a different perspective and complements previous explanations for learning, by focusing on political factors driving the learning process. Therefore, this article harkens back to research on issue attention and politicization, which has underlined the role of salience and polarization (Culpepper 2010; Jones and Baumgartner 2005; de Wilde, Leupold, and Schmidtke 2016). Both dimensions are important to understand the link between expertise and policy in accounting for differences between policy issues and actor constellations. Linking salience and polarization to learning is plausible. Policy evaluation research suggests that issue salience impacts on how policymakers use knowledge (Alkin and King 2017; Bundi 2018; Eberli 2018). Policy process research indicates that polarized actor constellations makes policy-oriented learning less likely (Jenkins-Smith et al. 2018). Nevertheless, both dimensions are under-theorized in the policy learning literature. Therefore, we argue that *issue salience* and *polarization of actor coalitions* impact on how decisionmakers resort to policy-oriented and power-oriented learning. This paper understands salience as the degree to which an issue receives political attention (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). Polarization refers to the ideological and policy positional distances between actors involved in policymaking (Druckman et al. 2013).

This article combines issue salience and actor polarization into different configurations of explanatory factors that allow for the developing of expectations regarding how decisionmakers use the policy-oriented and the power-oriented learning heuristics, respectively. Notably, the paper discusses whether the two heuristics are balanced, or one dominates over the other. In addition, the

paper specifies the potential as well as the risks for policy problem-solving (Thomann et al. 2019; Trein et al. 2019) that come along with each of the specified combinations of policy-and power-oriented learning heuristics (Table 1).

Table 1: Issue salience, polarization, and learning

	Low issue salience	**High issue salience**
Limited polarization of actor constellation	*Policy-oriented and power-oriented learning are balanced under relaxation* Potential: Reflexive learning; effective / "optimal" use of knowledge as time is available Risk: Missing of the window of opportunity due to limited pressure to act / implementation limits	*Policy-oriented learning dominates* Potential: Fast solutions using (some) expert knowledge Risk: group-think and limited reflexivity
Significant polarization of actor constellation	*Power-oriented learning dominates* Potential: Avoidance of "quiet politics" in the back room Risk: Knowledge only used for political purposes, dominance of the policy process by special interests	*Policy-oriented and power-oriented learning are balanced under stress* Potential: Learning process that accounts for different groups' preferences; correction of mistakes Risk: Inefficient and suboptimal use of knowledge due to interest bargaining; piecemeal reform

The first expectation stipulates that the combination of low issue salience and limited polarization of actor constellations results in a balanced relationship of power-oriented learning and policy-oriented learning under relaxation (Table 1). "Balanced under relaxation" means that there is no

pressure on policymakers to urgently decide on a policy solution and there is time for a learning process that allows to reconcile conflicts between actors' political and policy-programmatic goals. In such a case, decisionmakers are likely to use both heuristics – policy-oriented and power-oriented learning – with similar importance when processing new information. The learning potential for this context is that there is an efficient and optimal use of knowledge, which reflects on policy solutions based on available information and political feasibility. Due to the limited polarization, actors are likely to cooperate and seek a politically feasible solution. Furthermore, decisionmakers have more time available at their disposal, which is important, since it usually takes between five and ten years from the transfer of accumulated knowledge into policy (Weiss 1993). Under these conditions, a pragmatic deliberative approach is likely to work as participants have time to weigh (and potentially test) different policy options (Ansell 2011). The main risks in this case are that actors miss the window of opportunity as the issue does not have enough political salience to make it to the top of the list with policy priorities (Jenkins-Smith et al. 2018), or that policies are negotiated behind closed doors without scrutiny by the public (Culpepper 2010). Thus, we formulate the following expectation:

> *Expectation 1: Low issue salience and limited actor polarization result in a balance of policy-oriented and power-oriented learning under relaxation.*

The second expectation focuses on the combination of high issue salience but limited polarization of actor constellations (Table 1). In such a context, the policy-oriented learning heuristic dominates, and policymakers are under pressure to reach decisions. Therefore, they are likely to follow a script of policy-oriented learning as they face a high demand for problem-solving (Trein et al. 2019) and limited polarization between opposing coalitions (Jenkins-Smith et al. 2018). Under these

conditions, it is probable that there are policy solutions, which are based on the input by experts, i.e., policymakers accept technocratic solutions (Bertsou and Caramani 2019). The risk that comes along with this configuration is the reliance of a too thin knowledge base due to group think. This problem is particularly likely to appear if there is a policy problem that is not easily tractable and where no ready solutions are available (Dunlop and Radaelli 2018b). Thus, the second expectation reads as follows:

> *Expectation 2: High issue salience and limited actor polarization result in a dominance of policy-oriented learning.*

The third expectation combines low issue salience and significant polarization of actor constellations. In this situation, the heuristic of power-oriented learning dominates over the policy-oriented learning one (Table 1). It resembles very much the famous dictum by Karl Deutsch that, "power is the ability to afford not to learn" (Bandelow 2008, 746; Deutsch 1966, 111), in the policy-making sense. This configuration represents a central insight that scholars of policy implementation have reported when referring to political uses of evidence and evaluation (Boswell 2009; Alkin and King 2017; Eberli 2018). According to this mechanism, decisionmakers use policy insights from research in a way that benefits their political interests, i.e., by avoiding opposition by their electorate or by powerful interest groups. This learning logic results in discarding policy-relevant evidence for political reasons. In its worst forms, the dominance of power-oriented learning results in policies that aim at harming political opponents without dealing with actual problems in society. Consequently, the paper proposes the following theoretical expectation:

Expectation 3: Low issue salience and significant actor polarization result in a dominance of power-oriented learning.

The fourth expectation posits that high issue salience and significant polarization of actor constellations leads to a balanced relationship of policy-oriented learning and power-oriented learning, this time however, under stress (Table 1). "Balanced under stress" means that policymakers face pressure to act quickly, even against the background of complex policy problems (Ansell and Boin 2019; Boin et al. 2016). Decisionmakers are likely to face an equilibrium of their policy-oriented and politically oriented intentions and goals in a context where decisions need to be taken fast. Under this condition, cognitive shortcuts play a very important role. Policymakers might even need to guess about the best policy option because they do not know (Kamkhaji and Radaelli 2017; Birkland 2009). Even if evidence-based policy recipes are available decisionmakers will judge them through the lenses of their political interests (Cairney 2016).

In principle, there is a potential for deliberation of different policy alternatives, since actors will put different policy options for debate. Due to high public attention for the policy issue, decisionmakers might quickly change course if a policy does not work. Nevertheless, against the background of high issue salience and polarization, decisionmakers are likely to insist on their positions even if this means that policy solutions address a policy problem in a very limited manner. Therefore, under this configuration, it is likely that the learning process resembles a bargaining mode (Dunlop and Radaelli 2018b) rather than policy-oriented learning in a pragmatic problem-solving and collaborative sense (Ansell 2011). In this case, the risk remains high that the use of knowledge will be inefficient due to limited time to reflect and politically unfeasible policy options. Thus, the fourth expectation reads as follows:

Expectation 4: High issue salience and significant actor polarization result in a balance of policy-oriented and power-oriented learning under stress.

Empirical illustrations

The paper now turns to an empirical analysis that illustrates the above-developed theoretical expectations. Specifically, we discuss two case studies, which take the role of pathway cases. This means that they serve to illustrate and clarify the link between the policy- and power-oriented learning heuristics as well as issue salience and the polarization of actors, but not to test hypotheses derived from the above-discussed theory (Gerring 2007b) against confounding explanations. In other words, the case studies are "plausibility probes" (Gerring 2007a, 41) for the expectations that we developed before. Specifically, this article focuses on two case studies: First, it deals with the European Union's (EU) fiscal and monetary policy before and after the Euro crisis, i.e., policy decisions at the European level. Second, it analyzes public health policy with a focus on the responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, compared to previous anti-pandemic measures. Both case studies show a variation regarding salience and actor polarization during the periods under observation. Thus, they are suitable to illustrate our argument using proximate pieces of evidence. Regarding the policy responses to COVID-19, this article focuses on Germany and the U.S. The two countries represent variations regarding the political polarization of the pandemic, and we can expect differences regarding the use of policy-oriented and power-oriented learning heuristics by policymakers.

EU fiscal and monetary policy and the Euro crisis

The first case study focuses on fiscal and monetary policy in the EU, before and during the Euro crisis after 2010. Prior to the Euro crisis and after the Maastricht agreement when European fiscal and monetary integration accelerated, the use of knowledge shows a dominance of power-oriented over policy-oriented learning. During the period leading up to the creation of the European Monetary Union (EMU), economists criticized that European monetary integration was too different from the idea of an "optimal currency area", which represents the model for currency unions. For example, already prior to the creation of the Euro experts criticized that the labor market in the EU was not flexible enough and that the deficit criteria in the Maastricht Treaties were too strict (Grauwe 1994, 158-162). The design of the EMU reflected the political debates about monetary integration and economic policy in Europe since the 1970s (Mourlon-Druol 2014, 1283-1286). In using policy ideas derived from economic ordoliberalism Germany and other wealthy countries opposed fiscal transfers to economically weaker nations (Bulmer 2014). In establishing the EMU, decisionmakers used policy ideas about how to create a monetary union, but they neglected (or even ignored)[1] policy ideas regarding complementary fiscal measures for political reasons. Notably, EMU lacked a, "… 'fiscal shock-absorbing' mechanism that has been a cornerstone of most, but by no means all, existing monetary unions" (Issing 2004, 46). Therefore, the construction of European fiscal and monetary policy is an example of a dominance of power-oriented learning.

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[1] It is difficult to conclude with certainty at this point whether decision-makers neglected fiscal policy ideas because they did not know or ignored them deliberately. Nevertheless, since ideas about fiscal integration were discussed since the 1970s, we can assume that information about the need for a fiscal risk-sharing mechanism was available to policymakers. Further research could try to disentangle the role of neglect and ignorance in dealing with such information.

In the aftermath of the global financial and economic crisis of 2007-2009, the salience of European fiscal and monetary policy increased, as the Eurozone faced a debt and balance-of-payment crisis. Against this background, learning shifted to a balance of the policy- and power-oriented learning heuristics regarding the usage of policy ideas. To deal with this crisis, EU institutions and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) set up several fiscal bailout packages to help countries that had severe financial difficulties. The financial assistance from the IMF and other EU countries was conditional on internal adjustment. Countries that were in financial need received credits in exchange for domestic reforms (Trein 2020, 585-587). In addition, the European Central Bank expanded the monetary basis of the Eurozone through quantitative easing to deal with the liquidity problems of debtor countries (Schelkle 2012).

The policy ideas that decisionmakers learned when dealing with the Euro crisis solved the problem insofar as they avoided a break-up of the Eurozone. Nevertheless, these decisions show a politically driven use of policy ideas. In this process, the European Commission and the European Central Bank demanded strict austerity policies, accepting a steep decline in living standards in countries, such as Greece, Spain, and Italy. According to Matthijs and Blyth, the augmentation of public debt in Southern Europe and the economic recession in Europe happened because EU institutions insisted on a restrictive fiscal policy in debtor countries. They hold that decisionmakers ignored evidence about the negative consequences of their economic policies due to beliefs rooted in economic ordoliberalism. Specifically, decision-makers pursued a restrictive fiscal policy, which enjoyed considerable political support in Germany and other creditor countries. The focus of these specific policy ideas is a result of the "authority contest" between different EU member states (Matthijs and Blyth 2018, 116-119). As a consequence, the populations of debtor countries, such as Greece, bore most of the crisis' costs (Jones et al. 2016; Walter et al. 2020). What is more, the

strong polarization of actors resulted in ignoring potential policy ideas that would have absorbed some of the negative consequences of anti-crisis policies in Southern European countries.

Public health policy and the response to the COVID-19 pandemic

The second case study in this paper focuses on the policy responses against pandemics with a focus on the outbreak of COVID-19, in 2020. Before 2020, the salience, i.e., the public attention that pandemic management received, had been much lower, in most countries of Western Europe. This does not mean that governments did not deal with this topic. For example, the outbreak of the "Swine Flu" in 2009 resulted in the implementation of anti-pandemic policies, for example, in Germany (Elger et al. 2020/06/11). In response to the Ebola outbreaks 2014-2016, the Centers for Diseases Control set up policy measures to deal with the disease, in West Africa, and in the U.S. (Bell 2016).

The outbreak of COVID-19, in Spring 2020, shifted the issue on the top of the agenda of governments around the world. The magnitude of the problem was evident to scientists and governments at a similar point in time, however, there are differences in the policy reactions to the crisis (Hale et al. 2020). In some countries, the policy responses mirror the dominance of the policy-oriented learning heuristic, i.e., there were relatively swift responses to the crisis that used fast responses of lockdowns, extensive testing, and economic measures to deal with the crisis. Germany is one example of this situation. Although the country is a federal polity that requires coordinating the response to the crisis between the member states of the federation and municipalities, its policy response was relatively coherent (Büthe et al. 2020). The policies put in place by the government managed to keep the increase of cases stable (RKI 2020/07/12), even after releasing the lockdown

measures. Although some politicians at the subnational level disagreed on the how and when of the lockdown measures (Carstens et al. 2020/03/21), different political parties did not polarize on the general policy ideas regarding how to deal with the crisis, notably during the first wave of the pandemic until summer 2020. Despite some differences between member states of the federation regarding post-lockdown measures (Teevs 2020/05/04; NZZ 2020/07/13), the overall policy approach in Germany remains coherent.

Contrariwise, in the U.S., the response to the COVID-19 pandemic happened in a politically polarized context. The federal government ignored the first information about the pandemic (Pilkington 2020/04/04) and cut the budget for pandemic preparedness even after WHO had declared the global pandemic (Devi 2020). As the federal government did not pursue a coherent public health policy against the crisis, it remained in the hands of the States to respond to COVID-19 which resulted in very different approaches and variations along party lines. For example, States with a Republican governor and more "Trump supporters" passed less restrictive social distancing measures (Adolph et al. 2020). As a result, the number of infections never declined to the level they did in European countries but continued to surge (Dong et al. 2020). This is especially the case as the member states of the U.S. federation depend to a large extent on the funding by the federal government and Congress, "that is presently gripped by partisan polarization, which inhibits rapid and comprehensive action" (Rocco et al. 2020, 472). These examples show that the polarization of political actors in the U.S. resulted in a balance of policy- and power-oriented learning under stress.

Revisiting power- and policy-oriented learning

The above two case studies illustrate the theoretical expectations developed in the previous parts of the paper (Figure 1). The example of the European fiscal and monetary policy shows how polarized actor constellations have led to a use of the power-oriented learning heuristic, i.e., the prioritization of political success when processing policy ideas. In turn, this resulted in the selective use of policy relevant ideas that fit policy ideas that were prominent in Germany and the majority of EU and EMU countries.

Figure 1: Empirical illustrations of the theoretical argument
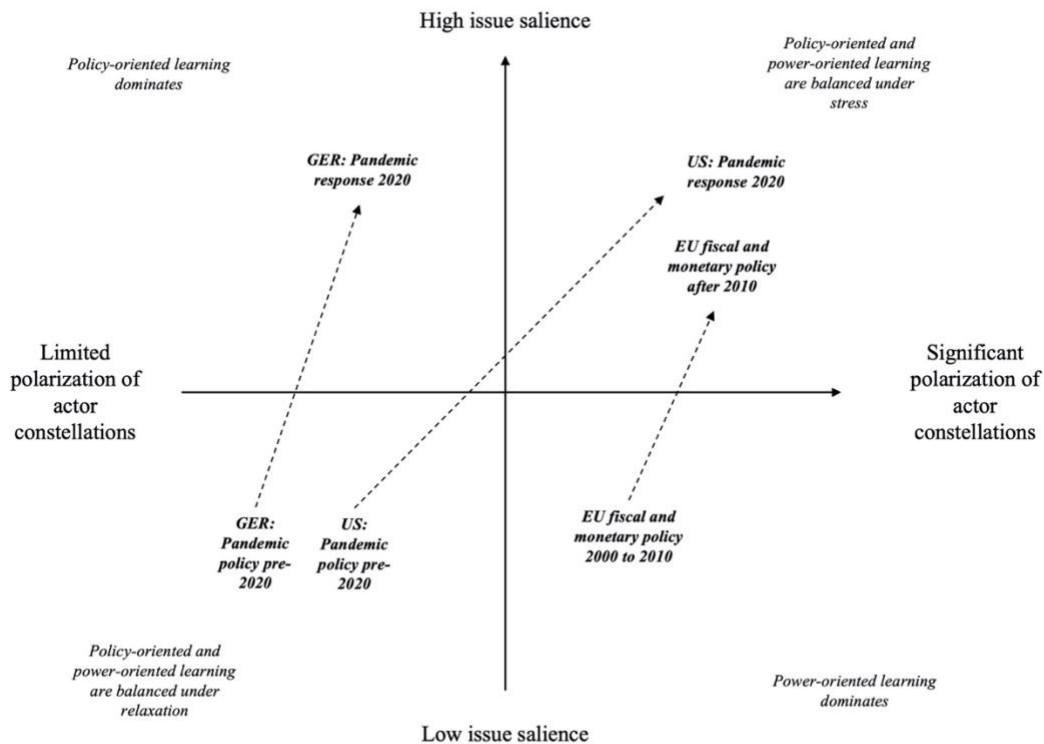
When the Euro crisis hit after the global recession of 2009, the German finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble argued that the Eurozone needs to learn from an episode in the early 2000s, when Germany and France had broken the EU's deficit rules, and should impose tighter restrictions on deficit countries (Matthijs and Blyth 2018, 115). This approach reflects power-oriented learning as

it benefitted the political interests of Germany and the governing CDU/CSU party but ignored the social reality of the crisis in Southern Europe. This politically oriented use of evidence needed to be balanced with policy-oriented learning and needed to create programmatic policy success, once European fiscal and monetary policy became a salient issue during the Euro crisis. Thus, policy-oriented and power-oriented learning were balanced under stress; although decision-makers corrected previous mistakes regarding solidarity in the EU, political interests limited the available policy options (Jones et al. 2016; Walter et al. 2020), as expected by our theoretical framework (Table 1).

The example of pandemic policies helps to illustrate how limited actor polarization and low issue salience resulted in a balance of power- and policy- oriented learning under relaxation, in the decade prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Germany, the U.S., as well as other countries prepared for a pandemic, although preparedness plans were not always sufficiently implemented (Mackey and Liang 2012; Mounier-Jack and Coker 2006; Jaffe 2018; Sellers et al. 2020; Rüefli and Zenger 2018; DB 2013). Once COVID-19 broke out and pandemic policy became a salient policy issue, the limited polarization of the German context came along with a dominance of policy-oriented learning as suggested by the theoretical framework (Table 1). In reacting to the first wave of the pandemic, the German strategy was successful, in keeping excess mortality relatively low. Contrariwise, the U.S. case shows how the combination of high issue salience and polarized actor constellations balanced policy-oriented and power-oriented learning under stress. As a consequence, policy options were limited and the reaction of the Federal and State governments incoherent and slow. Against the background of the first wave of the pandemic, in early 2020, this resulted in a continuing increase of cases and deaths while many other developed democracies managed to reduce case numbers and deaths.

6. Conclusions

This paper contributes to the literature in proposing a theoretical framework that explains how issue salience and the polarization of actor constellations impact on decisionmakers' intentions regarding the study of policy ideas and learning. In harkening back to research on behavioral economics, crisis management, and theories of the policy process, this paper conceptualizes policy-oriented learning and power-oriented learning as two learning heuristics. These are cognitive shortcuts which decisionmakers use when they learn, i.e., update their policy ideas. The article defines *policy-oriented learning* as the update of beliefs and ideas with the intention to make effective, i.e., programmatically successful, policies. Contrariwise *power-oriented learning* entails the update of beliefs with the intention to augment or maintain political influence, i.e., to achieve political success.

This article looks at policy- and decisionmakers as *homo discentis,* that is learning and studying persons. From this perspective, learning is a process that is embedded in the policy process. Therein, decisionmakers constantly need to balance their policy-making and power-oriented intentions when they update (but not necessarily) change their policy beliefs and preferences when facing new information. To explain how policy- and power- oriented learning are related, the paper links both learning heuristics to issue salience and the polarization of actor constellations. Specifically, this article develops four expectations regarding the relation of policy-oriented and power-oriented learning, in relation to issue salience and actor polarization (Table 1).

The article then illustrates the theoretical framework through case studies of European fiscal and monetary policy as well as of the policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, in Germany and in the U.S (Figure 1). The case studies selected provide insights in how changes in polarization and salience influence the use of learning heuristics. In analyzing the history of European fiscal and monetary policy, the paper discusses how actor polarization resulted in a dominance of power-oriented learning during the construction of the EMU and European fiscal policy. During the Euro crisis, decisionmakers had to balance policy-oriented learning with power-oriented learning, which resulted in a shifting of the costs of the crisis to the populations of debtor countries. Pandemic policy against COVID-19 shows how the change from low to high issue salience results in policy-oriented learning when actor polarization is limited, which is the case of Germany. Contrariwise, the example of the U.S. demonstrates that high issue salience, under significant polarization of actors, limits policy-oriented learning and, in the case of COVID-19, results in a highly incoherent policy response.

The theoretical framework proposed in this paper opens the avenue for further empirical research on how decisionmakers' political intentions impact on the use of policy ideas and learning. The theoretical expectations pave the way for the development and testing of specific hypotheses. The empirical part of this paper serves to illustrate the expectations put forward therein but does not test hypotheses against competing explanations. Future research could test hypotheses derived from our expectations and use empirical examples from additional policy fields and provide more detailed case studies. In addition, the potentials and risks for policy problem-solving that we derived from the literature for each configuration of policy- and power-oriented learning merit more attention and empirical illustration, yet this is beyond the scope of this article.

Although the theoretical model proposed in this paper presents an encompassing explanation for the role of political intentions in the learning about policy ideas, there are scope conditions (e.g. contextual variables) that might moderate the link between salience and polarization on the one hand, and the balance of policy- and power-oriented learning on the other. For example, the context for learning could be different between political systems that tend to produce coalition governments and those where parties can govern alone (Müller and Meyer 2010; Lijphart 2012). What is more, the personality of decisionmakers (Van Esch and Swinkels 2015) could moderate how they balance policy-and power-oriented learning under different configurations of issue salience and polarization of actors. These factors could be taken into consideration to assess how the link between issue salience and actor polarization on the one hand, and the balance of policy- oriented and power-oriented learning on the other play out in different institutional and personal contexts.

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