Median problem pressure and policy learning: an exploratory analysis of European countries

Philipp Trein[1]

University of California, Berkeley & University of Lausanne

Introduction

Learning is a fundamental element in the policymaking process. Governments spend large amounts of tax money on the evaluations of public policies and the development of new policy solutions, such as pilots, to explore the effectiveness of specific policy instruments. The knowledge that is acquired through policy related research should, ideally, enter the policy process in a way that benefits society collectively rather than the political agenda of individual policymakers. Nevertheless, all policymaking is per definition political, and participants in the political process pursue – at least to some extent – political interests. Consequently, due to the nature of the political process, policymakers are always tempted to use policy knowledge for their political goals or to influence the production of policy relevant knowledge strategically for their own interests. On the other hand, public support for politicians depends also on their

ability to deal with policy challenges. Thus, how to strike a balance between policy-oriented and power-oriented use of knowledge is an important question for researchers and policymakers alike. This chapter will deal with this problem.

The public policy and political science literature have devoted quite some attention to policy learning. It is established knowledge that policy learning, i.e. the update of policy relevant beliefs (Braun & Gilardi, 2006, p. 306), is important for policy change. Researchers have argued that learning is important to explain why policymakers change their beliefs about individual policies (Heclo, 1974; Sabatier, 1988) and have used the concept to explain fundamental shifts in public policies (P. Hall, 1993). Authors have distinguished different types of learning, for example, on the one hand, instrumental and social learning that refer to the updating policy relevant information for the purpose of improving policies (Zito & Schout, 2009, p. 1110). Notably, instrumental learning entails the transfer of policy relevant knowledge, which is substantiated by empirical policy research at home or experiences abroad, into improved policies (Daviter, 2015, p. 493; Radaelli, 1995, pp. 162-163). On the other hand, researchers refer to political learning, i.e. learning for political purposes, according to which policymakers use policy knowledge for political purposes, for example to pursue power related interests rather than to improve a policy (Bennett & Howlett, 1992; Gilardi, 2010; May, 1992). Although previous research has pointed to the use of knowledge for political purposes (Boswell, 2008; Gilardi, 2010), empirical analyses of learning tend to overestimate the impact of policy relevant knowledge for political reforms (Radaelli, 2009, pp. 1146-1147) and to underestimate power related learning processes, particularly in cases where problem-solving would entail political costs (Howlett, 2012, p. 540). In addition, recent contributions to the policy learning literature propose modes of learning, which also entail defective forms of policy-oriented learning (Dunlop, 2014, 2017; Dunlop & Radaelli, 2013).

This paper contributes to the literature on policy learning by developing an argument that

explains under which conditions policymakers learn to improve policies rather than to use information for political purposes only. For this purpose, the article starts with two different ways of learning: i.) policy (instrumental) learning or policy-oriented learning, and, ii.) political learning or power-oriented learning (Weible, 2008; Zito & Schout, 2009, p. 1110). In other words: political learning resembles powering whereas policy-oriented learning points to puzzling (Heclo, 1974) as the dominant logic of action in the decision-making process.

To analyse whether policy-oriented and power-oriented learning dominates a reform, this paper proceeds with an explorative and inductive empirical analysis. Therefore, the paper maps different social policy reforms, in the following countries and policy areas: organizational reforms of welfare delivery, in Denmark, Germany, Switzerland and the UK; pension reforms, in Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK; minimum wage legislation, in Germany and the UK; and, crisis related labour market reforms, in Greece, Italy, and Spain. The empirical analysis draws on already published case studies (Bonoli, 2000; Champion, 2013), and new research reports that researchers conducted in the context of the INSPIRES project.[2]

The comparative case studies show that learning behaviour of decision makers varies depending on the problem pressure against which policymakers do a reform. Functional problem pressure (Kingdon, 1995, pp. 90-115), e.g. high unemployment rates (Starke, 2006) or significant levels of pollution (Holzinger, Knill, & Sommerer, 2008), are an important element in the decision-making process (Kingdon, 1995, pp. 90-115). The case studies demonstrate that the chance for problem-solving-oriented learning is biggest, if policymakers conduct a reform against the backdrop of what will be called a "median problem pressure." Median problem pressure entails the condition that a given policy problem poses a challenge that is severe enough for policymakers to update their beliefs in a way that leads to a solution of the policy challenge but

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[2] http://www.inspires-research.eu/Deliverables, last accessed, March 29, 2016.

that does not need immediate reaction. In this circumstance, there is enough time for policy knowledge to build up and for substantiated facts to enter the political process. Examples for a median problem pressure are pension reforms and minimum wage legislation because these are salient and thus important problems but the time span for reforms usually leaves some time to react. Furthermore, the analysis shows also that political institutions moderate how policymakers learn. Notably, problem-solving-oriented policy learning under median problem pressure occurs especially in countries with a rather consensual political system.

Contrariwise, the analyses show that if problem pressure is very low or very high, there is above all power-oriented learning. If problem pressure is very low, policymakers do not care about policy improvement based on research too much because they do not fear electoral punishment for political inaction, policy failure, or reforms that clearly serve their political purposes instead of solving a policy challenge. For example, in the case of organizational reforms of the welfare state, policymakers in Denmark, Germany, and the UK did not even wait for pilot projects to finish before they decided to reform welfare delivery, whereas, in Switzerland, they continued such a project despite negative evaluations. On the other hand, if problem pressure is very high, there is no time for much substantive (policy-oriented) learning. Thus, quick and politically feasible solutions are put into place to tackle the policy problem and to demonstrate political activity. In this case, learning occurs if at all by trial and error rather than by strategic planning and testing of policy solutions. Examples, for political learning are the anti-crisis policies in Southern Europe, which, due to the enormous problem pressure and the necessity to act on time, allowed little time for an extensive learning process.

Defining learning

A common definition in the political science literature refers to learning, "… as the acquisition of new relevant information that permits the updating of beliefs about the effects of a new

policy" (Braun & Gilardi, 2006, p. 306; Dunlop & Radaelli, 2013). The updating of beliefs can occur in different ways. Firstly, evidence to support new policies can be generated from research undertaken abroad or domestically. Such research can, for example, take the form of pilot programs, experiments or simple statistical simulations (Martin & Sanderson, 1999). Secondly, learning can occur by mimicking (Hemerijck & Visser, 2003, p. 22) policy experiences in other countries (Gilardi, 2010) or from subnational governments in the same country (Shipan & Volden, 2008). This way of learning is often based on trial and error principle because it is not at all evident that transferring a policy from one country or jurisdiction to another will contribute to solving the problem at hand but might have instead negative social and economic consequences (C. M. Hall, 2011). Thirdly, learning can occur as a result of the influence of international actors. For example, the EU seeks to influence policymaking in its member states methods through mutual learning, such as in the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) (Zeitlin, Pochet, & Magnusson, 2005).

As mentioned before, the literature on learning has distinguished different types of learning (May, 1992, p. 336; Zito & Schout, 2009, p. 1110). More recently, Dunlop and Radaelli, have put forward a meta-theoretical analysis of policy learning in order to deepen our theoretical understanding of learning in the political sphere and come up with four modes of learning: epistemic learning, learning as bargaining, learning as hierarchy and reflexive learning (Dunlop, 2014, 2017; Dunlop & Radaelli, 2013). This article takes a more modest approach to the understanding of policy learning. In the following, the paper defines two ways of learning, which are sufficient for the argument the paper seeks to make: problem-solving-oriented or policy learning and power-oriented or political learning.

Problem-solving-oriented or policy learning

The first type of learning shall be called problem-solving-oriented or policy learning. This way

of learning emphasizes that learning entails adopting new policy instruments or changes in existing policy programs (Bennett & Howlett, 1992, p. 289). In other words, policymakers prioritize a problem-solving logic rather than powering logic in a reform process (Culpepper, 2002, pp. 775-776; Heclo, 1974, p. 305; Hoppe, 2011). According to this view of learning, the updating of beliefs contains the evaluation of policy instruments or changes of policy designs based on experiences made during implementation, experiments, or pilot studies, for instance. The public policy literature has referred widely to this notion of policy learning, speaking either of policy learning or instrumental learning whereas the latter is the most precise term because policy learning may also entail social learning (May, 1992, p. 336). Put differently, this form of learning refers to the use of policy information generated according to scientific standards to change policy instruments (Daviter, 2015, p. 493; Radaelli, 1995, pp. 162-163; Weible, 2008, pp. 620-621). Social learning, which is a widely-used term in the public policy literature (P. Hall, 1993), is different from instrumental learning (May, 1992, p. 336). Social learning refers not only to changes in policy instruments, but also to the broader ideas and interpretative frames that form the paradigm – or *Gestalt* – of policy, which determines the hierarchy of different instruments, and a wider strategic vision-building for a policy (P. Hall, 1993, p. 279).

Power-oriented or political learning

The second type of learning is called power-oriented or political learning. Contrary to policy learning, scholars have defined political learning as the use of knowledge in a strategic manner to serve power-related goals of individuals and organizations (Boswell, 2008, p. 474; Radaelli, 1999). According to Peter May, "Political learning entails policy advocates learning about strategies for advocating policy ideas or drawing attention to policy problems. The foci are judgments about the political feasibility of policy proposals and understandings of the policy process within a given policy domain" (May, 1992, p. 339; Weible, 2008, p. 620). This definition entails a clear reference to the importance of political strategies and their adaptation,

in addition to new policy ideas. This idea is not new. Already Hugh Heclo's seminal work on social policy underlines the importance of political elites for learning (Heclo, 1974, p. 319). The rationale behind the idea of political learning is that organizations are interested in maximizing their legitimacy. According to DiMaggio and Powell, organizations mainly strive to improve their legitimacy in unstable environments (DiMaggio, 1991, pp. 30-31). Taking a similar perspective, May, Bennett and Howlett refer to political learning as governmental learning, in the sense that state officials learn how to improve the political process to pursue political interests. Put differently: collective actors learn new strategies to attain their political goals (Bennett & Howlett, 1992, p. 289; Sabatier, 1988), or avoid policies as they are too costly politically (Wildavsky, 1979, pp. 385-406).

The relationship of both learning types

This paper assumes that – under certain conditions – there can be a trade-off between policy learning and political learning. Admittedly, political success and reforms that solve pressing problems oftentimes go hand in hand with one another. If we take a fictive example, we could argue that policymakers are likely to be successful politically because they passed successful policies, such as measures to reduce crime rates. In this case, it is easy to understand that the presence of a problem – high crime rates – lead to an update of beliefs – learning – and thus new policies, such as more police and better schooling concepts, that solve the problem, i.e. reduce crime rates. In this case, problem-solving-oriented and power-oriented learning go hand in hand as the policy solved the actual problem for society and elected officials profited from the policy electorally.

Nevertheless, this understanding of learning is idealized. In many instances, problem solving comes along with political costs. For example, reducing public expenditure for social policies or reducing labour protection might result in electoral losses, whereas powerful interest groups

might oppose environmental regulations. Political science research provides us with many examples for this. Notably, research on welfare state retrenchment (Hacker, 2004; Natali, 2002; Pierson, 1994) and immigration (Boswell, 2008) has underlined the political use of knowledge or pointed out that policymakers pursued reform strategies that avoided political cost. Furthermore, in some cases, policy relevant research is produced with the single aim to support political goals instead of solving a problem (Bonoli & Trein, 2015; Fleckenstein, 2011; Oreskes & Conway, 2010).

The reason for such behaviour is that policymakers and interest groups either want to deliberately put into place policies that serve their interest even if they do not serve the common good or they want to avoid being blamed for unpopular policies (Hood, 2010; Howlett, 2012, p. 540). Consequently, there is a trade-off between policy learning and political learning. To put it in the words of Hugh Heclo: due to the dominance of "powering" there remains less room for "puzzling on behalf of society" (Culpepper, 2002, p. 775; Heclo, 1974, p. 305). It is exactly this relationship between problem-oriented and power-oriented learning that the remainder of this paper is going to explore.

Median problem pressure and learning

Against this conceptual background, the chapter argues that the extent to which a reform process follows rather a logic of policy learning than of political learning depends on the functional problem that is attached to a reform. The political science and public policy literature frequently refer to problem pressure to denote the necessity for reforms in a given policy field. For example, the welfare state retrenchment literature points to external and internal problem pressure, such as globalization or pressure to consolidate budgets (Starke, 2006, p. 107). The literature on environmental policy also refers to problem pressure, for example, CO_2 emissions or energy use to denote the demand for implementing a reform (Holzinger et al., 2008, p. 562).

In other words, problem pressure refers broadly to the demands for reform, which the environment of the political system allocates (Easton, 1957, pp. 387-390; Schwartz, 2001). In other words, reform pressures are somewhat obvious indicators that policymakers use to gauge the reform demand in a policy field but also external events, such as economic and environmental crises (Kingdon, 1995, pp. 90-93, 94-96).

The degree of problem pressures (potentially) varies greatly between different policy fields and perhaps even within a single policy field. For example, quickly raising public debts in times of economic downturn need much faster attention than a slow but steady increase in Medicare expenses. Or, an environmental catastrophe that threatens human lives needs more immediate attention than coordination problems in public services. To take into consideration these differences, the paper distinguishes three broad categories of problem pressure: low, median, and high problem pressure. Although these categories are very broad they are sufficient for the purpose of this paper's argument.

An important criterion for using problem pressure in political analysis is its perception by policymakers. The mentioned objective indicators could be perceived very differently in various contexts, for example policy entrepreneurs could frame a policy idea as response to an allegedly pressing problem by increasing its valence (Cox & Béland, 2013, pp. 317-318) although it is in fact an objectively rather minor policy challenge. In the remainder of this article, we follow however the assumption that – overall – problem pressure correlates with the perceived necessity for political action. The higher the problem pressure, the more salient is an issue for voters and interest groups (Culpepper, 2010) and thus the risk of no or wrong political action. For example, if problem pressure is very high, an issue should be very salient, and so should be the risk of political inaction. In such a case a problem needs to be solved, but policymakers also need to show action for political reasons, e.g. during the financial and economic crisis or a foreign policy crisis. In case problem pressure is very low, the issue at

stake is not very salient and the risk of no or wrong political action remains low. If median problem pressure is present, a problem is salient, but there is no need for immediate political action, however, the problem is serious enough that political inaction will be punished. How different forms of problem pressure are linked to policy-oriented and power-oriented learning will be subject of the following illustrative empirical analysis.

Empirical illustrations

This chapter proceeds with a comparative and explorative analysis of the link between problem pressure and policy-oriented as well as problem-oriented learning. This research design follows a logic of inductive iteration, i.e., we defined previously the main theoretical elements but we will explore the nature relationship between the dependent variable (learning) and the main independent variable (problem pressure) in an inductive manner (Yom, 2015). The case studies were selected according to their variance on the main explanatory variable of interest, namely problem pressure. The purpose of this empirical section is to explore the link between problem pressure and learning in an inductive manner but not to provide a research design that systematically test the proposed hypothesis against competing explanations (George & Bennett, 2005, pp. 115-123). Therefore, the analysis employs a comparative case study design aiming at theory development (George & Bennett, 2005, pp. 111-115) through a meta-analysis of case studies that help to illustrate the link between problem pressure and learning. In other words, the paper itself does not present in depth case studies but summarizes the result of existing case studies with respect to the theoretical link that we are interested in.

Case selection

The case studies selected for the empirical part of this paper vary according to their relative problem pressure. Notably, the paper focuses on the following policies.

1. *Low problem pressure: coordination of welfare delivery.* The first group of reforms concerns changes in the delivery of social policies, namely better coordination of the provision of welfare services, for example, integrated job centres, in Denmark, Germany, Switzerland and the UK. The functional problem pressure regarding these reforms is relatively low, compared to the following two groups, as the reforms are less salient and the immediate risk of political inaction is low compared to other problems such as economic downturns. Admittedly, the reforms were part of welfare retrenchment and the activation turn in social policies (Bonoli, 2010), nevertheless, if government would not have implemented organizational reforms of welfare delivery, there would have not been an immediate threat to the stability of the welfare state and the economy. Thus, the political risk of inaction and the ignorance of policy relevant knowledge and no or ineffective reforms is low.

2. *Median problem pressure: increasing retirement age and minimum wage.* The second group of reforms entails the increase of retirement age, in Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany and the UK and the introduction of a general minimum wage, in Germany and the UK. These reforms have a median problem pressure, as they are more salient politically than the previous group but there is no need to for immediate political action. Nevertheless, no political action is risky as the median-term consequences can be problematic. No pension reforms might endanger the financing of retirement funds in the future, whereas not putting into place a minimum wage might increase the negative effect of labour market dualization as the less qualified will be less protected socially.

3. *High problem pressure: crisis related labour market reforms.* The third group of reforms comprises of policies against the socio-economic repercussions of the economic and financial crisis. In these cases, problem pressure is very high, because the crisis is a salient issue and for political reasons policymakers cannot afford to wait until policy research develops well-designed and well-tested solutions. Precisely, these are social

policy and labour market reforms that passed in Greece, Italy, and Spain during the recent crisis period. The implementation of these reforms occurred in a context of strong problem pressure and demand for immediate reaction to the crisis situation.

The case studies are based on already published material and results of case studies that researchers conducted in the context of the collaborative and EU-funded research project INSPIRES.[3] Precisely, the chapter uses material from the following sources. Regarding organizational reforms of the welfare state, this article relies on the findings of a Ph.D. project, which has been conducted at the University of Lausanne and is available for public use (Champion, 2013). Information regarding the pension reforms and minimum wage legislation originate from already published research in the field (Bonoli, 2000) as well as from research reports that country experts conducted in the context of the INSPIRES research project, and which are published online (Aa, Benda, Berkel, Fenger, & Qaran, 2015; Jansen & Knuth, 2015; McEnhill, Taylor-Gooby, & Otto, 2015; Struyven & Pollet, 2015). Eventually, concerning the anti-crisis policies, the paper relies also on research reports conducted by national experts in the INSPIRES project (Martínez-Molina, Pavía, & Ferrer, 2015; Papadopoulou, Dimoulas, & Kourachanis, 2015; Sergi, Giannelli, & Cefalo, 2015).

Overview of the cases

The first group of social policy reforms – organizational reforms in welfare delivery – comprises of empirical examples from Denmark, Germany, Switzerland, and the UK. In all of these countries, governments ran pilot projects to test more coordinated reforms of welfare delivery, such as social assistance and job activation measures, to find out whether the measures actually solved the problem at hand, i.e. reduced unemployment. In three countries – Denmark, Germany and the UK – national governments decided to implement the reform nationally,

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[3] http://www.inspires-research.eu, last accessed, March 24, 2016.

before the pilot projects had finished (Table 1). The reasons for this were political, for example in Denmark a window of opportunity appeared, which created a possibility to implement this particular reform (Champion, 2013, p. 224). Another example for this relationship is Switzerland, where the government waited until the pilot finished before it decided to continue the project MAMAC, although the results of the evaluation showed that the reforms had no positive impact on employment rates. The national government decided however to continue the project for political reasons, as it believed that the instrument had positive effects for administrators for example and was of important symbolic value (Champion, 2013, p. 226).

Table 1: Social policy reforms and policy-oriented learning

Problem pressure	Reform type	Cou.	Impact of learning on change
Low	Organizational reform of the welfare state	DK	Pilot project: Spring 2003 – End 2005; Decision by government to adopt policies in April 2004 (Larger reform program) (Champion, 2013, p. 224)
		GER	Pilot project (MoZArT): April 2001 – End 2003; Decision to adopt the reform in August 2002 (Champion, 2013, p. 224)
		CH	Pilot project (MAMAC): 2005 – 2009; Government waited until the project ended, but decided to continue it despite little employment effects of the measure (Champion, 2013, p. 226)
		UK	Pilot project (ONE pilots): June and November 1999 – April 2002; Decision to adopt the reform in March 2002 (Champion, 2013, p. 224)
Median	Increasing retirement age	BE	Feedback by the EU Commission regarding specific actions; learning in domestic pension reform commissions; incremental reforms: Generation pact 2005, Re-revision of pension age in 2012 and introduction of stricter regulations for early retirement (Struyven & Pollet, 2015, pp. 10-13)
		NL	External evaluation by the EU Commission and the OECD, and pension reform commissions; political resistance for a long time; increase of retirement age from 65-67 initiated in 2008, passed in 2015 (Aa et al., 2015,

			p. 17)
		GER	A number of reform commissions evaluated the necessity to cut costs, since the 1990s (Jansen & Knuth, 2015, pp. 37-41); Incremental reforms since the 1990s to reduce early retirement (1996, 1999) and increase of the pension age (2004, 2007, 2013) (Jansen & Knuth, 2015, pp. 30-31).
		UK	Government related agencies produced most of the evidence to support the increase of retirement age; Cost containment related reforms in the 1980s; increase of contributions for low income earners during the 1990s (Bonoli, 2000, pp. 52-85; Schulze & Moran, 2006).
	Minimum wage	GER	Evidence for effectiveness produced by different research institutes and pilots in specific sectors; fact-findings missions in the UK (Jansen & Knuth, 2015, pp. 48-49). Incremental reforms (1996, 2001, national introduction 2015) (Jansen & Knuth, 2015, p. 12).
		UK	Positive evaluations in the US, no evidence from Britain (McEnhill et al., 2015, p. 34). Introduction by New Labor in 1998 for political reasons; later evaluations did not find negative effects of the policy (McEnhill et al., 2015, p. 36).
High	Labour market reforms in times of crisis	GRE	Voucher for unemployed to be trained in private companies; Suggestion by OECD 2005; implemented 2011 during the crisis (Papadopoulou et al., 2015, p. 12), no lasting employment effect (Papadopoulou et al., 2015, p. 15). Temporary public works program, 2011; Created as a reaction to the crisis; No lasting employment effect (Papadopoulou et al., 2015, p. 12).
		IT	Adaptation of apprenticeship program, 2011, 2015; First reform in 2003 followed the French model; 2012 shift towards the dual German model, fact finding missions to Germany (Sergi et al., 2015, pp. 51-53). Reform unemployment policy; New ALMPs to receive ESM money in 2009; regions received freedom to experiment with funds, but made little use of it though (Sergi et al., 2015, pp. 55-56).

		SP	Temporary assistance scheme for unemployed to support reinsertion, 2011 (Martínez-Molina et al., 2015, p. 16); government set up the programme although prior pilots showed that it was not successful in putting people back to work permanently (Martínez-Molina et al., 2015, pp. 49-50). Programs to encourage youth entrepreneurship (2013-2016); implemented according to EU strategies rather than the experience of Spanish civil servants (Martínez-Molina et al., 2015, pp. 43-44).

The median problem pressure reforms show to some extent a different relationship between problem-solving-oriented learning and the implementation of reforms, than the reforms selected due to low problem pressure. Regarding learning in the case of pension reforms, notably the increase of retirement age, the facts regarding the necessary reforms were clear, e.g. that there was a demand for cost containment. One possible solution for this was to increase retirement age slowly. The case studies regarding pension reforms in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands show that policymakers learned and deliberated, for example in expert commissions, and that it took quite some time, until findings regarding increasing retirement age are visible in reform outcomes (Aa et al., 2015, p. 17; Jansen & Knuth, 2015, pp. 30-31, 37-41; Struyven & Pollet, 2015, pp. 10-13). In the UK, the dynamic of pension reforms was different because the pension reform of 1986 dealt already with future costs of the pension system, and subsequent reforms during the 1990s handled the amount of pension contributions, especially for those with low incomes (Bonoli, 2000, pp. 52-85; Schulze & Moran, 2006). The example of minimum wage legislation underlines this argument even further. Thereby, the German case study shows that policymakers learned in a policy-oriented manner before they decided to introduce this legislation, in 2015. This learning process took several years and contained, for example, pilots in specific economic sectors that included an evaluation of whether minimum wages have negative employment effects (Jansen & Knuth, 2015, pp. 12,

48-49). In the UK, the national government introduced a minimum wage without conducting pilots before that and relying mostly on experiences in the United States. Later evaluations of the minimum wage in the UK revealed that the law has no negative impacts on British economy (McEnhill et al., 2015, p. 36) (Table 1).

The third group of reforms are the "anti-crisis policies" that governments implemented in a number of European countries. Concerning the relationship between policy-oriented learning and policy change, the case studies reveal that there was little time to find out whether the anti-crisis policy instruments actually yielded a positive employment outcome. For example, the governments of Greece and Spain passed policies to temporarily support unemployed individuals, e.g. temporary employment programs and vouchers for vocational training in private companies in Greece, or the youth entrepreneurship programs in Spain (Martínez-Molina et al., 2015, pp. 43-44; Papadopoulou et al., 2015, pp. 12-15). Governments created these policies fast, as a reaction to political pressure and ideas from international organizations, however, without clear evidence about whether these policies would have actually the intended effect. In Spain, the government put into place temporary assistance schemes for unemployed although it new that they would not lead necessarily to better employment effects (Martínez-Molina et al., 2015, pp. 49-50) (Table 1).

Causal links between problem pressure and learning

What do these examples tell us regarding the causal mechanisms of the connection between problem pressure and learning? Overall, the results suggest that reforms follow a policy learning logic against the backdrop of median problem pressure. In addition, the cases studies point also to the importance of institutions for problem-oriented learning.

Learning and problem pressure

Regarding the organizational reforms of the welfare state (low problem pressure), reforms in all four countries have in common that policymakers did not wait until pilots finished before they implemented the reform or put the reform into place even though the evaluations showed no effect of the reform on policy outcomes (Switzerland). In these cases, policymakers decided to implement the reform either before the actual learning process finished, i.e. before pilots ended, or despite that pilot projects produced negative results. Nevertheless, in all cases, a policy-oriented learning process started because government commissioned research regarding organizational reforms of the welfare state, but eventually the impact of the results of policy related research on policy change remained limited and policymakers decided mostly according to political reasons (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Problem pressure and learning in a comparative perspective
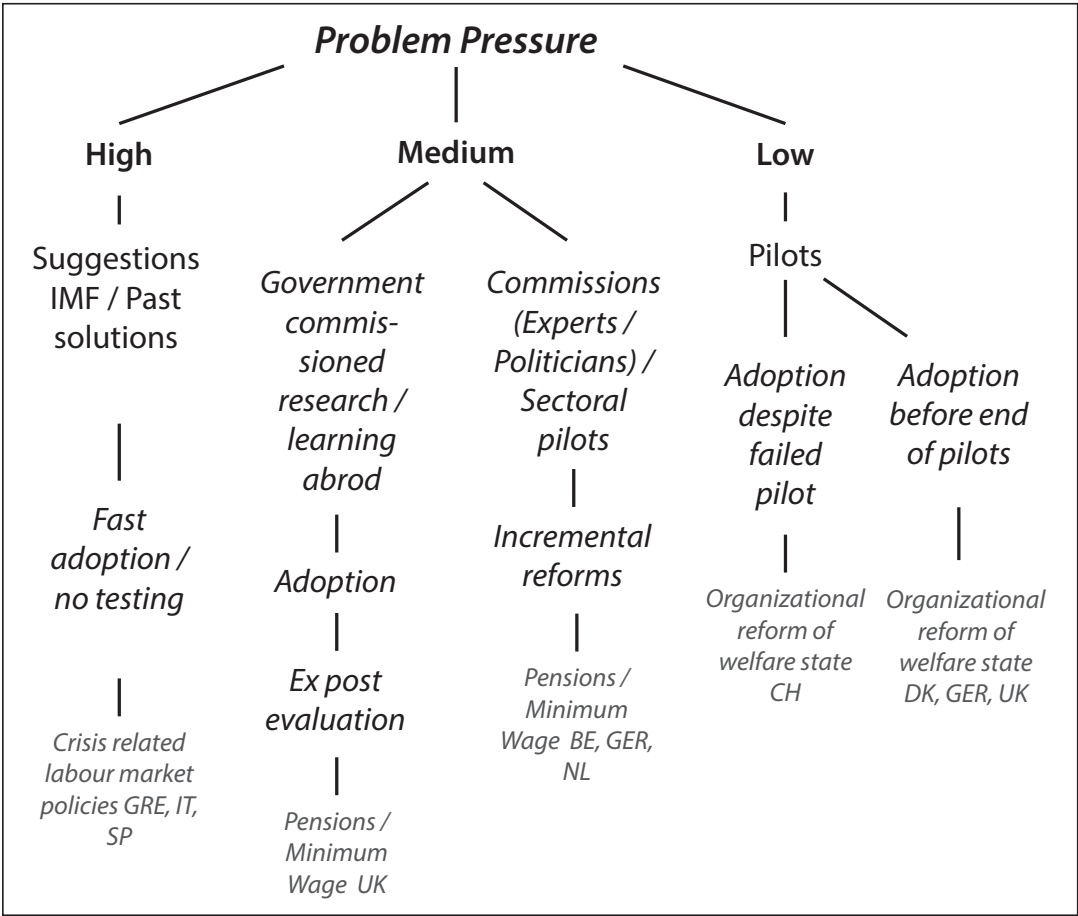
Regarding the anti-crisis policies (high problem pressure), the comparative analysis of case studies revealed that there is a limited impact of problem-solving-oriented learning in the policy process, in the sense decision-makers collect evidence for the actual effectiveness and efficiency of the instruments before adopting them. In the case of the temporary employment program in Greece and the reinsertion measure in Spain, this was not possible due to the urgency of reforms (Martínez-Molina et al., 2015, p. 16; Papadopoulou et al., 2015, p. 12). Governments needed to respond to the declining economy. What is more, external political pressure forced the Greek government to adopt a program that finances training in private companies and the Spanish government to implement a strategy that encourages youth entrepreneurship. Both programs were adopted mostly due to pressure from EU-related

institutions, which transferred ideas from other countries, rather than because there was substantial evidence that these instruments suit the needs of these two countries (Martínez-Molina et al., 2015, p. 16; Papadopoulou et al., 2015, p. 12). In Italy, the crisis also affected on how learning impacted on policy change. For example, the Italian government directed its attention to the German model of vocational training programs, in 2012, although before, it had used the French model of tertiary education as a primary model. Furthermore, the regions received some freedom to experiment when using money from the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) for activation policies, however, regional governments made little use of this instrument. Similar to Greece and Spain, the anti-crisis policies in Italy emerged due to high problem pressure and there was little time for policy-oriented learning. Although some of the Italian labour market reforms during the crisis followed a similar pattern as in Greece and Spain, for example policymakers regarded Germany and not anymore France as the main model for reforms of vocational training (Figure 1).

In the group of reforms with median problem pressure, the analysis shows instances of policy-oriented learning before the actual adoption of reforms. The increase of the retirement age, in Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands as well as the introduction of the German minimum wage show that problem-solving-oriented learning could occur as there was no demand for immediate action (Aa et al., 2015, p. 17; Jansen & Knuth, 2015, pp. 30-31, 37-41; Struyven & Pollet, 2015, pp. 10-13). In these cases, it was possible to test the minimum wage or estimating the saving effects of an increase in retirement age for pension funds, before the implementation of reforms. Interestingly, this mechanism was less present in the UK, where pension reforms and the minimum wage were introduced based on a narrower evidence base (Bonoli, 2000, pp. 52-85; McEnhill et al., 2015, pp. 34-36). This finding implies that there are differences between countries regarding the impact of median problem pressure on policy learning.

Political institutions and learning

In addition to the link between learning and problem pressure, the analysis in this paper suggested that political factors matter, especially political institutions impact how hard fact based policy learning occurs. The results of the comparative analysis in the previous section has shown that, in the case of median problem pressure reform projects, policy-related learning tends to guide the reform process. This effect is especially the case in pension reforms in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands, and the minimum wage law in Germany. Contrariwise, in the UK, the national government was able to pass cost containment of the pension system and minimum wage legislation already much earlier, and based on less substantive evidence for an actual effect of the policy. For example, the Blair government introduced the minimum wage laws in the UK without conducting own research, only based on experiences in the US. These findings support an argument that Hemerijck and Visser made before. According to these authors, in the Netherlands and Ireland, there is a particular way of learning, which they call "learning together," which is opposed to "learning alone" as in the case of the UK (Hemerijck & Visser, 2003, p. 22). Learning together entails some concertation, social pacts, or, in other words, a high degree of consensual decision-making, such as in Dutch politics. On the other hand, learning alone comes along with the absence of concertation and stronger capacity to exercise political power, which is inherent to majoritarian political systems, such as the UK.

The comparison of different policies with a median problem pressure shows that policy learning is especially the case in political systems with a consensual form of decision making, where policy deliberation takes time and reforms are usually incremental, such as Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany. This type of policymaking seems to be particularly compatible with the "knowledge creep" that characterizes the insertion of knowledge in the policy process (Weiss, 1980, 1982, 1986). What is more, the results suggest that in consensual systems, participants need to negotiate solutions. Therefore, using robust and credible evidence, such as

well-researched policy proposals, are beneficial for stakeholders in the policy process, as negotiations are necessary. Contrariwise, in the UK, decisions are made faster, and thus the government has a larger leverage on using knowledge politically as it does not need to defend its proposals in a consensual policy process. Consequently, the incentives for assuring problem-solving in political reforms declines.

The link between median problem pressure and policy learning

The result of the previous analyses suggest that the impact of policy-oriented learning dominates over power-oriented learning against the background of reforms with a median problem pressure (Figure 2). In this case, the policy problem is perceived as severe enough by policymakers to consider knowledge according to a problem-solving logic because political inaction is risky. At the same time, the policy problem is not so salient that there is a political need for immediate action. Under this condition, policymakers are most likely to take research results seriously in the reform process, and it is, therefore, most probable that policy-oriented learning dominates the reform compared to power-oriented learning. Contrariwise, the case studies show that if problem pressure is very high it is less likely that problem-solving-oriented learning impacts on a reform project since the policy issue is so salient that policymakers need to act immediately. If policy-relevant research would suggest large-scale immediate reforms, policymakers would follow these suggestions. Nevertheless, if this is not the case, political action might be required all the same, as doing nothing would be the worst option and highly risky politically, for example in times of crisis (Bonoli, 2012). On the other hand, the results of the analysis demonstrate that in cases of very low problem pressure, the potential impact of policy learning on reforms declines as well but for different reasons. Since the issue to which a policy responds is not salient and political inaction or inefficient policies are unlikely to result in electoral losses, policymakers are less likely to bother about policy-relevant research if it is at odds with their own political interests.

Figure 2: Relationship between problem pressure and policy learning
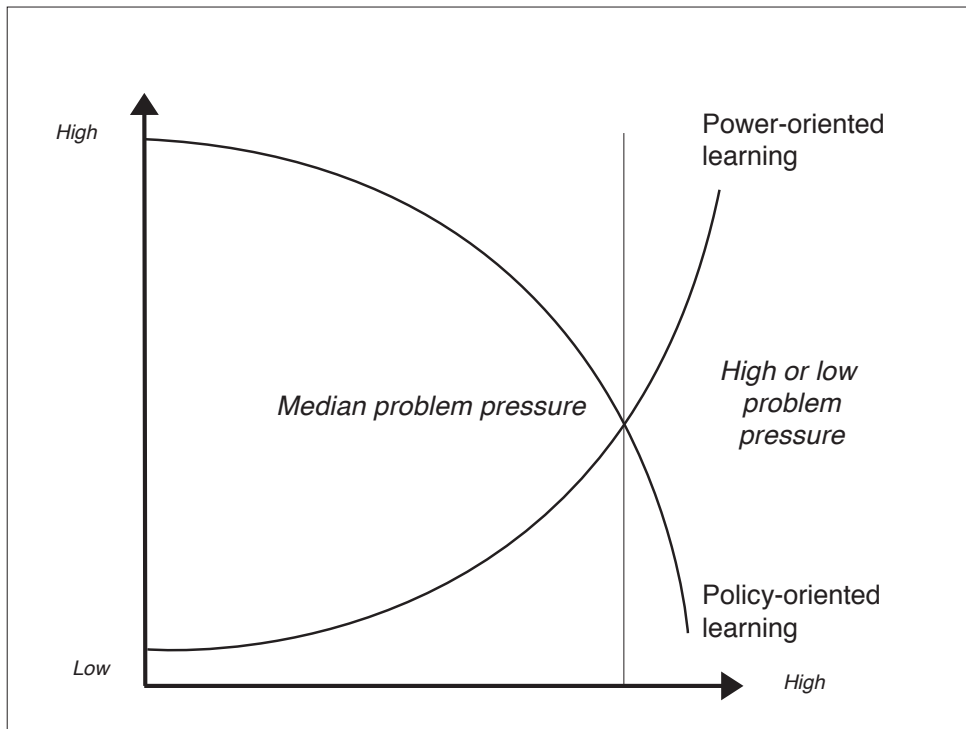
The outlined argument is plausible theoretically because it takes time until policy-knowledge, such as evidence about the effectiveness of policies, enters the political agenda. According to Weiss and others, "perhaps it takes 5 or 10 years or more before decision makers respond to the accumulation of consistent evidence" (Weiss, 1993, p. 98). Researchers have referred to this process of slow penetration of knowledge in the policy process as "knowledge creep" (Daviter, 2015, p. 493; Weiss, 1980, 1982, 1986). Given that policy-learning, understood as the infusion of scientific information into policy instruments, takes time, there needs to be a relatively sufficient amount of patience, resources, and time to find a solution. The conditions of median problem pressure – median salience and risk of political inaction – seem to be suited best to facilitate this type of learning during the policymaking process.

Conclusion

This paper started from the problem that policy relevant research is an essential element of

reforms in public policy but that we know little about the political use of policy related research. Furthermore, research in the public policy literature often overestimates the role of problem-solving-oriented learning for political reforms and underestimates power-oriented and political learning. To account for this problem, the paper proposed an argument that linked learning to problem pressure. Precisely, the chapter demonstrated that policy-oriented learning is most likely to occur under the condition of a "median problem pressure," i.e., a policy challenge is salient, but there is no need for immediate political action. Policy-oriented learning entails that politicians are most likely to use new information to reform policy instruments if problem pressure is neither too low nor too high.

The paper uses case study material from very different reforms, which vary according to their problem pressure, to support its argument. If problem pressure is rather low, i.e. there is little urgency to change policies, for example in the case of organizational reforms of the welfare state, policymakers do not care about policy-relevant research. In the case of very high problem pressure, such as during the economic and financial crisis, there is little time for a long learning process. Nevertheless, if a policy challenge faces a median problem pressure, the chances that policymakers model solutions according to policy-oriented learning is the highest. The analysis of pension reforms and minimum wage legislation support this argument empirically, but especially for countries with a consensual political system, e.g. Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany. In the UK, the reform of the pensions system and minimum wage shows instances of a political use of knowledge. According to the results of this paper, consensual political systems with a long and incremental decision-making process seem to be suited best for problem-solving-oriented learning. One reason for this is that policymaking lasts longer in consensual political systems, which is favourable for a knowledge creep that qualifies problem-solving-oriented learning. Furthermore, in consensual political systems, informed arguments help in the deliberative policy process that accounts for different political interest.

The contribution of this paper to the literature is above all theoretical and based on an inductive and explorative empirical analysis. The paper contributes to the public policy literature in general as it points to the importance of problem pressure for learning and to the relationship between the median problem pressure and problem-solving-oriented learning. The discussed case study material serves to develop the main hypothesis but not to test it against competing explanations. This important task remains to be done by future research. Nevertheless, the paper opens the way for further contributions to the public policy literature regarding policy learning. Notably, future research should account for the connection between salience (Culpepper, 2010) and problem pressure against the background of learning, which this paper mentions only peripherally. Another demand for further research is to test the hypothesis that this paper illustrates on a larger dataset with different reforms in the various countries across time. Particularly, future research should account for the potential dynamic within problem pressure, which might change over time and, for example, move from median to very strong. In addition, papers to come should also explore under which political conditions, for example institutional configurations, median problem pressure promotes or even inhibits problem-solving-oriented learning.

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