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Instrument constituencies in the policy process – What makes them unique? A theoretical review

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Abstract

This paper reviews the empirical applications of the concept of instrument constituencies. Instrument constituencies comprise diverse actors (academics, bureaucrats, consultants, and practitioners) whose common interest is the promotion of a particular policy instrument or a set of instruments. Building on the seminal work by Voss and Simons (2014), the paper surveys existing case studies and examines empirical observations that support the propositions associated with the concept. The analysis connects the empirical observations to the propositions associated with the concept and reflects on their distinctiveness relative to other collective entity concepts in the policy process. Through an assessment of the theoretical uniqueness of the empirical predictions, the paper demonstrates that while some case studies identify empirical patterns consistent with the propositions, the confirmatory power of the observations varies. The paper concludes by arguing that future research on instrument constituencies should more consciously focus on predicted observations with stronger discriminatory power in relation to other established concepts. The analysis also demonstrates the general value of assessing the theoretical uniqueness of predicted evidence as described by Beach and Pedersen (2016) for case studies that rely on theories of the policy process.

Keywords: *instrument constituency, policy process, case study methodology, expert networks, theories of the policy process*

1 Introduction

The concept of instrument constituencies is a recent innovation in public policy process scholarship. Instrument constituencies are collective entities comprising diverse actors who share an interest in the development and advancement of a policy instrument. They consist of experts and specialists who are diverse in their roles related to the policy process: they can be academics, bureaucrats, consultants, managers of the implementation, etc. The only attribute they all necessarily share is their special interest in a policy instrument or a set of policy instruments. This common interest fosters cooperation and, over time, leads these actors to form an 'instrument constituency' that exhibits collective actor qualities.

The concept was proposed in the seminal article by Voss and Simons (2014). It can explain some common observations that relate to how preferred policy solutions become attached to various policy problems over time or how expert communities may 'lock in' the usage of their preferred policy instrument for prolonged periods. The presence of instrument constituencies in the policy process can have important implications. The latter's concerted efforts to promote a particular policy instrument can result in the 'oversupply' of that instrument, because as a constituency of experts becomes increasingly focused on advancing a specific instrument, less attention may be devoted to exploring alternative policy solutions.

The concept of instrument constituencies fits within a broader trend in policy process scholarship that focuses on groups or networks that display collective actor qualities. Other theorized collective entities in the literature include advocacy coalitions, epistemic communities, policy communities, and discourse coalitions (Simons and Voss, 2017). Compared to other theorized collective entities in the policy process, the key difference is that for instrument constituencies, the interest in a particular policy instrument is the source of the group's cohesion. For instance, advocacy coalitions are unified by shared beliefs and epistemic communities by common concerns about specific problems. In the case of instrument constituencies, they do not have a shared belief system or clear shared convictions about how to solve a particular problem (Voss & Simons, 2014, pp. 741–742).

Since the seminal articles, the research connected to the concept of instrument constituencies has continued to develop, enabling some new reflections. With new case studies now available, it is now possible to reflect on how prior empirical case studies operationalize the collection of relevant empirical observations. Since a relatively wide array of empirical expectations can be derived from the propositions attached to the concept, it is useful to take a closer look at which of these can provide the strongest inferences that reinforce the explanatory relevance of the concept. This assessment can also include how it is possible to distinguish instrument constituencies from the other relevant collective entity concepts with which they were compared early on in the literature.

To contribute to this aim, this paper addresses the following question: What forms of empirical evidence support the conceptualization of instrument constituencies as a distinct type of collective actor in the policy process, and which observations are most useful in distinguishing them from alternative collective actor concepts?

In order to answer this question in a structured manner, the analysis draws on the concept of the theoretical uniqueness of empirical observations by Beach and Pedersen (2016, p. 182–184). In the analysis, the propositions associated with the concept of instrument constituencies are linked to the corresponding empirical observations from existing case studies. For each proposition, reflections on the theoretical uniqueness of the associated empirical observations are also added to assess which of the associated empirical predictions have stronger discriminating power vis-à-vis other collective entity concepts in the policy process.

In the discussion section, it is noted that while the case studies have established that their findings are in line with empirical expectations and can have important practical implications, a more consistent approach to the case studies could better accelerate the development of the concept.

The conclusion highlights that not all of the empirical expectations related to the propositions can produce observations with the same degree of theoretical uniqueness. Based on the analysis, the propositions by Simons and Voss (2018) that can generate the most theoretically unique expectations are *Proposition 8*, which refers to the disconnectedness of solutions from problems in the policy process, and *Proposition 9*, which refers to the spread of instrument constituency activities across the policy process. Case studies should more uniformly reflect these expectations to produce stronger inferences.

2 Scholarly context

2.1 Theories of the policy process

The concept of instrument constituencies is situated within the broader field of policy process scholarship. Voss and Simons (2014) themselves also located their work within the policy process scholarship, while the concept of instrument constituencies builds upon earlier work

on policy instrumentation as well—notably the work of Lascoumes and Le Galès (2007). Policy process scholarship in general seeks to provide better and more detailed explanations for real-world policy outcomes than those offered by functionalist models such as the 'policy cycle'—which tend to depict public policies as calculated governmental responses aimed at mitigating clearly defined societal problems (Weible, 2023, p. 8–10). More developed policy process theories offer theoretical propositions that aim to better capture the inherently complex interactions of policymaking, thereby accounting for outcomes that diverge from functionalist expectations.

The functionalist line of thinking can be traced back to Harold D. Lasswell's works in the 1950s (Weible et al., 2022), yet in the form we are now familiar with, it was introduced in later works such as Brewer (1974). The functionalist approach to policymaking describes a normative ideal: that at each decision function related to a public policy, the processes should conform to the requirement that the decisions support the public policy alternative that best delivers the desired public benefits (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007, pp. 2–3). The strong normative appeal of this functionalist approach makes it suitable for public institutions to promote it as a processual goal. We can indeed find the approach in the guidelines issued by public bodies (European Commission, 2021; HM Treasury, 2022)

We can also position the concept of instrument constituencies in relation to earlier literature on the theories of the policy process. Voss and Simons (2014) reflected on some of the observations of John Kingdon, whose seminal work (Kingdon, 2014) established the Multiple Streams Framework, one of the most commonly applied theoretical frameworks in the field. Kingdon recognized that 'policy entrepreneurs' push their preferred policy solution and try to attach it to different problems, an observation that is a key starting point for the concept of instrument constituencies (Voss & Simons, 2014, p. 740). Further connecting instrument constituencies with MSF, Mukherjee and Howlett (2015, p. 70) also theorized that instrument constituencies represent the agency behind the *policy stream* of the framework. This differentiation among the three streams is also used to theorize the relations between instrument-constituency activities and the broader policy process (Simons and Voss, 2018, p. 27–29). The authors also reflect on how other 'types of social formations' in the scholarship relate to instrument constituencies (Voss & Simons, 2014, pp. 740–741). These are notably advocacy coalitions, epistemic communities, discourse coalitions, and other types of theorized collective entities in the policy process that instrument constituencies need to be differentiated from.

2.2 Case study literature

To provide meaningful reflections, in the analysis I follow Beach and Pedersen's logic (2016, pp. 171–176), which details how empirical evidence from within-case studies can differ in its confirming or disconfirming power regarding the tested theoretical explanations.[1] Theoretical weight hinges on the certainty and the uniqueness of the empirical evidence. Theoretical uniqueness describes the 'expected probability of finding the predicted evidence' (p. 182) in the case that a proposition is not true. In other words, theoretical uniqueness describes the discriminatory power of the predicted observation against alternative explanations.

Uniqueness is important because finding theoretically predicted evidence that is also distinct provides stronger confirmation. Causal case studies, therefore, should aspire to find empirical evidence that is also more unique to strengthen inferences. This is why Beach and Pedersen (2016, p. 184) call for 'assessing theoretical certainty and uniqueness for each

[1] Beach and Pedersen (2016, p. 169–171) advocate a 'Bayesian logic' for drawing inferences from case studies. In this understanding, both confirmation and disconfirmation can be understood as ways to make inferences from observations.

proposition'. Assessing uniqueness can help us to understand which properties attached to the concept of instrument constituencies discriminate it from the above-mentioned rival collective entity concepts in the policy process.

2.3 Distinguishing the concept

Situating the concept within broader scholarship also highlights which other theoretical concepts the instrument constituencies need to be distinguished from. The concepts described above are situated on different levels of the 'ladder of theoretical abstraction' (Sartori, 1970); thus, first, some clarifications are necessary in this regard.

The functionalist approach is on a higher level of abstraction than a potential explanation that applies the concept of instrument constituencies. While these two terms are correctly contrasted, it should be noted that the distinction that is made here is in fact between the functionalist approach and *all* the 'more developed' theorized policy process explanations. That is a broader category, and within it, explanations that use the concept of instrument constituencies are only a subset. This is because, while functionalist explanations and instrument constituency explanations are mutually exclusive, they are far from exhaustive together, as there can be many other observable cases that neither explanation can account for.

Since the concept of instrument constituencies is a lower-level concept within the realm of these 'advanced frameworks', whenever a functionalist explanation of an empirical case is proved to be false, that inference alone would still mean the same for all of the 'developed' theoretical explanations. Disproving a functionalist explanation alone has little to say about whether an instrument constituency explanation is true.

To achieve more meaningful distinctions, the analysis needs to focus on that lower level of abstraction where the concepts, including instrument constituencies, can be both mutually exclusive and also jointly exhaustive. This lower level is where the already mentioned discrimination between the different collective entities in the policy process is situated.

Instrument constituencies and other conceptualized collective entities (advocacy coalitions, epistemic communities) are mutually exclusive denotations, in that the same collective entity cannot belong to multiple categories simultaneously. While it can be envisaged that their 'membership' can partially overlap, as a collective entity, they cannot bear the exact same characteristics, because that would make any meaningful distinction impossible. These different collective entity explanations can also be collectively exhaustive in the sense that each group that bears the characteristics of a collective entity must belong to one of these categories. While I do not intend to claim that the existing concepts in the literature are already developed well enough to exhaustively cover all the relevant cases of policy processes in the real world, it is at least theoretically possible to establish such an exhaustive classification.

Following a case study methodology that calls for evaluating the theoretical uniqueness in empirical observations can help to clearly define some important focal points for assessing the relevant case studies. In the following parts of the paper, I detail how theoretical uniqueness can be understood for the observations associated with each proposition on instrument constituencies, and also examine what empirical observations prior case studies have found so far.

3 Analysis of case studies

To review how the concept of instrument constituencies has been utilized in existing case studies, I conducted a structured search of scholarly articles that engaged with at least some of the propositions related to instrument constituencies. The criteria for including articles were

(i) that they contained reflections on one or more of the propositions described by Simons and Voss (2018) and (ii) that they contained a description that could be used to reconstruct how empirical observations were connected to these propositions. The search strategy first involved identifying all articles from the Web of Science database citing either of the two foundational articles by the original authors (Simons and Voss, 2018). To identify articles that treated the concept of instrument constituencies as a main theme of the study, I further narrowed the selection to those articles that contained a reference to the concept in their abstract or title. From this selection, the articles were assessed one by one to identify whether they engaged with the propositions and through what empirical observations. Finally, I included the seminal paper by Voss and Simons (2014), which is a case study that meets the criteria. Through this screening process, 17 articles emerged as detailed case studies that met the criteria. These articles are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Summary of the reviewed case study articles

Authors	Year	Title	Policy Theme	Policy Instruments
Voss & Simons	2014	Instrument Constituencies and the Supply Side of Policy Innovation: The Social Life of Emissions Trading	Environmental Policy	Emissions trading
Béland & Howlett	2016	How Solutions Chase Problems: Instrument Constituencies in the Policy Process	Social Policy	Social insurance, pension privatization
Mann & Simons	2015	Local emergence and international developments of conservation trading systems: Innovation dynamics and related problems. Environmental Conservation	Environmental policy	Conservation trading schemes
Perl & Burke	2018	Does institutional entrenchment shape instrument adjustment?: Assessing instrument constituency influences on American and Australian motor fuel taxation.	Transportation policy / Fiscal policy	Fuel taxation
Foli et al.	2018	How instrument constituencies shape policy transfer: A case study from Ghana	Social Policy	Cash transfers
Zito	2018	Instrument constituencies and epistemic community theory	Environmental policy	Multiple instruments

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Authors	Year	Title	Policy Theme	Policy Instruments
Fitch-Roy et al.	2019	Policy Instrument Supply and Demand: How the Renewable Electricity Auction Took over the World	Environmental policy / Energy policy	Renewable energy auctions
Saguin & Howlett	2019	Policy Transfer and Instrument Constituency: Explaining the Adoption of Conditional Cash Transfer in the Philippines	Social Policy	Cash transfers
Pischke & Wellstead	2020	Reimagining instrument constituencies: The case of conservation policy in Mexico	Environmental policy	Payments for ecosystem services
Blümel	2021	Innovations in Innovation Policy: Reconstructing the Emergence, Legitimation, and Dynamics of Cluster Policies in Germany	Innovation policy	Cluster policies
Grashof	2021	Who put the hammer in the toolbox? Explaining the emergence of renewable energy auctions as a globally dominant policy instrument	Environmental Policy	Renewable energy auctions
Nicholls & Teasdale	2021	Dynamic persistence in UK policy making: the evolution of social investment ideas and policy instruments.	Regional/ local development	Social investments policy
Simons & Schniedermann	2021	The Neglected Politics Behind Evidence-Based Policy: Shedding Light on Instrument Constituency Dynamics	Public administration reform	Evidence-based policy('meta-instrument')
Strassheim	2021	Who are behavioural public policy experts and how are they organised globally?	Public administration reform	Behavioral policy

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Authors	Year	Title	Policy Theme	Policy Instruments
Falkenström & Svallfors	2022	The Knowledge-Management Complex: From Quality Registries to National Knowledge-Driven Management in Swedish Health Care Governance	Health care policy	Evidence-based policy
Svallfors et al.,	2022	Networked reports: Commissioning and production of expert reports on Swedish health care governance	Health care policy	Multiple instruments
Ekstedt & Lundstedt	2024	Wanted Refugees: The Forming of an Instrument Constituency for Refugee Resettlement in the European Union	Immigration/ refugee policy	Third-country resettlement system

Articles that did not include clear descriptions of how empirical observations were connected to specific propositions were excluded from further analysis, even if they contained some reflections on the concept of instrument constituencies. Some of these articles connected policy diffusion to instrument constituencies (Béland et al., 2018; Demirbilek et al., 2020), while Weible (2018) offered primarily theoretical reflections. A recent study that applied collective entity theories to analyze public administration reform networks in Italy (Capano et al., 2024) reflected on an instrument constituency explanation as well, yet the text did not contain much detail about the relevant propositions, as the study's findings did not support the presence of an instrument constituency.

The number of case studies that relied on the concept of instrument constituencies is still limited. Nevertheless, despite the literature's slow development, it continues to attract interest. The majority of articles were published in journals with a general public policy orientation, but articles have also been published in journals with more specialized thematic orientations. The case studies have covered different policy themes, such as social policy, environmental policy, immigration policy, administrative reform, fiscal policy, transportation policy, and innovation policy. Most case studies have focused on a single case, but Béland and Howlett (2016) analyzed two cases (social insurance and pension privatization), and Perl and Burke (2018) compared two parallel cases—motor fuel taxation policies in the United States and Australia. In terms of policy outcomes, most case studies focused on national-level analysis covering a diverse range of countries—including various European nations, the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, Ghana, and the Philippines. Additionally, there are case studies that focus on policymaking at the level of the European Union (Ekstedt and Lundstedt, 2024), and others that focus primarily on the transnational dimension of instrument constituencies (Béland and Howlett, 2016; Grashof, 2021). Furthermore, Blümel (2021) reflected on regional and federal aspects of policymaking through the analysis of regional cluster policies in Germany.

4 Theoretical propositions and empirical observations

After its initial introduction into policy process scholarship, the concept of instrument constituencies was further clarified by the original authors. In their 2018 article, Simons and Voss provided additional details by identifying ten distinct propositions. This structured presentation of the key mechanisms is a valuable guide for further work on instrument constituencies. Detailed empirical expectations can be derived from these propositions in a structured manner and can be examined in detail through case studies.

In the following sections of the paper, I provide an overview that reiterates each of the propositions outlined in the Simons and Voss (2018) article, supplemented by my own reflections on their existing and potential empirical operationalizations in case studies. In line with the case study methodology of Beach and Pedersen (2016), I pay special regard to the theoretical uniqueness of the different empirical expectations.

4.1 Emergence of a social life and prospective structures

Simons and Voss (2018) proposed that following the introduction of a new policy instrument, a distinct 'social life' can emerge around it. The involved actors begin to interact and start to form interdependencies in their work, laying the foundation for an instrument constituency characterized by collective actor qualities. The empirical expectation associated with this proposition is that during the initial phase of a novel instrument, one should observe the emergence of a new social network—a network assembled around the instrument itself. The group does not need to be 'entirely new', as it can contain members from a previously existing collective entity, yet they must display changes in their characteristics. Zito (2018), for example, noted that an epistemic community can transform into an instrument constituency over time. Even if the instrument constituency has some sort of predecessor, there needs to be a marked shift in the focus of the network, and changes in the participating actors can also be expected. The second expectation is that this social life should be linked to the instrument, distinguishing these networks from those whose cohesion stems from other factors. The uniqueness of the empirical evidence that supports this proposition is dependent on whether it can prove that the observed social life is 'instrument-centered'.

The second proposition posits that the design of a new policy instrument includes prospective structures that align the interests of different actors (Simons and Voss, 2018). The technical design of the policy instrument can lay down the foundations of new practices in the implementation and analysis of public policy. These can later create opportunities in the form of new institutional arrangements, new appointments, new consultancy or analytics opportunities, etc. Promoting a particular policy design thus becomes in the interest of those who expect that a new instrument will lead to desirable developments.

The observation of prospective structures alone provides limited uniqueness for instrument constituencies. It is the relative importance of these prospective structures for the group's cohesion and the group's heterogeneity that can provide stronger inferences, helping confirm the characteristics of instrument constituencies. Relative importance can be observed through the lack of other factors that could align actors' agency. A lack of shared convictions among actors can increase confidence that an observed 'nascent' collective actor is an instrument constituency rather than an advocacy coalition or an epistemic community. The heterogeneity of the available prospective structures is another factor that can increase confidence in an instrument constituency explanation. If the prospective structures are located across different policy domains and ranges of functions across the policy process, this is a more unique observation, as other theorized collective entities are expected to be active

in a narrower, more specific policy setting (Weible, 2018, p. 65).

The first two propositions about the emergence of instrument constituencies were among the most consistently analyzed and largely confirmed in the case studies. The latter found evidence of emergence dynamics as well as the heterogeneity of the actors brought together by a newly forming instrument constituency. Perl and Burke (2018, p. 93) described the beginning of the US fuel tax instrument constituency, pointing out how it consisted not only of road engineers but also of automobile manufacturers and members of the industry. The study by Falkenström and Svallfors (2022) about the Swedish health-care knowledge management complex is another good example for describing this aspect in detail. The authors highlighted both the heterogeneity of the actors and the factors that brought them together: 'Since the instrument constituency is so heterogeneous and potentially unstable, efforts have to be made to ensure some semblance of coherence' (p. 1061).

Zito (2018, p. 51) also used the diversity of the forming instrument constituency for the 'Energy Star' ecolabel as evidence to support the claim that the observed network is an instrument constituency rather than an epistemic community. When Foli and Fenwick (2018, p. 113–114) described a group of transnational actors who emerged as an instrument constituency around conditional cash transfer programs, they also demonstrated that while the first members were mostly international organizations, research institutions also became involved in the constituency at the national level.

4.2 Connecting modelling and implementation

'Proposition 3' reflects the connectedness of modelling and implementation (Simons and Voss, 2018). Policy instruments are grounded in 'abstract functional models' which are 'blueprints' and guide the implementation of policies. Instrument constituencies connect modelling and implementation, with members involved in both. Once they gain agency, instrument constituencies are expected to actively nurture linkages between these functions. The creation of models, guidelines, supporting studies, and related materials is done by the same interconnected network of experts. Since the degree of connection between the actors in modelling and implementation can be 'trivial,' the theoretical uniqueness of evidence here hinges on the intensity and exclusiveness of these linkages. A narrower, 'myopic' focus of the theoretical modelling that is closely related to the implemented instrument and largely disregards alternative solutions as relevant alternatives can yield stronger observational evidence. In that scenario, the strength of evidence can also depend on the observations made about what is 'left out' from the models. A detailed inclusion of alternative solutions in the discussion, framed as viable and reasonable, can even bear disconfirmatory power in this case.

Saguin and Howlett (2019) detailed how the transnational instrument constituency around conditional cash transfers produced important 'knowledge products' near the beginning of the implementation, reflecting also the connectedness of modelling and implementation. They also found proof that the design of the cash transfer program was largely influenced by these (Saguin and Howlett, 2019): 'The resulting design of the Philippine CCT program highly resembled the stories codified by the instrument constituency' (p. 360). The close connectedness of modelling and implementation was also analyzed by Blümel (2021, p. 549) in the case of cluster policies in Germany, and for evidence-based policy by Simons and Schniedermann (2021, p. 518). In the case of behavioral public policy, a related subject, this was also reinforced by the analysis of Strassheim (2021): 'They establish a kind of politico-epistemic interlinkage in which actor groups, behavioural evidence[…] and practices of validating and implementing indeed exist "for and by" (Voss & Simons, 2014: 4) behavioural instruments' (p. 12).

4.3 Source of stability: Structural promises

The original authors of the concept differentiated between the functional and structural promises of the instrument constituencies (Simons and Voss, 2018). They argued that while functional promises—expectations about the policy instrument's societal benefits—are valued by those outside the policy community, structural promises provide stability for the instrument constituencies. While constituency members may be driven by both types of promises, structural promises offer distinct incentives to promote and sustain the instrument. These are manifested as specialized institutional arrangements for planning, analysis, and implementation of the instrument, a demand for specialized expert services, or the expansion of research related to the policy instrument.

What I have noted about the empirical testing of the initial prospective structures also holds true for this proposition. The existence of structural promises alone does not strongly rule out other explanations. The additional observation that members of the instrument constituency actively promote arrangements that support and maintain these structures can increase confidence in the explanation. Although such effects may be difficult to observe directly, qualitative 'confessionals' obtained through interviews might reveal that certain structures were created or maintained even when not necessary from a functionalist perspective. The heterogeneity of the structures can also strengthen the uniqueness of the related observations. Some of the prior case study observations focused on this aspect. Perl and Burke (2018, p. 92) described the 'highway beneficiaries' as a diverse group that formed the instrument constituency advocating for fuel taxation earmarked for building roads. Blümel (2021, p. 547–548) gave a detailed description of the proliferation of new roles and tasks connected to the implementation and modelling of cluster policies created in Germany, both at the level of project consortia and at the federal executive agency that oversaw implementation.

4.4 Sources of strength: Functional promises, reflexive coordination, and socio-material infrastructure

Simons and Voss (2018) grouped three propositions together as sources of strength for the instrument constituencies. These three propositions also share the characteristic that related empirical observations are associated with relatively low levels of theoretical uniqueness. Most of the empirical expectations derived from these propositions also hold for other collective entities, such as advocacy coalitions and epistemic communities. To make stronger inferences in a case study, more unique evidence first needs to show that the observed collective entity can be treated as an instrument constituency, and only then can these propositions be interpreted in a way that supports an instrument constituency explanation for the concrete case.

'Proposition 5' is connected to the functional promises that create acceptance for the instrument by the public and the decision makers (Simons and Voss, 2018). The instrument constituency relies on these functional promises for necessary external support that backs the instrument. Functional promises were not always addressed in case studies, but there are some good examples for the observations. Saguin and Howlett (2019, p. 361) described how the functional promise linked to the conditional cash transfer was not just to support the short-term alleviation of dire needs but also to contribute to the long-term eradication of poverty. Foli and Fenwick (2018) detailed how the studies created by members of the instrument constituency influenced expectations associated with the instrument concerning the provision of sufficient backing:

As the minister in charge of social protection at the time mentioned during an interview,

several publications, including by the DFID, the World Bank and other international organizations, provided critical information on cash transfers and the Latin American experience. This was used to support the argument that the program would 'contribute to economic growth and [was] not a disincentive' (p. 118).

'Proposition 6' asserts that instrument constituencies over time can display active coordination, which is also another process that makes them stronger (Simons and Voss, 2018). Following their initial evolution, these constituencies begin to exhibit reflexive collective-actor qualities with a nontrivial degree of coordination. Empirically, this implies that one should observe specific activities—such as organizing events, creating platforms, forming associations, or holding meetings—that foster joint action in favor of the instrument. The empirical expectations here are relatively straightforward, and the proposition indeed was widely confirmed by the case studies. Foli and Fenwick (2018, p. 117) described the 'transfer project' as a platform that was developed in relation to conditional cash transfers to disseminate information and connect actors. They also gave details of the international conferences that were organized by the World Bank that promoted cash transfers as an instrument (Foli and Fenwick, 2018, p. 119).

Simons and Schniedermann (2021, p. 518) described how the instrument constituency around evidence-based policy (understood as a 'meta-instrument') fostered the creation of its own journals and the formation of the 'Evidence-Network' that linked researchers and practitioners worldwide. Nicholls and Teasdale (2021, p. 805–806) noted that the establishment of the 'Social Investment Task Force' in the UK marked the birth of an instrument constituency that promoted social investment in a changing political landscape over the next 20 years. In this case, the instrument constituency was found to be more formalized from an early stage and was not just a loose network but one with a clear agenda and reflexive activities.

'Proposition 7' concerns the development of 'socio-cognitive' and socio-material infrastructures fostered by the instrument constituencies (Simons and Voss, 2018, p. 25–26). Socio-material infrastructure contains those structures that emerge from the implementation of the instrument, such as databases, metrics, technical infrastructures, trading platforms, specialist software, legal structures, etc. These non-argumentative elements, on the one hand, can provide additional work for members of the instrument constituency, and beyond that, they can also exacerbate the path dependence associated with a given instrument (Voss and Simons, 2014, p. 742). The production of specific statistics, metrics, or scorecards, for example, might significantly reinforce prevailing interpretations in public policy. Furthermore, the material infrastructure may be tangible, reinforcing the reliance on the cognitive constructs developed by the instrument constituency, such as models, guidelines, or evaluations. This may be particularly evident in cases where transnational or federal initiatives foster the development of shared infrastructure across different jurisdictions, reinforcing a particular kind of interpretation of policy activities and policy outcomes.

Mann and Simons (2015, p. 328–329) described the emergence and spread of conservation trading, including the development of the extensive financial-legal infrastructure that is required for these trading schemes. Ekstedt and Lundstedt (2024) offered a detailed account of the socio-material infrastructure of a policy instrument, which also took form in the 'resettlement support facility in Istanbul' as a form of physical infrastructure (Ekstedt and Lundstedt, 2024, p. 383). While this paper did not offer details on the evidence for the more distinctive expectations associated with instrument constituencies (independence of solutions, heterogeneity of the constituency, etc.), it nonetheless provides a good example of what can be considered socio-material infrastructure.

4.5 Relationship of instrument constituencies with the policy process

A central proposition related to the concept of instrument constituencies is that they advocate for their preferred policy solutions independently of specific problems (Simons and Voss, 2018). This means that in order to sustain or expand the implementation of a policy instrument, an instrument constituency is expected to actively try to attach its favored solution to different policy problems as circumstances change.

Empirically, one would expect that a mature instrument constituency—one that has existed for an extended period—has already adjusted the framing of its instrument at some point to attach its solution to new problems that became salient over time. This can be observed through the changed framing of the instrument's rationale over time by the instrument constituency. Stronger evidence for this proposition can emerge from confessional accounts provided by participants in the policy process, detailing how certain actors have deliberately reattached their preferred solution to varying problems over time.

Evidence that the constituency actively tried to attach the solution to different problems is important for its higher levels of theoretical uniqueness. Béland and Howlett (2016, p. 394–396) offered detailed reflections on the theoretical relevance of problem independence, reflecting on how instrument constituencies differ in this regard from advocacy coalitions and epistemic communities. On the other hand, if there are no attempts to reframe solution-problem connections over a longer period of time and amidst changing conditions in the 'problem stream' (of a multiple streams framework understanding), this may weaken the relevance of an instrument constituency explanation.

The case studies provide good examples of this point, which is important, as 'solution independence' is one of the most distinctive empirical predictions of instrument constituencies. Nicholls and Teasdale (2021) provided detailed reflections on how social investment in the UK over time was reframed by the instrument constituency: 'However, it soon became apparent that the policy instruments remained remarkably consistent. Instead, change concerned the meaning of social investment (the policy solution) and the policy problems to which social investment became a response to' (p. 805).

Blümel (2021, p. 551) described how assigned problem definitions have changed in the case of Germany's cluster policies, as the regional economic development rationale was replaced with internationally competitive research as the ultimate goal of the programs. Pischke and Wellstead (2020, p. 375) also convincingly presented how, in Mexico, the payments for the ecosystem services program's goals changed over time. While the policy instrument initially had an environmental focus, it later shifted to poverty alleviation, a markedly different problem. In a different approach, Svallfors et al. (2022) emphasized the vague and elusive nature of problem definitions in the analyzed Swedish health-care reports: 'What is being pushed in this networking of reports are instruments, particular policy solutions—such as "knowledge management" or "person-centered care"—while problems are often ill-defined backgrounds to the real issues in the reports' (p. 588).

'Proposition 9' posits that instrument constituency activities are expected to extend to all of the different parts of the policy process (Simons and Voss, 2018). In addition to their roles in modelling and evaluation, instrument constituencies are expected to be active across other phases of the policy process—often simultaneously in multiple venues—thereby creating 'trans-local and trans-temporal linkages' (Simons and Voss, 2018, p. 29). Their activities can cross many boundaries, and they can become active in different policy domains, promoting their favored instrument.

This proposition is also distinctive for instrument constituencies. This is because, in ad-

vocacy coalitions, coalition activities are not expected to span multiple policy subsystems and different stages (Weible, 2018, p. 63). Empirical observations thus can be theoretically unique as long as they reinforce that suspected members of the constituency are active across different policy domains in relation to the same policy instrument. Simons and Schniedermann (2021, p. 517–522) provided a detailed analysis of how the evidence-based policy constituency spread in the UK and internationally, also describing how it became connected to different stages of policymaking. Béland and Howlett (2016, p. 399–401) also provided good examples analyzing the trans-locality of instrument constituencies by describing the international spread of social insurance as well as pension privatization. Foli and Fenwick (2018, p. 118) described how the transnational instrument constituency actively promoted conditional cash transfers across several different countries to diffuse the instrument, and the same phenomenon was also detailed by Saguin and Howlett (2019, p. 359–360).

The last proposition addresses the instrument constituencies' relationships with politics (Simons and Voss, 2018). Instrument constituency activities can effectively 'black box' the discussion around the instrument into a technical framing to steer the political discussion away from it. Constituency members, in pursuit of broad support for the instrument's application, are expected to shape their activities in ways that promote and reinforce this 'depoliticization'. A more technical and less political discourse can decrease the possible contestation of the instruments' implementation. As Simons and Voss (2018) phrased it: 'The technical framing of policy solutions works to carve out apparently "apolitical spaces" of policy design that provide room for maneuver in political negotiations between antagonistic camps' (p. 17).

Nonetheless, it remains challenging to determine whether such broad political support was actually influenced by the actions of the instrument constituency, since the instrument constituency's emergence itself may also have been supported by a pre-existing, less politicized environment. Given that depoliticization is endogenous to this mechanism, it is difficult to establish to what degree the depoliticized nature of a discourse is a precondition for or a consequence of the instrument constituencies' existence.

Empirically, we can expect to find that an instrument constituency will keep a distance from overt politics to avoid interpretations that heighten political tensions or render the application of the instrument more partisan. We can expect the instrument constituency to seek cross-party support whenever possible. Keeping the language of discussions *overly* technical and treating different political sides as 'equally distant' can be the observed manifestation of such activities. Even if these expectations are confirmed, the observations still remain only moderately unique, as they may be true of other kinds of actors as well, like epistemic communities (epistemic community influence on decision makers in Zito, 2018, p. 47)

Concerning the relative difficulty of empirical operationalization, it is not surprising that detailed demonstrations of this proposition were not available in all the case studies, but there are exceptions. Simons and Schniedermann (2021) offered an in-depth analysis of how the technical framing of 'evidence-based policy' practices helped the instrument constituency to spread its preferred meta-instrument. Perl and Burke (2018) provided insights about the politics of fuel taxation, connecting the parallel activities of an advocacy coalition and an instrument constituency: 'A bipartisan advocacy coalition espoused user fees as a legitimate and preferred solution to meeting America's transportation needs. Ideas about mobility, finance and de-politicized expertise melded easily across subsystem participants' (p. 94). The authors found that the initial technicalized framing contributed to the lock-in of the instrument. They also demonstrated that, while the issue was largely depoliticized in the United States, it was surrounded by greater political conflict in Australia, yet the instrument constituency grew significantly stronger in the United States. It can also be noted that not all

of the observations that are related to politics are necessarily connected to this proposition. While Nicholls and Teasdale (2021, p. 803) also analyzed the bipartisan support for social investments in the UK, their evidence is more related to shifting problem definitions than to 'black-boxing' and technical framing.

5 Discussion

5.1 Case study findings are broadly in line with empirical expectations

The reviewed case studies found various empirical evidence that supports propositions associated with the concept of instrument constituencies. The relevance of the concept was confirmed across diverse policy domains, providing evidence for the emergence and influence of different instrument constituencies. Studies corroborated the emergence of a network with collective actor qualities, centered around a policy instrument or set of instruments. Theoretically, more unique empirical expectations, such as problem independence, the 'trans-locality' of instrument constituencies, and the heterogeneity of constituent actors and their motivations, also receive support in most of the case studies.

5.2 More consistent case studies could help theory development

The case studies reviewed here do not uniformly address each proposition; instead, they typically focus on some propositions in much more detail than others. While a narrow focus can be justified, it makes it somewhat difficult to compare them and draw inferences about the advancement of theory. As not all the empirical predictions connected to the propositions are unique to instrument constituency explanations, case studies should more consistently reflect on those expectations that are theoretically more unique in order to strengthen their findings. It would also be desirable for case studies to reflect on how their findings differ from functionalist explanations and from other explanations that rely on collective-entity concepts in policy process scholarship. Differentiating the concept from other collective entities can yield more robust theoretical inferences, and comparisons with a functionalist approach can further strengthen the practical relevance of the findings, as functionalist interpretations are widely used in policy-making.

Analysis of the case studies also raises questions about whether the emergence of an instrument constituency is contingent on certain characteristics of a policy setting and how different kinds of collective entities might prevail in different contexts. Recent work in policy process scholarship points towards the so-called 'toolbox' usage of different policy process theories (Weible, 2018, p. 71). In this understanding, different theorized collective entities can provide useful explanations for different policy outcomes. This can also be an important future direction for research that can benefit from nuanced comparisons between instrument constituencies and other types of conceptualized collective entities.

5.3 Practical implications: Oversupply of instruments, locked-in solutions

Most of the analyzed case studies had clear ambitions to apply the concept to provide a useful explanation for their cases, as well as to generate practical implications. In many cases, they reinforced the existence of negative consequences that instrument constituencies can generate. The activities of instrument constituencies can be associated with overinvestment in certain policy instruments that then induce path dependence. As Falkenström and Svallfors (2022) noted: 'Substantial resources in terms of tax money and time are now invested

in "knowledge-driven management," resources that could have been used for other purposes' (p. 1054).

Others have reached similar conclusions; for example, Pischke and Wellstead detailed how the activities of the instrument constituency likely crowded out more effective conservation programs in Mexico (Pischke and Wellstead, 2020, p. 371). Perl and Burke (2018, p. 93) described in detail how instrument constituency activities locked in a solution that, over time, became increasingly less effective at serving its purposes in the U.S. They compared it with the Australian situation, where the instrument constituency did not have a similar success in locking in its preferred solution.

Svallfors et al. (2022, p. 593) also presented another kind of risk that is associated with instrument constituencies. The coalescence of actors into an instrument constituency that produces most of the available expert reports can also provide opportunities for special interests to infiltrate this network. Special interests can thus more effectively divert the instrument away from its originally intended purpose. The authors' notion points to the need to better understand how instrument constituencies relate to specific interests and lobbying.

Regarding the mitigation of potential negative effects, Zito (2018, p. 48) noted that the production of epistemic knowledge and influence can be enhanced when the instrument inherently incorporates processes of reflection and revision into its implementation. If the design of the instrument needs to be evaluated from time to time in such a way that alternative solutions are also broadly considered, this can increase the possibility that evaluations remain more independent and induce better reflections on instrument effectiveness.

6 Conclusion

This article has provided an overview of how the concept of instrument constituencies was applied in empirical case studies and what it is possible to say about the theoretical weight of the empirical evidence they found. To date, the application of the concept of instrument constituencies has been a slowly growing research theme. While case studies are not numerous, they have already confirmed the causal relevance of instrument constituencies across various policy topics, including environmental, social, health care, evidence-based, innovation, immigration, and fiscal policy. These cases all offered evidence for assessing the key propositions of the original authors of the theoretical concept (Simons and Voss, 2018). The case studies have also reinforced the important practical implication that the presence of an instrument constituency can lead to path-dependent policy outcomes, resulting in overinvestment in preferred policy instruments and neglect of other viable alternatives.

Looking at the propositions and the case studies in detail, it can be seen that not all associated empirical expectations and observations have the same degree of theoretical uniqueness, as not all of them are exclusive to explanations that rely on the concept of instrument constituencies. The confirmatory power of the case studies depends on whether the more distinctive expectations have proven true. The propositions by Simons and Voss (2018) that can generate the most theoretically unique expectations are *Proposition 8*, concerning the disconnectedness of solutions from problems, and *Proposition 9*, concerning the spread of instrument constituency activities across the policy process (trans-local and trans-temporal qualities of their activities). Other observations with relatively high theoretical uniqueness, like evidence about the heterogeneity of the instrument constituency and the clear neglect of other policy solutions as viable alternatives, can further strengthen inferences about the emergence and activities of instrument constituencies.

Some of the case studies have provided strong evidence for these expectations, with a

higher degree of uniqueness, along with convincing descriptions of how instrument constituencies influenced policy outcomes. On the other hand, not all case studies establish equally well how the observations are different from the expectations of other relevant alternative theoretical explanations. A more consistent approach to reflecting on the propositions and empirical observations can accelerate the development of theory and advance the broader field of policy process scholarship. This paper also shows that assessing the theoretical uniqueness of predicted evidence, as described by Beach and Pedersen (2016), can be fruitful for case studies that rely on theories of the policy process and add clarity to research in this line of scholarship.

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