



The Politics of Detail

The Micro-Dimension of Policy Design

Giliberto Capano

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Introduction: Reclaiming the Micro-Layer of Policy Design

Abstract The literature on public policy and policy design has long recognized, albeit in fragments, that the manner in which instruments are deployed, that is, the operational choices they embody about who is targeted, what is demanded from those targets, and how programme delivery is to be configured are central to policy effectiveness. Salamon identified the calibration of tools and the micro-specification of targets as a key neglected dimension of tool design, while Ostrom demonstrated that operational rules governing access, compliance, and enforcement are crucial for policy performance. However, these contributions have remained largely disconnected from one another and from the mainstream of policy design and instrument research. To help address this gap, the book presents a framework that details the content and workings of the operative micro-layer these authors collectively identified. It posits that goal specifications and instrument calibrations constitute the core of design, rather than being the simple administrative residuals some authors have suggested. This framework helps make legible what we can know about how policies work, how they change, and where the most consequential conflicts in the policy process often occur.

Keywords Policy design · Policy calibrations · Policy specifications · Micro-level analysis · Operative content · Delivery package · Policy change · Distributional politics

BETWEEN ANNOUNCEMENT AND EFFECT: AN EMPIRICAL PUZZLE AND ITS CONCEPTUAL ROOTS

There is no shortage of concepts in the public policy literature attempting to describe a government's ambitions and how it would like to achieve them. There is a rich vocabulary, for example, dealing with key elements of policy such as programme goals, ideational paradigms, and policy instruments whose real-life evolution can be tracked across time, sectors, and political coalitions with considerable precision.

However, there is a persistent discrepancy between the stated goals and objectives of policies and their actual implementation which is evident in much of this work. A policy may be generous in its purported entitlements, for example, but remain inaccessible to many of those it is intended to serve. Or a regulatory regime, to give another example, may have substantial formal statutory authority, but fail to be effectively implemented and affect very little in practice. Conversely, a seemingly modest change to a policy element, such as a shift in eligibility criteria, a revision of verification procedures, or a redistribution of discretionary authority can have a significant impact on who gains access to services, who bears the costs of compliance, and how the state is encountered by citizens.

Understanding why these impacts occur and what it implies for policy effectiveness and change is a critical challenge not only for practitioners charged with programme design and administration but also for students of public policy (Bali et al., 2024). The problem is not just that politicians may be two-faced about their purported goals or that officials fail to carry out their duties, even though both are often true. Rather, it is also a matter of where we locate the central dimension of policies and how we examine and prioritize their component elements.

That is, much analysis still treats policy as adequately represented by either its authoritative statement of intent—such as a statement of goals, principles, or declared commitments—or by its formal instrument label—such as regulation, subsidy, tax, or organizational efforts. While these are indispensable descriptors, they do not provide a sufficient representation of what comprises a policy as an operative arrangement and gives it effect. Key aspects of policy include not only the nature of the ideas about society and state action behind it, and the kinds of objectives and tools expected to accomplish them, but also concern the micro-level of tool calibrations (Verhoest et al., 2026). Both the former components have been well examined but the impact of whether or not a tax is set at 5% or 25%,

for example, is critical not only to how much revenue a state collects, but also to how actors respond to it, including, for example, shifting their efforts towards activities or locations with less burdensome tax rates. This latter level of policy-making, however, is paradoxically so familiar in policy conversations that it risks becoming banal, yet its analytical implications are often ignored or under-addressed in the literature on policy-making, change, and choice. Most case studies and comparative treatments of policy-making focus almost exclusively on the macro- and meso-levels of policy goals, governance arrangements, tool choices, and, at best, somewhat operationalized policy objectives, ignoring the micro-level almost completely.

Notwithstanding this analytical blind spot, in contemporary governance policy, artifacts are increasingly assembled and impact upon social actors through fine-grained rule choices, such as eligibility boundaries, proof requirements, procedural pathways, discretionary guidelines, enforcement routines, and the organizational distribution of implementation responsibilities (Petit & Tedds, 2026). These choices are not mere details to be added after the main design is finished, as is sometimes alleged. Rather, policy calibrations and specifications at this level are often the hinges on which policy effects turn, not only in exceptional circumstances when policies change, but also in the ordinary, ongoing day-to-day work of governing (Lui et al., 2026).

This point is most evident when we consider how the same policy instrument can have very different effects across different locations, or even within the same place across different administrative areas. Two regulatory regimes governing industrial emissions, for example, may be otherwise identical in terms of goals, objectives, instruments, and governance arrangement but not share the same statutory limit or the same legally mandated maximum concentration of a pollutant and thus operate very differently. Or they may involve a different enforcement process, where in one case, inspections are scheduled and announced in advance, whereas in the other, they are random and unannounced. This can have a significant impact on compliance, as can also occur if compliance is assessed annually through self-reporting, or through continuous monitoring (May, 2005; Scholz, 1984; Winter & May, 2001). Or, to cite another example, in one case sanctions may be fixed and automatically triggered, whereas in another, they are discretionary and rarely enforced. The actual quantity of pollutant emitted (the outcome that the policy is

meant to affect) often depends far more on these operational dimensions than on the choice of regulatory instrument *per se*.

The same logic applies to welfare programmes that may share the same headline formal benefit or entitlement yet differ dramatically in terms of access burdens, benefit stability over time, reassessment frequency, practical challenges, and the availability of appeals, among other items (Knotz, 2018; Michener, 2018; Moynihan et al., 2015). In all these cases, which are far from unusual, the unit of comparison that scholars most commonly rely upon to analyse effects such as stringency or intended severity relates to instrument type or declared goal, does not adequately describe the variation that is empirically decisive. That is, key differences are not apparent if analysis stops at the meso- or macro-level of policy goals or instruments and come into sharper focus only when attention shifts to the operational or micro-dimensions through which those instruments are administered in practice.

The analytical implication is clear: without a conceptual account of this operational layer, studies of policy design will continue to produce explanations that are correct in principle, but imprecise in detail.

This gap can potentially lead to two symmetrical errors that can compromise the reliability of comparative and longitudinal policy analysis. The first is to overestimate differences, mistaking variations in formal instrument labels or stated goals for substantive divergences in how policies operate and whom they affect. The second, and arguably more significant, error is to underestimate differences: overlooking real variations in operational arrangements (in rules, procedures, and enforcement practices) because headline goals and instrument types appear similar. Both errors are important for both academic theory-building and practical policy learning, since they make it difficult to identify precisely, for example, what is being transferred when ‘best practices’ are adopted in different contexts or to understand why policies that appear well-designed on paper produce unexpected or disappointing results.

The consequences of this gap become clear when we consider what it means for policies to succeed or fail. McConnell (2010), for example, argues that policy success and failure can be assessed along three distinct dimensions: programme, policy, and political, each of which captures a different aspect of how a policy performs once it has been implemented. Importantly, the micro-design gap leaves its mark on all three of these dimensions.

At the *programme* level, incoherent operational design, such as vague specifications, inconsistent calibrations, and insufficiently resourced monitoring, can easily generate implementation problems that are misdiagnosed as administrative capacity failures, when in fact they are design failures. At the *policy* level, the feasibility of a proposed solution depends not only on whether the instrument type is theoretically appropriate, but also on whether its specific configuration can activate the requisite causal mechanisms which actually give a policy effect (Capano & Howlett, 2021). At the *political* level, the legitimacy and sustainability of a policy partly depend on whether the micro-choices embedded in its design are perceived as fair and consistent with the stated intent: this perception is frequently undermined when details diverge from the public commitment, whether deliberately or accidentally.

Therefore, a framework that makes micro-choices analytically visible is useful not merely as a scholarly tool, but also as a resource for improving the quality of policy design across all these dimensions (Verhoest et al., 2026).

This book treats this imprecision as its starting point in developing a method of identifying and analysing the impact of the micro-level aspects of policy tools and goals. The solution proposed in this book is to reclassify the micro-level design from a secondary detail of implementation to a primary object of policy design analysis. This is not a plea just for more descriptive granularity. Rather, it is a proposal for conceptual re-ordering: instead of approaching operative policy content as something that happens after design decisions are taken (something to be explained by capacity, discretion, or political contingency), we treat it as part of design itself: the structured set of choices that transforms policy intent and instrument choice into an actionable institutional arrangement. That arrangement is what a policy actually is, rather than what its architects declare it to be.

The chapters that follow develop the argument in a cumulative and interconnected sequence, each contributing a distinct analytical function to the overall project.

Chapter 2 establishes the starting point. Much of what determines whether a policy will be successful or unsuccessful is encoded in its content before delivery begins, in the design of rules, administrative architecture, and the structuring of discretion. The chapter demonstrates that both the policy mix literature and implementation research have indicated this without ever fully addressing it. The issue is not that scholars have

entirely overlooked the micro-level. Rather, the problem is that there is no systematic framework for analysing it.

Chapter 3 asks why this is the case. It maps policy content across three levels—macro, meso, and micro—and identifies two tendencies that have consistently drawn scholarly attention towards the first two, leaving the third under-explored. The first tendency is the dominance of macro-level ideational explanations, which treat operative choices as simply following from higher-level decisions. The second tendency is a focus on process rather than content, whereby changes in how decisions are made are mistaken for changes in the actual policies. Both tendencies produce the same blind spot, and the chapter establishes the analytical and practical costs of this.

Chapter 4 then recovers the intellectual foundations on which a remedy can be built. Salamon, Linder and Peters, and Ostrom, each starting from a different perspective, identified dimensions of operative policy content that the discipline's mainstream subsequently overlooked. This chapter does more than simply acknowledge these contributions: it evaluates them critically. It identifies what each author left unresolved in terms of scope, integration, and connection to distributional politics. It then uses these gaps to specify what a more systematic framework needs to provide.

Chapter 5 assesses more recent scholarship that has begun to treat micro-design as a distinct area of enquiry. Three strands of work are examined: research on design quality, research on design diversity, and research on micro-calibrations within policy mixes. Each has made real progress. However, each remains confined to specific domains, and none provides a shared vocabulary or logic of operationalization that works across sectors and national contexts. This chapter identifies the precise gap that the framework developed in Chapter 6 is then designed to close.

Chapter 6 presents our proposal for a micro-design analytical framework. Three dimensions describe goal specifications: the target population, the expected outcome, and the timeframe involved or designated. Six dimensions describe instrument calibrations: stringency; public visibility; automaticity; resource intensiveness; the agencies responsible for implementation; and monitoring and auditing provisions. Together, these nine dimensions constitute what the book refers to as the 'delivery package' of a policy. The framework is intended to provide an analytical orientation rather than a rigid checklist, and the need for domain-specific adaptation is recognized throughout as a condition of its validity.

Chapter 7 develops the logic for interpreting the delivery package as a configuration rather than a list of elements. No single dimension can be assessed in isolation. High stringency without credible monitoring results in compliance on paper, but not in practice. Precise targeting combined with heavy administrative burdens can exclude the very people a policy was intended to help. These are design failures, not implementation failures, and they can be identified before a policy is ever enacted. The chapter also explicitly sets out the political argument: the configuration of the delivery package is where negotiated settlements are encoded, and where the difference between a government's announcements and its actual actions is determined.

Chapter 8 translates the framework into a working empirical instrument. It addresses the unit of analysis, the construction of coding scales, and how legislative texts and administrative guidance can be used as data sources. It also clarifies the relationship between micro-design analysis and the Ostrom-inspired Institutional Grammar tradition, demonstrating that the two approaches complement rather than compete with one another. Three case studies demonstrate the operationalization procedure: a constructed example, an empirical analysis of Korean healthcare reform, and a large-scale comparative study of the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan.

Chapter 9 applies the framework to the study of policy change. The central argument is that existing frameworks are too abstract to detect the reconfigurations through which policies most commonly transform. The micro-design perspective distinguishes between nominal reform, where labels and declared goals change while operative content remains the same, and substantive reform, where delivery packages are genuinely reconfigured. Three trajectories of change are identified in which micro-level choices function as the primary drivers of transformation rather than as consequences of shifts occurring at higher levels.

Chapter 10 draws these threads together. It clearly states the book's core propositions, derives their implications for design practice and policy evaluation, and acknowledges the framework's limitations. The chapter also presents a broader political argument, stating that the micro-level is where the most consequential distributional choices in governance are often made, and therefore where accountability must reach. The chapter concludes with a research agenda for developing micro-design as an ongoing field of study.

Across all these chapters, the book pursues a single, consistent claim: that the micro-level is not a residual of design but its constitutive substance. Making it analytically legible changes, in important ways, both what we understand about how policies work and what we can say about how they should be made.

To repeat, the analytical costs of neglecting this level of policy are many. Without a systematic account of the micro-level, it is impossible to assess design quality or diagnose why policies that appear coherent at the macro- and meso-levels succeed or fail in practice. In practice, the decisions that matter most to decision-makers, such as how much stringency to apply, how to define eligibility, and how to structure accountability, currently remain outside the scope of academic policy advice, precisely because they fall below the level at which most scholarship operates. The rest of this book is tasked with closing this gap.

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CHAPTER 2

What the Policy Sciences Have and Have Not Explained About the Sites of Policy Success and Failure

Abstract Recent scholarship on policy mixes, design logics, and design quality has made it clear that instruments rarely operate in isolation and that their interactions are as important as their individual properties to policy success or failure. Aspects of their interactions such as the coherence displayed across tools can determine whether a design can generate its intended effects, and implementation research has produced a growing body of knowledge about how organizations and employees translate mandates into practice and also shows how poor management and capacity limitations can allow outcomes to diverge even among seemingly uniform policies. It is less often recognized, however, that within these traditions scholarship has also pointed directly towards the need to better understand the micro-level of policies in order to improve policy designs and understand how policy composition affects implementation outcomes.

Keywords Policy calibrations · Policy specifications · Policy composition · Policy components · Policy elements · Policy tools · Policy instruments

INTRODUCTION: HOW DOES IMPLEMENTATION MATTER?

There is little novel about the general observation that ‘implementation matters’ in policy-making and policy scholars have been well aware of this for decades (Lipsky, 1980; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973). Unexpected outcomes are often attributed to ‘implementation problems’, and while this pattern is often correct in spirit, it is analytically misleading because it treats as exogenous what is frequently endogenous to a policy’s design.

That is, it is less well appreciated that much of what produces policy success or failure is not introduced by factors such as frontline worker discretion or organizational capacity after a policy has been handed over for delivery. Rather, these outcomes may be encoded in the content of the policy well before delivery begins: in the design of rules, administrative architecture, and the structuring of discretion.

Some efforts have been made to better assess the reasons why policies fail and the ‘tools of government’ tradition and the extensive literature on policy design that has developed in its wake have clarified how different policies operate, including aspects such as the consequences of combining different kinds of tools in different combinations and their impact on subsequent policy performance, coherence, and legitimacy (Hood, 1983; Howlett, 2019; Salamon, 2002). This more recent scholarship on policy mixes, design logics, and design quality has highlighted how instruments rarely operate in isolation; that their interactions are as important as their individual properties, and that aspects of their interactions such as the coherence displayed across tools can determine whether a design can generate its intended effects (Capano & Howlett, 2024; Howlett & Rayner, 2007; Howlett et al., 2024). But it also continues to operate largely at the macro or meso-level of analysis.

In parallel, implementation research has also produced a growing body of knowledge about how organizations and employees actually translate mandates into practice and how poor management and capacity limitations can allow outcomes to diverge even among seemingly uniform policies (Lipsky, 1980; Knill et al., 2024; Winter, 2015).

It is less often recognized, however, that within both these traditions recent scholarship has pointed directly towards the need to design and understand the micro-level of policies in order to understand why aspects of policy composition and implementation affect outcomes in the ways

that they do (Lui et al., 2026). Between the instrument label and front-line delivery lies a layer of formal and semi-formal design choices that often largely determine what the policy demands, enables, and constrains.

This layer is the operative content of policy, and it is not adequately captured by the tool tradition's instrument typologies or by implementation research's focus on discretionary adaptation, legitimacy, or principle–actor relationships. When this layer is not conceptually foregrounded, analysts are left with a recurring but imprecise explanatory pattern of policy behaviours.

How to characterize this order of policy, however, has not been clear. While some authors such as Hall (1993) distinguished changes in policy settings from changes in instruments and paradigms and identified calibrations as a distinct order of policy content, this theoretical framework assigned them the least causal weight and importance in policy-making among the three macro, meso, and micro-levels of policy components Hall identified.

Others scholars such as Salamon (2001 2002), however, noted that most work in the tools tradition focused too heavily on the macro and meso aspects of instrument selection and too little on the specific micro-level design parameters (the ‘critical design features’, as he termed them) that determine whether an instrument can function effectively in a given context. Ostrom (1990, 2005) similarly highlighted the central role played in policy-making and outcomes by the rules governing access, compliance, monitoring, and enforcement, which are the operative mechanisms through which collective action problems are either solved or perpetuated. Her distinction between ‘rules-in-form’ and ‘rules-in-use’ highlights the gap which often exists between a declared policy intent and its micro-design content. Linder and Peters (1989, 1991) also noted that instrument selection cannot be divorced from the conditions under which it is implemented. That is, an instrument is not only a generic category or ideal type, but also a particular combination of design features whose feasibility and political acceptability hinge on the configuration of its micro-level design features.

Taken together, these contributions constitute an implicit but fragmented intellectual lineage for the argument of this book. What these contributions lack, and what this book provides, however, is an analytical framework that treats the operative choices each scholar identified as a systematic and tractable object of study.

The impact of this gap is evident in scholarship on policy change. Much of the field has focused on identifying different types of change, such as the changes in settings, instruments, or overarching goals or paradigms set out by Hall (1993), or has explained change through the impact of exogenous events and learning on policy regimes and pathways affecting advocacy coalitions and subsystem behaviour (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Pierson, 2004; Sabatier, 1988). While these approaches have generated substantial insight into change processes and drivers, they are commonly pitched at a very high level of abstraction and struggle to capture the reality of governance, where change often occurs through incremental revisions to operational rules and administrative arrangements rather than the often much more visible replacement of instruments or paradigms.

The current governing environment, however, amplifies the urgency of developing a more detailed and precise analytical model of micro-level calibrations and specifications. In increasingly common policy environments characterized by high contestation, dense veto points, strong path dependence, and fiscal constraints, for example, change often occurs much less through proclamation and more through the quiet redesign of operational arrangements; through processes such as layering, conversion, and recalibration, while headline goals and instrument labels remain formally stable and apparently unaffected (Hacker, 2004; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). The ability to better understand policy-making in these circumstances hinges on our capacity to better recognize and conceptualize the micro-level where these revisions occur.

THE INCREASING IMPORTANCE OF THE MICRO-CONTENT OF CONTEMPORARY POLICY DESIGNS: CONDITIONALITY, VISIBILITY, AND DIGITALIZATION

Three broad trends characterize aspects of contemporary governance in ways that make the micro-level both more consequential but often more difficult to observe.

Firstly, facing financial and ideological imperatives which undermine traditional welfare state activities, states are increasingly delivering policy through conditionality and administratively mediated processes, often turning on the enactment of limitations of rights to access public services. Benefits, permissions, and services are more than ever conditional upon

proving eligibility, meeting procedural requirements, and navigating verification mechanisms, all of which are micro-design choices.

Secondly, it remains very much the case that political conflict does not end when legislation is passed; it often intensifies in the design of these rules, guidelines, and enforcement routines, where the redistribution of burdens and discretion can be achieved in ways that are far less visible and less likely to feature legislative conflict.

Thirdly, digitalization is progressively relocating policy content into administrative infrastructures, such as automated eligibility checks, integrated databases, algorithmic decision support, and digital-by-default delivery. This also means that the micro-level of policy design is increasingly embedded in technical systems and routines rather than solely in statutory text and affect, positively or negatively, the methods and processes through which public services are fashioned and delivered.

Together, these trends mean that much of what governments actually do at present is fully legible only at the operative, micro-level and needs to be revealed and analysed at this level, and this is what this book sets out to do.

Two categories or types of operative micro-level choices are central to the book's analysis. *Policy specifications* define the target and the object of intervention: who is included and excluded, what outcome is expected of them, and within what timeframe and under what conditions the policy applies. These are the 'who, what, when' of the micro-level, and they are anything but neutral (Wellstead & Howlett, 2024).

The definition of a target population (often seemingly a technical exercise), for example, is one of the most consequential choices in the design process, determining which groups receive benefits and which bear burdens, shaping how groups perceive the legitimacy of state action, and configuring the conditions under which they can mobilize or contest that action (Schneider & Ingram, 1997). Specifications are what give an instrument its purpose and its bite: without them, a policy goal remains only a declaration of intent; with them, it becomes something addressed to identifiable people, demanding identifiable changes, within identifiable conditions and administered in specific ways by specific agencies and actors (Petek et al., 2022).

Policy calibrations, by contrast, define how traditional policy instruments operate: their level of stringency and coerciveness; the resources allocated to them; the monitoring and enforcement arrangements that give them practical authority; the automaticity with which rules are

applied; and the accountability rules that determine how failures are recognized and addressed. Calibrations are what bring an instrument to life: without them, a policy tool remains an inert legal or administrative provision; with them, it becomes something that reaches into the world, changes behaviour, distributes burdens, and produces effects (Scott et al., 2026).

Together, specifications and calibrations form the basis of what this book in later chapters terms ‘the delivery package’: the configuration of choices that determines whether in fact a policy can actually generate the behavioural and institutional changes it seeks. As Salamon (2002) argued with respect to tool design, and as Ostrom (1990, 2005) demonstrated through institutional analysis, it is precisely these operative elements, not the abstract or formal instrument category, that commonly determine the conditions under which a policy succeeds or fails in practice.

It is important to be clear about the status of this framework. The sets of specifications and calibration dimensions identified in this book are not intended as a fixed template to be applied mechanically across all policy domains. They rather allow the analytical reasoning that is needed for effective policy design in the modern era and are expected to be adapted by researchers and practitioners in the specific policy field under examination and the questions being pursued about it. Different sectors—environmental regulation, social protection, health, education—typically call for different specifications of who counts as a target, different calibrations of what constitutes adequate monitoring, and different accountability arrangements suited to their institutional context as well as different tool calibrations.

The value of the framework thus lies not in its universal applicability as a checklist, but in the investigative method it helps put into practice: the habit of asking, for example, for any instrument in any domain, what operative choices have been made, how they cohere, and what distributional consequences they carry. This flexibility is, as Linder and Peters (1989) argued for instrument design more broadly, one of the strongest reasons for taking the micro content of policy design seriously as an analytical object.

MICRO-DESIGN AS THE SITE OF POLITICAL CONFLICT

One important aspect of this activity is its often technical nature. But the political dimension of this framework deserves explicit and extended acknowledgement, as it is all too easy to misread micro-design analysis as a narrowing of political analysis into administrative detail. The opposite is true. The politics referred to in the title of this book are precisely this: not a theory of the process through which operational design choices are negotiated and adopted—an otherwise distinct research agenda—but rather an analytical account of the distributional choices encoded in specifications and calibrations; the conflicts these choices generate and conceal; and the accountability and analytical deficits that arise when these choices remain invisible.

Like choices of paradigms and governance arrangements or policy objectives and instruments, micro-design choices are political choices, and often among the most consequential ones made in the policy process. As already set out above, the allocation of eligibility burdens, the stringency of sanctions, the distribution of discretion between central and street-level administrators, the transparency of decision rules, the resourcing of monitoring systems are all politically charged and encode assumptions about deservingness and risk, distribute costs and benefits across social groups, and shape the material and symbolic experience of citizenship and governance. The presumption of fraud that motivates verification burdens; the asymmetry of monitoring intensity across different categories of compliance actor; the procedural complexity that effectively screens out weaker claimants; the discretion that enables differential treatment while appearing facially neutral—these are not mere administrative technicalities. They are where politics is sedimented into institutional architecture, and they often determine the lived meaning of a policy more powerfully than a policy statement or preamble might allege (Herd & Moynihan, 2019; Schneider & Ingram, 1997).

The idea that political conflict is often about the micro-dimensions of design may nonetheless seem counterintuitive. Again, this is at least in part a function of the analytical lens and theoretical preferences characteristic of the field. Dominant accounts in the policy process literature, for example, tend to focus on large-scale issues, such as battles over economic or social paradigms writ large, the choice between using market or state, between universalism and targeting, and between growth and redistribution. These are real conflicts. However, they are not the only conflicts that

matter in the policy process, nor are they necessarily the most intensely contested in practice.

Lowi (1964) established the foundational insight in the policy sciences that the type of political conflict a policy generates depends on how it distributes costs and benefits across social groups. Wilson (1973) built on this by mapping the configurations of concentrated and dispersed costs and benefits which he argued led to four distinct patterns of political dynamics. However, neither Lowi nor Wilson addressed the fact that this distribution is not determined only at the level of paradigms or instrument types, but often at the operative level of specifications and calibrations. Whether a policy is genuinely redistributive or that effect is merely nominal, whether it imposes costs on concentrated interests or disperses them effectively, and whether it activates or marginalizes powerful stakeholders hinges on decisions about target populations, eligibility thresholds, stringency levels, implementing agencies, and accountability rules. The formal choice of instrument type establishes the framework for action while the micro-design choices determine who wins and who loses within it. Lowi's assertion that 'policies determine politics' is most accurate when applied to the operative content of the 'delivery package' rather than only to instrument types and policy objectives.

This operative content is a political product. Schneider and Ingram (1993, 1997), for example, demonstrated that the definition of the target population is one of the most politically consequential choices in the design process and this applies very much to the micro-level of policy specifications and calibrations. This choice shapes which groups receive benefits and which bear burdens, as well as how each group perceives the legitimacy of government action.

From a different angle, VanSickle-Ward (2014) empirically demonstrated that the level of specificity in statutory language is also a function of political conflict. In high-salience legislation, political fragmentation and interest group diversity create ambiguity, as vague language is deployed so that opposing actors can reach a compromise on details neither side is willing to concede. By contrast, in lower-profile legislation, the same conflict dynamics often yield extreme specificity, as actors with concentrated stakes draft precise provisions to secure favourable operative arrangements. In short, the politics of detail operates differently depending on visibility and intent, but always operates. Béland et al. (2018) further expand on this concept, suggesting that actors are not only mobilized around problems or ideational paradigms, but also around

specific instruments and their settings. They forms ‘instrument constituencies’, whose core interests are bound up with preserving or modifying not only policy tools but also their precise operative arrangements.

The most direct evidence that micro-level conflict is a systematic rather than residual political phenomenon, however, comes from research on administrative burdens. Herd and Moynihan (2019) demonstrate that the bureaucratic obstacles citizens encounter when accessing public programmes, such as complex registration requirements, documentation demands, mandatory waiting periods, and recurring re-certification rules, are often not unintended by-products of administrative complexity, but rather deliberate design choices through which political actors restrict or expand access to rights and services that they cannot or will not address openly at the macro-level. Eligibility criteria, compliance thresholds, the designation of implementing agencies, and monitoring requirements are the operative vocabulary through which these choices are encoded.

Chen et al. (2022) provide the methodological counterpart to this argument using an Ostrom-style Institutional Grammar to demonstrate that the composition of policy text—specifically, the distribution of deontic operators, conditions, and sanctions across a legislative instrument—reflects the intensity and direction of political conflict within the legislative process. Siddiki and Curley (2022) bring these ideas together by arguing that policy design, when considered as the operative content of instruments, constitutes a distinct and under-theorized domain of political activity, with its own actors, resources, and stakes.

The micro-design framework proposed in this volume provides the systematic vocabulary needed to observe, document, and compare this domain analytically, making visible a dimension of political conflict that existing frameworks have mentioned but consistently treated as secondary or technical even though it, in practice, often determines whether a formal reform becomes an operative reality or remains, as Lowi’s original formulation implies, a distribution of public authority settled in the fine print.

The political consequences of micro-design choices, however, also do not end at policy adoption. Rather, they extend forward in time, shaping the preferences, identities, and mobilization capacities of the populations that the policy governs. This, in turn, affects the political conditions under which the policy can later be reformed or dismantled.

While the policy feedback literature has extensively documented this dynamic (Mettler & Soss, 2004; Pierson, 1993), it too has rarely specified which design features generate which effects. But a micro-design framework provides this level of detail.

Pierson (1993), for example, demonstrated that policies produce two types of political effect: resource effects, which alter what actors possess and can do; and interpretive effects, which influence how actors perceive their relationship with the state. However, both effects are determined by operative choices rather than instrument labels. Mettler's (2005) comparison of the G.I. Bill and post-war tax expenditures in the United States is instructive: both transferred comparable material benefits, yet the G. I. Bill generated lasting civic engagement, whereas tax expenditures left recipients politically inert. The difference was not the formal instrument category, but rather the visibility calibration: one benefit was administered through direct, salient interaction with public agencies, while the other was invisible and buried in tax code mechanics.

Soss (1999) makes the same point from a different angle: recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children and Social Security Disability Insurance in the US held formally equivalent entitlements yet developed sharply different political orientations because the operative architectures of the two programmes (their authority structures, procedural demands, and discretionary practices) communicated opposing messages regarding the duties and benefits of citizenship and the legitimate realm of state power. In each case, it was the specific calibration choices concerning visibility, administrative burden, and the structure of discretionary authority that generated the political conflict these acts witnessed, not the programme category.

The micro-design framework set out in the remaining chapters of the book renders these choices observable and comparable by transforming the programme design, which the feedback literature has treated as a black box mediating between policy and politics, into an analytically tractable set of dimensions.

Focusing on the micro, operational, level is thus not a narrowing of policy analysis into administrative detail; rather it is a way of conducting policy analysis where its effects are most significant but have been least systematically examined. Political conflicts over policy are often not the result of broad ideological differences, but rather disagreements about how to achieve goals on the ground using the language of eligibility

thresholds, enforcement intensity, and the distribution of administrative burdens.

Stone (2002) offers a structural explanation for this: political actors routinely secure agreement on formal policy objectives by keeping goal language deliberately ambiguous. Conflicts that cannot be resolved at the level of stated goals are deferred to the operative layer (the specifications and calibrations that determine who is covered, the threshold at which they are covered, the enforcement regime they are subject to, and their appeal rights). This allows coalitions with incompatible distributional preferences to coexist under a shared rhetorical commitment and allow a bill to pass but with ‘the devil is in the details’. These conflicts can remain largely invisible as long as the micro-layer remains analytically opaque, and this opacity is a political product, not merely an analytical oversight. This opacity also undermines normative debate, as discussions of key topics such as equity, legitimacy, and accountability remain at a principled level only to find they lack institutional referents when a given design decides where burdens are placed, where discretion is concentrated, which feedback channels are opened or closed, and where the possibility of contest and redress is built in or foreclosed.

Making the micro-design analytically visible is thus useful not merely as a scholarly exercise, but also as a resource for improving the quality of policy design, helping diagnose why policies underperform and holding design choices accountable to the goals they claim to serve. This book aims to make that layer visible, so that it can be described, compared, and tracked as a systematic object of analysis accessible to scholars, practitioners, decision-makers, and evaluators alike.

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CHAPTER 3

A Multi-level Perspective on Policy Composition

Abstract The expectation of the superiority of a design approach to public policy-making is based on the expectation that a well-conceived, well-crafted, and well-executed policy design can drive effective policy performance and outcomes better than one which is not. From this point of view, accurately describing the components of policy at all levels, and their needs and prerequisites, is essential. However, while the literature on policy design has made great strides in assessing the more macro-level aspects of policy-making such as the contents, requisites, and impact of governance arrangements and policy paradigms, and the meso-level world of policy objectives and tools has received similar treatment and attention, it has tended not to examine very closely, or has actively dismissed, the relevance of micro-level of policies.

Keywords Policy calibrations · Policy specifications · Policy composition · Policy components · Policy elements · Policy tools · Policy instruments

INTRODUCTION: THINKING ABOUT POLICY COMPOSITION

Policy-making is a complex activity that involves many stages of the policy process, from agenda-setting to implementation and evaluation, and each of these activities contributes to policy content and execution. The design

of policy, however, is sometimes equated with only the formulation of policy alternatives and their adoption but it in fact extends far beyond the moment of formal decision. Solutions to policy problems do need to be developed systematically, however, and the way they are designed encompasses and influences many tasks involved in delivering services and affecting policy outcomes (Strokosch & Osborne, 2023).

The challenges associated with policy success and failure—programme implementation, policy solution feasibility, and how to maintain political legitimacy and support (McConnell, 2010)—need to be at the front of mind when policies are formulated and, as we have seen, are subjects of detailed scholarly investigation and learning from successful and failed past practices.

But policy scholars seeking better policies and policy-making are challenged to understand not only traditional questions, such as what drives successful or unsuccessful policy design efforts and content, but also whether and how the content of a design can influence policy outcomes in expected ways. Those responsible for implementing policies do not simply execute instructions; they also interpret and adapt them in response to the conditions they encounter. And in this sense, implementation does not begin where design ends; rather it is already prefigured in the choices that design encodes.

Problems in this process of both arriving at a workable design and seeing it put into practice are endemic and present considerable public management and implementation challenges. Some arise, of course, due to the poor understanding of policy content or context and can be thought of as policy errors, such as failing to learn from the experiences of others or learning the wrong lessons from them (Howlett & Cashore, 2009; Nair & Howlett, 2020; Radaelli & Dunlop, 2013). Others are more subtle and can involve the mis-calibration or mis-specification of programme elements.

As noted above, these latter subjects require careful thought and evaluation but have been examined largely in passing in the past by luminaries such as Eleanor Ostrom, Guy Peters, Peter Hall, and Lester Salamon. Their insights into this important dimension of policy designs have typically been glossed over in the mainstream policy sciences, however, and the significance of their work for real-world policy analysis and the creation and maintenance of policy success has been insufficiently appreciated. It is only recently that this pioneering work has begun to receive the attention it deserves, both in terms of better defining more precisely

what is the content of policies and their various design parameters: that is, which aspects of these elements can be configured, why, and how (Howlett et al., 2024).

Understanding the significance of this work requires a nuanced appreciation of the policy elements or components of policies (Cashore & Howlett, 2007), and this chapter maps the micro-level of policy by situating it within the multi-level structure of policy content (namely, the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels). It also identifies two analytical tendencies that have consistently stressed the macro- and meso-levels, thereby impoverishing the study of the third.

CONCEPTUALIZING THE STRUCTURE OF POLICY GOALS AND MEANS AT DIFFERENT LEVELS OF ANALYSIS AND APPLICATION

There has been a renaissance of policy design studies in the policy sciences recently, an analytical approach to policy-making that seeks to better understand and specify the requisites of effective policy-making at all levels of policy analysis and performance (Peters et al., 2018).

The policy design approach characterizes effective policy-making as a process in which policy formulators base their decisions on present and past knowledge, active learning, and ultimately the deployment of coherent and congruent policy tools capable of attaining policy goals not just in theory but in practice (Bendor et al., 2009; Howlett 2014, 2019; Howlett et al., 2014; Radaelli & Dunlop, 2013; Sidney, 2007).

Such processes are contrasted negatively in the policy design literature with those which take place without such an orientation, which, for example, can arise as the result of purely political dynamics (for example, partisan/ideological conflict or legislative bargaining) or when policy choices are heavily influenced by the unrecognized or ignored lock-in effects of previous policy decisions.

The design approach thus underscores the expectation that the characteristics of a policy design, when conceived and executed well in terms of both process and content, can drive more effective policy performance and successful policy outcomes (Capano et al., 2020; Schaffrin et al., 2014, 2015; Schmidt & Sewerin 2019).

From this point of view, accurately describing the components of policy at all levels, and their needs and prerequisites, is essential. However, while

the literature on policy design has made great strides in assessing the more macro-level aspects of policy-making such as the impact of the contents, capacity requisites, and impact of governance arrangements and policy paradigms on policy coherence (Hogan & Howlett, 2015; Peters & Pierre, 2016), and upon the meso-level world of policy objectives and tools (Howlett, 2022; Petek et al., 2021), as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, it has tended not to examine very closely or to dismiss the significance of the micro-level calibrations and specifications of policies.

There are two principal reasons for this inadequacy. The first is related to an over-emphasis in the policy literature on the ‘deterministic’ nature of macro-level ideational and institutional constructs, which are often asserted to determine the content of more meso and micro-level policy elements, thus rendering the latter epiphenomenal or not worthy of further study in themselves (Sewerin et al., 2022). The second is in many ways the reverse of the first. This is the tendency of many observers to focus exclusively on process rather than outcomes, or to conflate the two, so that a change in a processual aspect of policy-making is equated with a change in output and in outcomes, without due regard to exactly what changes, if any, have actually occurred to the policy itself on the ground when, for example, a new report is written or policy statement issued.

Despite operating from opposing directions, both tendencies converge on the same analytical blind spot: the neglect of the specific operational content of policy at the micro-level. The first dismisses this content as a derivative of higher-level forces, while the second renders it invisible by substituting process indicators for substantive policy content.

The net impact of both failures is largely the same in that they lead to the neglect of the detailed components and levels of micro-level policy elements, thus missing important potential linkages between different aspects of a policy and its outcomes.

In order to help overcome this problem, in recent years work has been undertaken to clarify the dependent variable in the question of what is ‘public policy’. Among other things, this work has drawn increasing attention to the significance of micro-level policy components in driving policy change (Capano & Howlett, 2024; Cashore & Howlett, 2007; Howlett & Cashore, 2009; Howlett et al., 2024; Sewerin et al. 2022). This body of work has advanced understanding of many key aspects of policy-making and policy design by looking into exactly what comprises a policy and how

the various components that make up a policy—goals, tools, objectives, settings—fit together.

Siddiki and Curley (2022), for example, found this to be the case in their comprehensive survey of the design literature, identifying a structural gap between research on the process of designing policy and research on the content of policy outputs. Their analysis showed that neither area of research had the vocabulary to connect the design process to policy outputs at the level at which important distributional impacts and choices are encoded. They specifically called for diagnostic frameworks that can move beyond just describing policy features to systematically identifying how design choices can shape policy trajectories and outcomes in specific ways and directions.

The working assumption of this body of literature is that policies are composed of several different and distinct parts which interact with each other in the effort to change target behaviour and alter a given situation on the ground towards one in which government aims and ambitions are, or can be, achieved (Capano & Howlett, 2021; Howlett & Cashore 2009). ‘Effectiveness’ is typically assessed by judgements about how well these policy components are synchronized and coordinated in attaining the objective(s) of government (Peters et al., 2018).

Clarifying the differences among the components of a policy is thus key to understanding how these interactions occur and how the different kinds of policy elements interrelate and provides a significant indicator of the likelihood of a policy succeeding or failing.

MODELLING POLICY COMPOSITION TO INFORM POLICY DESIGN

Although this matching of policy elements is an essential part of policy-making, it remains only imperfectly understood in theory and often unrealized in practice (Howlett & Cashore, 2009).

Most studies of policy composition and decomposition, for example, rely on Peter Hall’s (1993) conception of policy content and its subsequent modifications by Cashore and Howlett (2007).

Hall’s original idea in investigating short- and long-term changes in macroeconomic policy-making in Britain and other countries was to argue that these movements could be better understood if policies were divided into three components: *policy goals, tools, and tool calibrations*. Thus, a fiscal policy, for example, can be thought of as having a policy goal such

as inflation control, which would be realized through a set of policy tools such as balanced budgeting or otherwise altering government expenditures and revenues. And those budget-balancing efforts would have their own ‘calibrations’, such as removing or altering specific tax deductions or cutting specific government services, expected to achieve policy goals.

However, as Cashore and Howlett (2007) pointed out, both these policy aims and means exist at three different levels: the ‘macro’ level of abstract or general goals and governance arrangements or preferences; the ‘meso’ level of policy objectives and tools; and the ‘micro’-level of policy targets and policy calibrations. Thus, fiscal or monetary policy goals can be further specified, for example, as an aim to reduce the inflation rate by X amount over Y years or decrease deficits by X amount over some specific period. Similarly, policy tools and calibrations are embedded in general governance preferences—such as market-based arrangements or civil society involvement—which are a critical component of policy-making and policy implementation.

Other works in this vein have since clarified and provided examples of these six different policy components, though not evenly. Thus, at the macro-level, studies have confirmed Hall’s finding that at the most abstract level, policy goals often exist within policy ‘paradigms’ that are more or less coherent bundles of aims—such as, in the case of monetary and fiscal policy, which Hall examined, in the form of Keynesian or Monetarist thinking (Hogan & Howlett, 2015). And it is true that at this level, policy designs concern themselves with clarifying and applying the general ideas and goals behind policy interventions in specific policy sectors.

For example, in education policy, the sectoral general goals could be to increase equity in access, differentiate skills, and align with economic needs. In the environmental sector, these goals can range from strong environmental protection to a major emphasis on economic development. In energy policy, sectoral goals could be national energy independence or low prices. At the same time, however, these sectoral policy goals are paired with governance choices regarding the general instrumental principles (for example, state-based instruments, market-based instruments, and collaborative governance-based instruments) that can then be translated into choices regarding the general type of meso-level policy instruments to be adopted.

Others have also shown how these overarching goals are concretized in different kinds of realizable ‘objectives’ ranging from functional ones to

those which telegraph more aspirational or symbolic aims (Dunn 2004; Petek et al., 2021). Policy design at this meso-level must decide, for example, between programmatic goals such as increased decentralization of families' choices in education, decreasing greenhouse gas emissions in environmental policy, and diversifying national resources in energy policy.

These programmatic objectives are paired with the substantial policy instruments (e.g. regulation, subsidies, financial incentives, information, public enterprises, etc.) which actually execute policy on-the-ground. For example, in education, financial instruments such as vouchers may be introduced to increase families' freedom of school choice; in environmental policy, the regulative instrument of technical standards can be used to limit greenhouse gas emissions; or in energy policy, the establishment of a national public company can be adopted to facilitate an increase in energy autonomy.

However, both these meso components of policy design must also be operationalized at the micro-level before they can be implemented. This means that, in terms of the micro-dimension of goals, it is necessary to define a target to be reached, along with its related behavioural dimensions. And in terms of policy means what kinds of 'settings' will configure an instrument also need to be specified (Hood, 1983; Salamon, 2002).

This three-level model utilized here is set out in Table 3.1.

The taxonomy set out in Table 3.1 suggests that all three levels should receive equal analytical attention. However, the literature has not honoured this implication. While the macro- and meso-levels have attracted sustained and sophisticated study, the micro-level has not. Only a very few studies have actually turned their attention to what Hall termed 'first order' or micro-level policy dimensions.

The following section examines the reasons for this and its consequences.

THE NEGLECT OF THE MICRO-DIMENSION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

As we have seen, most scholarly attention, somewhat inadvertently, has emphasized the importance of changes in big ideas or the general conception of the ways of governing policies (as testified by the extensive literature on governance) in explaining policy content and change dynamics.

Table 3.1 Taxonomy of policy design content

<i>Content</i>			
	<i>Sectoral-level (macro)</i>	<i>Programme-level (meso)</i>	<i>Specific measures-level (micro)</i>
Focus	Aims	High-level policy goals What general types of ideas govern policy design?	Policy goal targets (Specifications) What are the specific on-the-ground requirements of policy design?
	Instruments	Instrument logic What general instrumental principles guide policy design?	Design of instrumental packages (Calibrations) What are the ways to deliver instruments?

Source Our elaboration from Cashore and Howlett (2007)

Indeed, many works have argued that the existing institutional and governance order can shape general tool preferences; for example, whether the central actors in implementing policies will be public or private, and how they interact with government in this process—collaboratively or under contract—and result in distinct tool preferences or ‘policy styles’ (Howlett & Tosun, 2019; Kekez et al., 2020).

And of course, many works also exist at the meso-level dealing with the merits and demerits of specific kinds of policy tools (such as regulations, subsidies, and/or moral suasion)—and the governing resources (information, treasure, authority, or organization) on which they rely (Hood, 1983; Hood & Margetts, 2007; Vedung, 1998).

This has been very important in areas such as education policy and health policy, for example, where improved quality and efficiency have been systemic meso-level goals pursued by policymakers within fee-for-service models, while the attainment of these kinds of goals has focused the activities of policymakers and implementers upon pairing them with the adoption of policy tools and governance arrangements focused on aspects of policy-making such as accountability, competition, and decentralization (Gorard et al., 2003; Hannaway & Woodroffe, 2003; Toth, 2021).

But while it is clear to even the most novice observer that these meso-level choices require micro-level calibration—for example, determining the size of a subsidy, or the rules for its eligibility—surprisingly little work on this subject exists in the policy literature (Acciai & Capano, 2021; Capano & Howlett, 2020).

The results of this neglect of the micro-dimensions of policy design are double-sided. On the theoretical side, it means there is a lack of deep understanding of how policies are actually designed, and thus it is difficult to assess the performance of any given design. Thus, for example, when performance funding is introduced in steering a university system, what makes the difference in terms of affecting the behaviour of universities is not the instrument itself but the way in which it is micro-designed (what percentage of the public funding will be attributed, through which kind of evaluation, and so on). Or when national railways are privatized, what makes the difference in terms of performance is often not the privatization in itself but the rules of privatization (those rules establishing how many private companies the national service can be sold to, the minimal requirement of service that the new private companies are asked to deliver, its share structure, and other such criteria).

The lack of a micro-analytical perspective prevents the development not only of a clear grasp of this kind of content of the policy but also of the reasons for the behaviour of the actors involved in the policy-making process (Petit & Tedds, 2026).

This has serious consequences on the practical side, as many of the key questions facing decision-makers and administrators, such as how much to spend on a particular programme and how best to do so, or how to design a privatization that can work in terms of quality for citizens, remain little studied and outside the ambit of many policy advisors (Verhoest et al., 2026). But these are, of course, precisely the questions that matter the most in everyday policy-making, which commonly centres on adjusting the operational details of policy goals and means rather than changing overall goals or altering governance arrangements.

Inadequate answers to these questions also make it difficult to gauge policy performance, which is measured by the policy's real impact on society and is also a key concern for policymakers and practitioners (Dunlop et al., 2022). Furthermore, the lack of focus on the micro-dimensions of policy design overlooks the real picture of what is at stake for policymakers. Indeed, very often, political battles, partisan dynamics, and conflicts among interest groups explode exactly when the specification of goals or the calibration of instruments, such as the size of a subsidy or who will receive it must be decided. A better understanding of the micro-dimension of policy design can also help highlight this political dimension (Capano & Toth, 2023).

CONCLUSION: THE PRICE OF IGNORING THE MICRO-LEVEL

This chapter shows how the large literature on policy-making has focused primarily upon the macro and meso dimensions of policy design. The macro dimension contemplates general trends, changes in the main systemic and sectoral goals, and general instrumental principles (hierarchy, market, and network) that have been considered to characterize the main governance shifts in the last few decades.

Macro-level design content is organized around general sectoral goals, such as equity in access to education, environmental protection, or national energy independence, paired with broad instrumental preferences regarding the roles of state, market, and civil society actors. These choices

frame the overall direction of policy without yet specifying how goals are to be achieved on the ground.

At the meso-level, programmatic objectives, such as decentralizing school choice, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, or promoting energy diversification, are paired with specific instrument types (regulation, subsidies, financial incentives, public enterprises, and so on) within this macro-level context. These meso dimensions include a special focus not only on policy instruments as a whole but especially their types or ‘genre’ (Hood, 1983; Howlett, 2005; Ingram & Schneider, 1990; Linder & Peters, 1989, 1998; McDonnell & Elmore, 1987; Salamon, 2002; Vedung, 1998). This includes the characteristics of their interactions in the current set of adopted policy mixes (Cejudo & Michel, 2021; Givoni, 2014; Howlett, 2018; Howlett & Rayner, 2013).

Although these meso-level decisions mark the beginning of translating macro goals into implementable policy choices, however, they remain insufficient for determining how policies actually operate in practice. The goals and instruments identified at the meso-level must be further operationalized before they can be applied on the ground.

In terms of goals, this means setting a specific target along with its temporal and substantive parameters. In terms of instruments, this involves calibrating each tool according to specific operational attributes, including specifying who is targeted, what resources are allocated, who is responsible for implementation, and how compliance is enforced, so that the instrument can plausibly generate its intended effects.

Nor is the relationship between levels a one-way street. There exists empirical evidence that changes at the micro-level of policy design can, in the medium-to-long run, drive changes at higher levels (Beland et al., 2016; Dittmar, 2014; Howlett & del Rio, 2015; Howlett & Rayner, 2013; Howlett et al., 2024; Oliver & Pemberton, 2004) as occurs, for example, when changes in welfare payments reduce the overall general level of social protection and undermine the welfare state, whether this larger goal was intended or not. This fits with the idea that policymakers can intervene strategically at the micro-dimension (Capano, 2019) and that such interventions can prove consequential well beyond their initial micro-level scope.

The following chapters examine the insights from the existing sparse literature on this topic, including the work of Salamon, Ostrom, Linder, and Peters, as well as more recent micro-design scholarship. They also assess how their insights can be built upon to create a systematic analytical framework which can help move the study of this important dimension of public policies and policy-making forward.

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CHAPTER 4

The Micro-Dimensions of Policy Design: The Classical Foundations

Abstract Many policy problems are linked to poor conceptualization and understanding of policy content on the part of policymakers. As the previous chapter has shown, this is especially true with respect to the micro-level aspects of policies; the level at which goals and policy instruments are concretely implemented in the form of specific policy targets and tool calibrations. Although generally neglected in the literature, these latter subjects have been examined in the past by scholars such as Elinor Ostrom, Guy Peters, Stephen Linder, and Lester Salamon who established a foundation for their further consideration and analysis. Their insights into this level of policy-making have been insufficiently appreciated, however. This chapter discusses the usefulness of this work in developing a model of micro-level policy specifications that reconciles and incorporates their insights to provide a concise and useful description of the policy components visible at this level of policy-making and to assess their influence. It evaluates these classic contributions, identifies the analytical gaps they left open, and establishes the building blocks for a more systematic framework of micro-design analysis.

Keywords Policy calibrations · Policy specifications · Policy composition · Policy components · Policy elements · Policy tools · Policy instruments

INTRODUCTION: THE NEED TO STUDY THE MICRO-LEVEL OF POLICY-MAKING IN ORDER TO IMPROVE BOTH POLICY THEORY AND PRACTICE

Understanding how policies work in practice, as earlier chapters have shown, requires more than knowing which instruments a government has chosen or what its declared goals are. It is also necessary to know how those instruments are configured, who they target, what they demand in terms of resources and treasure, how they are enforced, what monitoring arrangements are in place for them, and what the consequences are for non-compliance with their wishes. This is the micro-level of policy design, at which the match between policy intention and effect is most directly determined.

As noted above, the neglect of the micro-level is not accidental but rather the result of systematic biases in the field towards large, more macro-level explanations for policy change and development. It reflects the gravitational pull of macro-level explanations where much of the most influential work in policy research—from Hall's paradigm framework to Sabatier's advocacy coalition model—locates the primary drivers of policy content and impact at the level of ideas, belief systems, and institutional or governance configurations. From this perspective, the specific micro-level calibration of instruments and the precise definition of target populations and other similar specifications appear as consequences of higher-level forces rather than as analytically autonomous choices worthy of independent study. This bias has been bolstered by a second tendency to treat implementation as a separate domain from policy formulation and decision-making—something that happens to a policy after it has been designed and whose impact is explained by bureaucratic criteria such as administrative capacity, organizational culture, and street-level discretion—rather than being a central part of the design's content itself. Together these tendencies have produced a field of policy studies that is sophisticated about the macro-architecture of policy and increasingly attentive to the implementation process, yet curiously silent about the operative layer that connects the two.

The costs of this silence are both theoretical and practical, and more significant than is commonly acknowledged. Theoretically, without analytical tools for describing and comparing operative content, the field is unable to answer some of its most important questions with the necessary precision. For example, has a given policy changed, or has only

its label been updated while its operative content remains intact? Or why do two programmes featuring the same general instrument type produce systematically different outcomes across jurisdictions if their administrative capacity and ability are much the same?

These are not marginal puzzles. They lie at the heart of comparative policy analysis, the study of policy learning and change, and important issues such as the evaluation of policy success and failure. However, they cannot be answered at the level of paradigms or instrument typologies. A finer-grained vocabulary is required, one that can delve into the operative content of instruments and objectives and describe, with analytical precision, the choices that have been made, how they cohere or not, and their distributional consequences.

The practical costs of neglect of these micro-dimensions and questions are equally significant. The everyday reality of governance is not primarily a contest over paradigms or instrument categories. Outside of critical moments when policy trajectories change, politicians, senior officials, and legislative drafters spend relatively little time debating whether to regulate or subsidize, or whether to pursue universalism or targeting in the abstract (Vesely, 2024). They spend considerably more time, and political capital, on negotiating aspects of policies such as thresholds for public services and subsidies, determining the stringency of sanctions, deciding who bears the burden of proof in compliance procedures, or distributing discretionary authority among implementing agencies and actors. These micro-design choices are the ones that most directly affect the practical meaning and impact of a policy.

This chapter maps the existing literature on micro-level policy components with two related aims. First, it demonstrates that the field has already produced significant foundational insights into this dimension, albeit in fragmented and disconnected form, which can be brought into dialogue with one another and integrated into a common analytical framework. The second aim is to identify precisely what a more systematic framework would need to provide what existing contributions do not, namely a shared vocabulary, a coherent set of dimensions, and a logic of operationalization that allows micro-design choices to be observed, coded, and compared across instruments, sectors, and national contexts.

The chapter examines the foundational contributions of Salamon, Linder, Peters, and Ostrom, who each addressed the micro-level from a different angle, leaving behind a set of partially developed concepts which

are very useful in this task. Chapter 5 then turns to a more recent wave of micro-design scholarship which has begun to consolidate these insights.

ANALYSING MICRO-LEVEL POLICY COMPONENTS: THE NEED FOR A BETTER FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

As set out in the previous chapter, it is possible to describe six component elements of public policies which can be distinguished according to whether they relate to policy goals or policy means, and at what level of abstraction they occur (Cashore & Howlett, 2007) (see Table 3.1).

As we have seen, some elements of this matrix have received a great deal of attention while others have not. Based on this work, in recent decades the literature on policy design has made great strides in assessing some levels and aspects of policy-making but has largely ignored others. Work on the macro-level aspects of policy-making, such as governance arrangements and policy paradigms and upon the meso-level world of policy objectives and tools, for example, has received a great deal of study and has aided the understanding of what kinds of goals and instruments exist at these levels as well as the impact of governance arrangements and policy tools choices on policies and policy-making and vice-versa (Capano et al., 2015; Cejudo & Michel, 2021; Hogan & Howlett, 2015; Hood, 1983; Ingram & Schneider 1990; Howlett, 2005; Petek et al., 2021, 2022; Vedung, 1998).

At the macro-level, for example, where policy design content is concerned with the general ideas and goals of designing policy in specific policy sectors, many works exist dealing with topics such as educational or health policy paradigms (Hogan & Howlett, 2015) or governance arrangements like collaborative or market-based institutions and rules (Capano, 2020; Considine & Lewis, 1999; Peters & Pierre, 1998) and their impact on government preferences and their choices of policy arrangements.

The importance of this level of policy content is clear. At the macro-level, policy-making involves debates and discussions around general concepts and objectives governing particular policy areas, such as the merits and demerits of equitable access to education, environmental protection, or national energy independence. These are paired with broad choices regarding the general instrumental principles (state-based, market-based, or collaborative governance) that must subsequently be

translated into more specific instrument choices and policy objectives (Howlett & Ramesh, 2016).

Programmatic objectives at the meso-level (such as increasing the decentralization of school choice, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, or diversifying energy sources) must be paired with specific instruments such as regulations, subsidies and other financial incentives, information campaigns, and bureaucratic agencies or public enterprises (Hood, 1983; Howlett, 2009). Each objective must be matched with an appropriate policy instrument, as occurs when, for example, financial instruments like vouchers in education, technical standards in environmental policy, or public enterprises in energy policy are deployed (Hood, 1983; Howlett, 2000; Salamon, 2002). The range and categories of instruments available at this level have also been the subject of extensive study (Bemelmans-Videc et al., 1998; Capano & Engeli, 2022; Hood, 1983; Salamon, 2002).

Thus both the macro- and meso-levels of policies and policy-making have received sustained attention in the policy literature (Hogan & Howlett, 2015, 2022; Petek et al., 2021; Peters & Pierre, 2016). However, the meso components of policy design must also be operationalized before they can be implemented, and it is precisely this micro-level that needs further study and elaboration.

In practice, every macro goal and meso instrument must be effectuated through a series of micro-level decisions concerning eligibility, conditions, duration, sanctions, reporting duties, exemptions, and support measures amongst others. This observation, and gap in the literature, highlights the need for a better framework for analysing micro-level policy components: without an explicit vocabulary and structure for these kinds of decisions, they remain analytically invisible, even though they are empirically crucial (Fernández-i-Marín et al., 2021; Howlett et al., 2024).

As was noted earlier, it is often the case in the policy literature that the micro-level of policy calibrations and specifications is treated simply as a residual space—an area where implementation details, administrative routines, and technical norms are acknowledged but assumed to stem mechanically from earlier macro and meso-level decisions. Thus a decision to add more police or patrols in support of a policy intended to make streets safer by reducing violent crime may be thought of simply as a technical exercise rather than one that has significant budgetary, political, and spill-over aspects into areas such as neighbourhood desirability, housing preferences, and retail activity as well as its own logic of

community policing and geo-spatial analysis of crime patterns, victims and perpetrators.

As the contributions reviewed later in this chapter suggest this category is in no way simply residual or the subject of mere technical deliberation. Rather, it comprises a complex layer of normative, organizational, and behavioural choices that are neither trivial nor automatic (Petek et al., 2022; Shaffrin et al., 2014; Siddiki & Curley, 2022). It is precisely at this level that abstract goals and chosen instruments are translated into the rules, procedures, and resource allocations that determine the actions of frontline actors from the public to police or public servants, and it is where citizens and residents actually experience and debate both what is a ‘policy’ and what should be and how effective, or not, it may be (Capano & Howlett, 2020).

Thus, for example, it is necessary to precisely define a target if it is to be reached, and the kinds of specifications required to achieve a goal must be carefully considered and selected. Dealing with these micro-dimensions of goals and tools—that is, policy specifications or goal ‘targets’ and instrument ‘calibrations’—is essential to implement policies on the ground and the choices made at this level are often the key to policy success or failure. The micro-level is where abstract goals meet concrete administrative capacities, and where political compromises are translated into operational rules and standard operating procedures that may look, but are not, de-politicized.

The following sections demonstrate that, despite being scattered and frequently overlooked in the literature of the policy sciences, some existing work has identified several aspects of this micro-level of policy-making world that can serve as the foundation for a framework for identifying and analysing the content of micro-level policy components and their effects. Developing a more systematic and comparable framework of micro-design requires building on these foundations and this is what this chapter and the succeeding one seek to do (Capano & Toth, 2023; Dunlop et al., 2024; Grohmann & Feindt, 2024).

FOUNDATIONAL WORKS ON MICRO-LEVEL POLICY COMPONENTS: SALAMON, LINDER & PETERS, AND OSTROM

Foundational contributions to the study of micro-level policy components originate from three distinct intellectual traditions followed by three different sets of pioneers in policy studies writing in the 1980s and 1990s. Each tradition approaches the operative content of policy from a different angle and uses different analytical tools and accords either a more important or less significant reading of the import and impact of the micro-dimensions they examined.

Despite their differences, however, what unites these traditions is the shared intuition that broad instrument categories and general institutional arrangements are adjusted in multiple ways, and that the consequences of these adjustments are significant in and of themselves and cannot simply be inferred from or reduced to the functional or technical aspects of the instruments and objectives they operationalize.

The first and most directly relevant contribution is that of Lester Salamon (2001, 2002), who argued that the tools tradition had in the past focused too heavily on instrument selection and too little on what he termed the ‘critical design features’ that determine whether an instrument can function effectively in a given context.

Salamon proposed four main dimensions along which policy tools could be calibrated: *coercion*, *automaticity*, *directness*, and *visibility*.

The first dimension, *coercion*, refers to the degree to which a tool shapes the behavioural autonomy of its targets, from purely voluntary arrangements to mandatory obligations backed by sanctions. A government reorganization, for instance, can force a restructuring of policy networks in ways that merely offering interest group funding would not or choose to back-up threats of fines or penalties with stricter or less onerous oversight and enforcement.

The second dimension highlighted by Salamon concerned what he termed ‘*automaticity*’. That is, whether or not a good or service is provided ‘manually’ or is more or less automated. Thus, for example, supplying food stamps or welfare payments can be done ‘by hand’ in the sense that applicants must arrive at a welfare office and physically collect stamps, or their food payments can be automatically deposited monthly to their bank accounts or credit cards. Similarly tax and other forms of reporting can be done electronically or more laboriously by hand.

The third key dimension in his work was related to '*directness*', by which he meant the proximity of implementation to the final 'customer', which he argued could also be controlled or manipulated by government. So, in some cases, for example, a license for driving can be extended directly to a user, while in other cases, a license to operate a mobile phone network is instead extended through many intermediaries between the radio spectrum owner and the actual service provider.

And the fourth key dimension was '*visibility*' or the extent to which any specific government activity was known or obvious to the public. Thus, for example, the extension of low tax rates for some kinds of investments or accelerated depreciation of capital equipment are much less visible forms of subsidy to business than are straightforward cash grants or permissive regulations.

Taken together, these four dimensions constituted the first systematic attempt to describe the operative content of policy instruments as a distinct subject of analysis, separate from the question of which instrument type has been chosen or which objective or goal was sought.

Stephen Linder and B. Guy Peters extended this line of inquiry at around the same time, proposing eight dimensions they argued were used in practice by decision-makers and others to assess the relevance and usefulness of specific kinds of policy instruments to policy-making. Some of these were very close to the four identified by Salamon, but others identified additional dimensions of government choice and control. These included *complexity of operation, level of public visibility, adaptability across uses, level of intrusiveness, relative costliness, reliance on markets, chances of failure, and precision of targeting* (Linder & Peters, 1989).

In somewhat later work, however, Peters (2000) reduced this number to seven and altered their names and content so that they became: *directness, visibility, capital/labour intensity, automaticity or level of administration required, level of universality, reliance on persuasion versus enforcement, and their 'forcing vs enabling' nature* (39). That is, drawing a sharp distinction between 'market-based' and 'state-based' tools was ultimately found to be less useful in dealing with the micro-components of policies than thinking about these aspects as part of a more macro 'mode of governance', while 'chances of failure' was also found not to be a property which 'adheres' to an instrument in itself.

The other difference between the two lists developed by Peters and Linder is the several sub-elements they added to the original 'level of intrusiveness' criteria. If these are re-bundled into the main category,

however, that leaves five main instrument characteristics or calibration components in Peters 2000 summary. This list then becomes quite similar to Salamon's, highlighting automaticity, visibility, and intrusiveness and adding cost and precision of targeting in place of Salamon's somewhat less precise notion of 'directedness'. Each of these criteria has different implications for implementation feasibility, political acceptability, and distributional consequences (Linder & Peters, 1991).

What remains consistent across both of Linder and Peter's versions, however, is the core insight that meso-level instrument choice is not a single decision but rather a bundle of related micro-level design choices made after or while a meso-level instrument choice was debated or made.

The third foundational contribution comes from a different intellectual tradition and was offered by Economics Nobel-prize winner Elinor Ostrom who was less concerned with instrument choices than with how administrative, and especially regulatory, arrangements needed to specify several 'targets' and rules, both in terms of meeting the goals or objectives to be sought through their creation and deployment and the specification of who would implement them.

These rules were intended to indicate what policymakers should take into consideration when designing a policy, but unlike Salamon, and Linder, and Peters, who focused on policy tools, Ostrom's focus was very much on the 'who' question or agency. That is, who is expected to do what in the realization of those goals and objectives. She set out a set of rules for creating the institutions needed to implement policies encompassing both who is targeted by policy action and what they are expected to do (Dunlop et al., 2022; Koski & Siddiki, 2021; Siddiki et al., 2011; Weible & Carter, 2015).

Ostrom outlined seven such 'design rules' (2005, 2010) which she argued were always needed for the creation of any regulatory institutions. These were Position, Boundary, Choice, Aggregation, Information, Payoff, and Scope rules. The component of each set of rules and their purpose is set out in Table 4.1. Together, these were intended to delimit the characteristics of key actors and their interactions needed in any implementation arena but can also be seen as establishing the basic content of the micro-level of specifications of policy goals and objectives.

That is, the specifications of policy goals at the micro-level can be seen to be related to the ways in which policy goals are operationalized in terms of the target of the intervention (whose behaviours are expected to change), the expected outcome (the indicator), and the time

Table 4.1 Ostrom’s rules for regulatory institutions

1.	<i>Boundary rules</i> that specify how actors were to be chosen to enter or leave these positions;
2.	<i>Position rules</i> that specify a set of positions and how many actors hold each one;
3.	<i>Choice rules</i> that specify which actions are assigned to an actor in a position;
4.	<i>Information rules</i> that specify channels of communication among actors and what information must, may, or must not be shared;
5.	<i>Scope rules</i> that specify the outcomes that could be affected;
6.	<i>Aggregation rules</i> (such as majority or unanimity rules) that specify how the decisions of actors at a node were to be mapped to intermediate or final outcomes; and
7.	<i>Payoff rules</i> that specify how benefits and costs were to be distributed to actors in positions

Source Ostrom (2010)

frame (the period in which the intervention should achieve the expected outcome). Her distinction between ‘rules-in-form’—more general macro and meso-level preferences—and ‘rules-in-use’—more specific, on-the-ground measures—captures, at its core, an effort to overcome the same gap between declared policy intent and operative design content that motivates this book.

Ostrom’s framework has subsequently been developed and extended through what is often referred to as an Institutional Grammar approach to the analysis of policy documents and regulations (Frantz & Siddiki, 2022). This approach systematically operationalizes her concepts, allowing them to be applied to the assessment of policy content across a wide range of domains and jurisdictions (Dunlop et al., 2022).

As this brief overview shows, these classic contributions are united by the idea that broad instruments or institutional arrangements can be ‘tuned’ in multiple ways and that these adjustments have consequences. Salamon and Linder & Peters conceptualize this tuning primarily in terms of instrument properties such as coercion, automaticity, intrusiveness, visibility, cost, and targeting, while Ostrom does so in terms of policy targets and actor positions. In all of these writings, however, the micro-level is where the causal mechanisms connecting policy intent to outcome are determined.

However, these early typologies and lists of criteria remain largely disconnected from one another and from the broader policy design literature. There is currently no widely accepted, single framework that

integrates these insights concerning instrument calibrations, rule configurations, and administrative provisions into a coherent representation of micro-design features and requisites, and the turn-of-the-millennium-era insights of these three sets of scholars remain often unread or unused by most contemporary policy scholars. There is still not even a shared vocabulary with which to compare how similar instruments and goals are specified and calibrated across sectors and countries and this fragmentation is one of the main reasons why micro-level design issues have remained analytically marginal despite their practical importance (Dunlop et al., 2022; Fernández-i-Marín et al., 2021).

WHAT THE FOUNDATIONAL CONTRIBUTIONS LEFT OPEN: THE CASE FOR A NEW RESEARCH ORIENTATION

The contributions reviewed above nevertheless form the intellectual basis for a serious analysis of micro-level policy design going forward. In particular, they establish three key points: first, that operative choices at this level matter; second, that the components of instruments and goals can be systematically described along multiple dimensions; and third, that the rules governing actor positions and interactions are as consequential as the formal goals and instrument types that a policy declares. These are significant achievements, and it would be a mistake to underestimate them.

However, these foundational authors also left a few important analytical problems unresolved. These problems also help explain why micro-design research has remained on the periphery of the policy sciences for so long, and why a new wave of scholarship has only recently begun to address the issue more directly.

The first problem is one of scope. The classical contributions focused almost exclusively on the calibration side of micro-design—the properties of instruments and the rules governing compliance—and with the partial exception of Ostrom said relatively little about the specification side, such as defining target populations, identifying expected outcomes in measurable terms, and setting time frames within which interventions are expected to produce results.

Ostrom's framework comes closest to addressing these questions, but even her rule typology is primarily oriented towards institutional compliance rather than the systematic description of policy specifications as

objects of design in their own right. The result is a body of knowledge that can describe in some detail how instrument operate once deployed but which offers limited guidance on how this relates to what the instrument is designed to achieve and for whom.

The second problem is one of integration. The frameworks developed by Salamon, Linder and Peters, and Ostrom were developed independently at different points in time, in response to different empirical issues, and within different disciplinary conversations. While they are not incompatible, they have not been brought into dialogue with one another in a way that allows their insights to be combined. There is also no agreed logic of operationalization, that can allow micro-design choices to be coded and systematically compared. This absence of integration is not merely an academic inconvenience; it is a structural obstacle to the development of cumulative knowledge about how operational choices shape policy performance (Dunlop et al., 2022; Fernández-i-Marín et al., 2021; Petek et al., 2022).

The third problem is one of connection. None of the classical frameworks establish an explicit analytical link between micro-design choices and policy outcomes, policy change, or the distributional politics of the design process. Salamon's dimensions, for example, describe instrument properties without specifying how different configurations of these properties produce different performance trajectories. And Ostrom's rules identify the operative conditions for institutional success, but do not provide tools for comparing how different configurations of these rules affect areas such as the distribution of costs and benefits among target groups. Linder and Peters (1989, 1998) identify design attributes but without systematically connecting them to the political dynamics through which those attributes are chosen and contested.

CONCLUSION: FROM FRAGMENTED INSIGHTS TO A SYSTEMATIC FRAMEWORK

The classical contributions reviewed in this chapter collectively demonstrate that the micro-level of policy design is neither trivial nor derivative. And they show that it can be described systematically along multiple dimensions with the rules governing the positions and interactions of actors being as important as the formal goals and types of instruments a policy embodies. While a significant achievement, the three problems of scope, integration, and connection identified in the preceding section

reveal that, taken together, these contributions leave a systematic gap between the findings of micro-design research and the requirements of a rigorous analytical framework able to guide practice.

This gap has practical as well as scholarly consequences. Questions about whether a radical policy change is necessary to achieve a significant shift in outcomes or whether a partial recalibration might suffice, for example, depend on an understanding of precisely what a policy intervention entails beyond a general statement of intent (Sewerin et al., 2022). Without this understanding, the field produces explanations and predictions concerning policy performance that are broadly correct, yet imprecise in precisely the most important operative details. This leaves practitioners without adequate guidance on the choices that determine whether a policy can work as expected that they can apply in their own work (Capano & Howlett, 2020; Dunlop et al., 2022).

The absence of a shared logic of operationalization also means that the insights of Salamon (2001, 2002), Salamon and Lund (1989), Linder and Peters (1989, 1998), and Ostrom (2005, 2010) remain incompatible with many of the more recent contributions, such as those of Schaffrin et al. (2014) and Capano and Toth (2023) discussed in the following chapter which examine specific pathways and trajectories of policy change. This is not because they contradict one another, but because no common vocabulary exists to facilitate dialogue between them.

The imbalance between understandings of calibrations and specifications found in this work is also important because they are co-constitutive dimensions of any operative policy arrangement; neither is analytically prior to the other, and both require an understanding of each other if micro-level policy activities and effects are to be fully comprehended (Capano & Howlett, 2024). Ostrom's rules address the specification side to some extent, but her framework is still primarily oriented towards institutional compliance rather than the systematic description of policy targets and their operative parameters which concerned Salamon and Linder & Peters (Siddiki et al., 2011; Frantz & Siddiki, 2022).

Finally, the fragmentation of these classical contributions has an important political consequence that is easy to overlook. Without a common framework for describing operational choices, the political implications of those choices—such as who bears the burden of a given automaticity design, who is excluded by a given boundary rule, and whose interests are protected by a particular visibility calibration—remain difficult to isolate and discern.

A framework that addresses these issues must treat the micro-level as analytically autonomous, integrate the fragmented insights of existing contributions into a common vocabulary and set of dimensions, and give equal analytical weight to both policy specifications and calibrations. This is the task taken up in the next two chapters that follow. Chapter 5 examines the more recent wave of scholarship that has begun to address these issues, before Chapter 6 develops the systematic framework that this review has revealed to be necessary.

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A New Wave of Work on Targets and Calibrations: Achievements and Remaining Gaps

Abstract This chapter reviews a new wave of scholarship that treats the micro-dimensions of policy as a distinct and systematic area of study rather than a residual category. Building on the classical foundations examined in Chapter 4, the chapter looks at three areas of recent empirical and theoretical work dealing with design quality, design diversity, and policy mixes which address this level of activity. It demonstrates how research into each of these areas has improved our understanding of the micro or operative layer of policy. Finally, the chapter evaluates the collective achievements of this new wave and the areas that remain to be explored, establishing the basis for the framework developed in Chapter 6.

Keywords Target specifications · Instrumental calibrations · Design quality · Design diversity · Policy mixes · Micro-design research

INTRODUCTION: THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF A NEW WAVE OF MICRO-DESIGN RESEARCH

Building on the classical foundations reviewed in Chapter 4, and responding to the limitations left open by the contributions of authors such as Salamon, Linder and Peters, and Ostrom, a new wave of scholarship has begun to emerge that has started to treat the micro-components

of policy as a distinct and systematic area of study (Lui et al., 2016; Verhoest et al., 2026). Although this work too varies in its methods and areas of focus, it is united by the effort to develop the conceptual vocabulary and empirical tools required to describe, compare, and evaluate operational design choices across instruments, sectors, and national contexts.

Three main strands characterize this new wave of micro-design research.

The first issue it is concerned with pertains to the quality of a design—whether a policy can generate its intended effects—and finds this to depend heavily on the internal consistency of calibrations and specifications. Rather than viewing implementation as a separate stage in which policies are adapted to local circumstances, the newer literature emphasizes that many critical implementation issues are developed and debated in the initial policy design stage, at which point most goal targets and calibrations are set (Howlett, 2024; Petek et al., 2022). The degree of discretion granted to street-level bureaucrats, the strictness of eligibility rules, the availability of supportive services, and the extent or intensity of sanctions can and are all decided at the design stage rather than during implementation. Recognizing this helps to bridge the artificial divide between formulation and implementation, supporting a more integrated understanding of policy design processes.

The second strand involves the study of design diversity, especially a focus on how different combinations of micro-features result in distinct operational patterns across and within jurisdictions with systematic distributional and political consequences. Questions such as who is included or excluded by a specific targeting rule, who bears the burden of compliance, and who benefits from more generous thresholds or laxer oversight are all issues which cannot be adequately answered at the macro- or meso-levels. Rather answering these questions, as Ostrom-noted, requires detailed attention to the content of rules, procedures, and resource allocations, as well as the nature of the compliance regime involved (Béland et al., 2016; Grohmann & Feindt, 2024; Schaffrin et al., 2014). In this sense, micro-design is explicitly studied as a political matter as well as a technical one, with decisions at this level seen to be shaping the allocation of risks, responsibilities, and opportunities among different actors and groups.

The third strand concerns the analysis of the impact and effects of the micro-dimensions on policy mixes. That is, how this level of policy

affects combinations of related policies and instrument configurations in different areas or across jurisdictions. Whether and how these policies cohere is often studied only at the meso- and macro-level but is often largely created at the micro-level and it is at this level that a new wave of studies of this subject focuses (Howlett & del Río, 2015; Rogge & Reichardt, 2016).

THE ISSUE OF DESIGN QUALITY

One important aspect of this work focuses on the concept of ‘design quality’. Rather than simply considering which kinds of instruments are chosen and coexist in a policy portfolio, newer studies of design quality have also begun to examine the internal consistency and accuracy of the calibrations and specifications that make up a policy design, as well as how these dimensions are configured in practice (Verhoest et al., 2026).

An early important contribution in this area came from Schaffrin et al. (2014). Working inductively from a large-scale, transnational survey of climate policies, they identified six operative dimensions that recur across instruments in this domain: level of integration, scope, targets, budget provisions, implementation arrangements, and monitoring provisions. This study built on the calibration work of Salamon and Linder and Peters incorporating the administrative and organizational dimensions of policies. Significantly, it began to bridge the gap between calibrations and specifications, mainly by including targets as an explicit dimension of analysis.

Similarly, Capano and Toth (2023) conducted a micro-analytical study of comparative health policy and argued these policies were commonly comprised of five dimensions: designation of primary recipients, intrusiveness, resource intensiveness, organizations responsible for implementation, and implementation rules. This latter work also encompassed Salamon’s concern for automaticity or ease of administration but added additional elements such as the discretion of implementers, procedural simplicity, conditionality, and reporting criteria.

Together, contributions like this demonstrated that in practice instruments are designed with varying degrees of clarity regarding targets, timelines, sanctions, and support measures, and that such variation has significant consequences for both implementation and outcomes (see also: Fernández-i-Marín et al., 2021; Petek et al., 2021). However, these analyses remained tailored to specific policy areas: climate policy in the case

of Schaffrin et al. and health policy in the case of Capano and Toth. Neither provides a vocabulary or set of dimensions that can be compared systematically across sectors and national contexts.

THE ISSUE OF DESIGN DIVERSITY

A second strand of recent research interrogates ‘design diversity’ across and within jurisdictions. Here, the emphasis is less on quality than upon mapping how different combinations of micro-features give rise to distinct design patterns, even when macro goals and meso instruments appear similar (Lui et al., 2026). This work suggests that there is no single ‘correct’ or technical way to calibrate a given instrument, but rather families of configurations that reflect different political priorities, administrative capacities, and behavioural assumptions.

Understanding such configurations helps to explain why instruments often perform poorly when transplanted without adaptation to different contexts (Dunlop et al., 2022; Capano & Howlett, 2024). Gofen et al. (2023), for example, provide an important empirical illustration of this point in their comparative study of national research excellence centres in six OECD countries. They found that, although instruments were formally identical at the meso-level, they differed substantially in their operative content and that this latter difference is crucial. These studies demonstrate that micro-design variation is not incidental, but systematic, and has measurable consequences for policy performance.

This operative content is captured by concepts such as ‘calibration flexibility’, which is defined as the degree to which implementing agencies can adapt calibrations to their local context. However, the concept of calibration flexibility emerged from the specific governance logic of science policy-making and was not designed to be transferred across sectors without modification. This illustrates again the domain-specificity that limits this strand of literature.

THE ISSUE OF POLICY MIXES

A third group of recent studies explores micro-calibrations within policy mixes. Rather than treating each instrument in isolation, these analyses examine how the detailed settings of one tool interact with those of others. For instance, they consider how the generosity of a subsidy

may combine with the strictness of an eligibility rule or how the timing of a new standard interacts with existing reporting obligations.

The key finding in this strand of the literature is that the performance of a tools within a mix depends not only on the selection of instruments, but also on the alignment—or misalignment—of their micro-calibrations. Minor changes to one instrument's settings, for example, can alter the functioning of the entire configuration (Cejudo & Michel, 2021; Grohmann & Feindt, 2024; Howlett & Rayner, 2013).

In some recent work, Sewerin et al. (2022) extend this logic to the analysis of policy change trajectories, demonstrating that the distinction between virtuous and vicious cycles of policy development—that is, whether or not a policy can be improved once created—depends critically on whether the micro-calibrations of instruments within a mix move towards or away from internal coherence over time. Their framework makes explicit that the operative content of specifications and calibrations—not merely instrument selection—is often what determines whether a policy trajectory is path-reinforcing or path-breaking and is discussed in detail in Chapter 9.

However, this strand of literature often continues to focus mainly on instrument interactions at the meso-level, examining which instruments are combined and whether they cohere as types, rather than considering the entire operative content of individual instruments at the micro-level, namely also looking at specifications. It too does not provide the vocabulary of these two dimensions at the instrument level needed to assess how the calibrations and specifications of one instrument interact with those of another.

CONCLUSION: VIEWING THE MICRO-LEVEL AS THE CORE OF POLICY DESIGN

The micro-dimensions of policy design constitute the operative layer where abstract policy intentions take on concrete form and gain practical traction. This encompasses the specification of goals and the calibration of instruments—the two processes by which a policy's aspirations and proposed methods are translated from general statements into operative provisions.

The quality of a policy design is ultimately determined at this level—below the paradigm and the programme. A policy whose goals are vaguely defined or whose instruments are poorly calibrated may appear

coherent at the macro- and meso-levels yet remain incoherent in practice. Conversely, careful and deliberate attention to these micro-level choices can partially offset the constraints imposed by higher-level decisions which might undermine their consistency or coherence. Therefore, understanding the micro-dimensions of policy design is not a secondary analytical task, but a precondition for any serious assessment of what a policy actually does, to whom, and through what means. And beyond the foundational work outlined in Chapter 4, the work cited in this chapter seeks to develop this area of policy studies.

Across these different areas of recent research, the consistent message is that micro-dimensions can be systematically described, compared, and evaluated. These dimensions are not idiosyncratic ‘details’, but structured components of policy designs that can be theorized and measured.

However, taken together, the three strands reviewed in this chapter share a common limitation. The design quality strand, as presented by Schaffrin et al. and Capano and Toth, addresses the scope issue identified in Chapter 4 by incorporating specifications alongside calibrations. However, it produces domain-specific frameworks that cannot be easily compared across sectors. The design diversity strand begins to address the connection problem by demonstrating that operative choices are politically consequential and systematically varied; however, the concepts it produces, such as calibration flexibility, are also domain-specific. The policy mix strand extends the argument of connection to change trajectories but operates at the mix level rather than at the level of individual instruments. Most importantly, none of the three strands addresses the integration problem identified in Chapter 4. In them, as with earlier foundational work there is still no shared vocabulary of key dimensions, no common logic of operationalization, and no framework that allows the micro-elements of policy be compared systematically across sectors, levels of government, and national contexts. While the three problems of scope, integration, and connection have been partially addressed by this new wave, they have not been resolved.

The next step in this work is to assemble these insights into a coherent analytical model that clarifies the core dimensions of specifications and calibrations and their role in shaping policy processes and outcomes (Capano & Howlett, 2020, 2024; Howlett et al., 2024). This is the aim of the framework developed in the following chapter. Chapter 6 sets out to resolve these problems and produce a framework that is both analytically rigorous and cross-sectorally portable.

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The Architecture of Micro-Design: A Framework of Policy Specifications and Calibrations

Abstract The classical and more recent contributions to the study of the micro-level component of public policies examined in Chapters 4 and 5 were reviewed for what they revealed about the state of existing literature. Here, however, they are used to provide the conceptual raw material from which a more systematic micro-design framework can be assembled. Drawing on both the foundational contributions reviewed in Chapter 4 and the new wave of scholarship examined in Chapter 5, the chapter proposes a coherent set of dimensions along which both specifications and calibrations can be systematically described, providing a shared vocabulary that is analytically rigorous and cross-sectorally comparable and moves this area of study forward.

Keyword Target specifications · Instrumental calibrations · Delivery package

INTRODUCTION: THE NEED FOR A NEW FRAMEWORK

The preceding chapters have established the need for more a systematic micro-design framework than currently exists, as well as provided the conceptual raw material from which such a framework can be built. Chapter 4 showed that Salamon, Linder and Peters, and Ostrom each shed light on a different aspect of the operational layer of policy,

including observations on calibration properties, institutional rules, and targeting dimensions, but also how these insights were left fragmented and disconnected.

Chapter 5 showed that while a new wave of scholarship has begun to address problems of scope and connection between elements, it has not yet resolved the problem of integration. There is still no shared vocabulary of the key dimensions involved in micro-level design choices that is systematically comparable across sectors and national contexts. The framework developed in this chapter addresses this gap.

Drawing on the conceptual resources provided by the classical and new contributions, it sets out a systematic account of specifications and calibrations as the constitutive dimensions of the delivery package and explains how this framework can be usefully applied across instruments, sectors, and comparative analyses.

MODELLING GOAL SPECIFICATIONS: EXPECTED OUTCOME, TARGETS, & TIME FRAME

As Petek et al. (2021) suggest in their recent appraisal of the literature on policy goals and objectives, goal specifications may be single or multiple but in either case must address what is the expected outcome of a policy effort, often set out in the form of an indicator (for example, that the incidence of violent crime will be reduced by 15%); who is the target or ‘object’ of government action; and over what time frame the goal is expected to be achieved (see Table 6.1).

Of course, in some cases, some of these elements may not be specified, and in others, they may be implied (for example, ‘over the term in office’ of a government). And they may be mis-specified, for example, using the wrong indicator or an infeasible one. However, for a goal to be implemented at all, these criteria must be specified at some level of detail.

Drawing upon this account of more general goal specifications, and following Ostrom, three main specifications can be identified as the most relevant aspects of micro-level policy goals:

Designation of the target population: ‘who’ specifically is targeted by the intervention;

Table 6.1 Policy goal specification parameters

<i>Attribute of goal</i>	<i>Nature of specification</i>	<i>Parameters</i>	<i>Examples in use</i>
Expected outcome ('What the policy will actually do')	Indicator	Increase or decrease	Reduce health insurance fraud by 15%
Target or object of action ('Who will be affected by it')	Social actor	More or less precise	Reduce health insurance fraud by closely auditing providers' billing
Time frame ('When will this occur')	Time period	Short or long	Achieve the expected outcome over 5 years

The expected outcome of the intervention: 'what' precisely is expected to be done by the target population with respect to the problematic condition; and

The time frame for achieving the desired aim: 'when' or the time by which the intervention is expected to be undertaken.

To illustrate these three dimensions: in a policy programme aimed at raising national educational attainment at the high school level, for example, the target population would be families and schools. A targeted outcome could be to reduce the male dropout rate from 10 to 7%, with the expectation that this could be achieved within a specified time frame such as 5–10 years. Alternatively, in a programme intended to expand health insurance coverage for citizens, the target population would be citizens and providers; the expected outcome could be to cover all currently uninsured citizens; and the time frame could be to do so within a decade.

In both cases, the three micro-dimensions of goal specifications—target population, expected outcome, and time frame—operationalize more abstract goals such as improving life expectancies or enhancing productivity and objectives such as reducing hospital costs or improving educational attainment and life choices, demonstrating how the framework helps translate abstract policy goals into actionable provisions.

MODELLING POLICY CALIBRATIONS: MODE OF DELIVERY, PUBLICNESS, INTRUSIVENESS, RESOURCE INTENSITY, AGENCIES, AND AUDITORS

Calibrations, on the other hand, are more complex in the sense of involving more elements or aspects. As was noted in earlier chapters, Linder and Peters (1989) described as many as eight ‘attributes of instruments’, which can be thought of as representing the range of possible choices in tool calibration (complexity of operation, level of public visibility, adaptability across uses, level of intrusiveness, relative costliness, reliance on markets, chances of failure, and precision of targeting).

Some of these choices, however, such as ‘reliance on markets’ or ‘chances of failure’, are considerations affecting meso-level tool choice rather than micro-level calibrations. And, as we have seen, in later work, Peters (2000) also added some additional attributes, replicating in part the ideas of Salamon (2002), who highlighted the differences between tools in terms of automaticity (or the degree to which a tool utilizes an existing administrative structure rather than creating a new one), intrusiveness (‘enforcement or persuasion’), directedness (the extent to which ‘the entity authorizing, financing, or inaugurating a collective activity is involved in carrying it out’), and visibility.

Calibrations can hence be thought to provide the answer to six key questions about how a policy tool will be deployed in practice:

1. How is the goal to be achieved (what is the precise mode of delivery and desired level of automaticity)?
2. How public is it (how visible will be the tool, including what is its need for collaboration among government actors and with non-governmental ones)?
3. How coercive is it for targets and non-targets (how intrusive will it be and how precise will it be in its effects)?
4. How resource intensive is it (how complex is its operation and what kind of resource use will it involve)?
5. Who will carry this out (how direct will be its administration *vis à vis* the public)?
6. How is the effort to be evaluated and monitored (how stringent will be its level of accountability)?

As with goal specifications, the precise content of these choices is constrained and/or facilitated by the macro and meso aspects of policy, including current thinking in the field about the benefits and costs of different activities, as well as the configuration of actors and institutions found in the existing system which affect tool preferences.

Following these authors and logic, however, six dimensions of policy tool calibration characteristics can be considered relevant at the micro-level:

Stringency (i.e. how coercive the adopted instrument is for shaping the behavioural autonomy of the target);

Public visibility (i.e. whether and how much the instrumental calibration is visible to the public);

Automaticity (i.e. whether and how the instruments can be immediately applied by an existing agency without the use of other modes of delivery);

Resource intensiveness (i.e. the level of organizational and financial resources attached);

The agencies responsible for implementation (if there is only one public agency, or if there are more agencies, even private, programmatically charged with implementation);

Monitoring and auditing provisions (i.e. the provision of planned procedures of monitoring and auditing) and accountability rules (i.e. the rules that are expected to activate mechanisms leading to effective implementation: for example, provision of sanctions and fines can activate compliance, while performance funding can activate utility maximization, etc.)

Each of these calibration dimensions has political, as well as technical, distributional consequences.

The choice of stringency, for example, encodes assumptions about who is deserving and who is not, determining how coercively the state treats its targets. Public visibility choices determine whether citizens and legislators can observe the actual effects of a policy, and low visibility is often a deliberate strategy for avoiding scrutiny. Automaticity choices determine who is systematically excluded: instruments requiring active application and documentation impose burdens that fall most heavily on those with the least capacity to navigate them. Resource-intensive choices signal whether

a commitment is genuine or merely formal. Designating implementing agencies determines which institutional interests are served and which are marginalized in delivery. Monitoring and auditing provisions determine whether accountability is real or merely for show. None of these choices is technically neutral; they are all sites where political conflict over the distribution of costs and benefits is resolved, usually below the level of public attention.

Examples of the nature of these calibrations in use in the regulation of therapists, for instance, are depicted in Table 6.2.

Returning to the educational attainment example in order to clarify these calibration dimensions even further, a regulatory instrument requiring schools to implement mandatory tutoring for at-risk students would have high stringency, relatively high public visibility, and substantial resource intensity. A specific public agency (e.g. a national education authority) could be designated as responsible for implementation, and regular monitoring of attendance and outcomes would be required. Accountability rules would be attached in the form of performance-linked

Table 6.2 Policy instrument calibration parameters

<i>Attribute of instrument</i>	<i>Nature of calibration</i>	<i>Examples in use</i>
Precise mode of delivery ('How is the goal to be achieved')	Level of precision (includes 'automaticity')	Provide or tighten licensing requirements for therapists
Publicness ('How the public will be involved')	Level of societal participation (includes 'visibility')	Consult with therapists and citizens' groups on their regulation
Intrusiveness ('How will this affect targeted groups or individuals')	Level of Coercion	Provide tougher penalties for unlicensed therapists
Resource intensiveness ('How much will this cost')	Level of financial and personnel resources (includes 'complexity of operation')	Increase funding and hire more staff to administer licenses to practice
Administering agency ('Who will carry this out')	Number of agencies with responsibility (includes 'directedness')	Create a new agency or designate an existing agency to coordinate different medical licensing authorities
Monitoring and auditing ('How administrators will be held accountable')	Stringency of accountability	Tighten monitoring and identification of unlicensed therapists

funding. The same policy goal, however, could be pursued through an alternative, low-stringency, voluntary incentive scheme with high automaticity, lower resource intensity, and minimal monitoring provisions, resulting in a different delivery package and, most likely, a different distribution outcome.

These six dimensions of calibrations, when taken together, form the delivery package of the instrument itself (Capano & Toth, 2023; see also Attwell & Navin, 2019). This package is expected to concretely activate a policy in a way that can lead, *ceteris paribus*, to an expected policy outcome and is discussed in detail in the following chapter.

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Implications of the Framework: The Delivery Package as the Appropriate Analytical Unit to Assess the Micro-Dimensions of Policy

Abstract This chapter outlines the implications of the framework developed in Chapter 6, introducing ‘the delivery package’ as an analytical unit combining specifications and calibrations well suited to micro-design analysis. The chapter argues that the nine dimensions of the framework (three specifications and six calibrations) constitute a configurational map rather than a checklist. The analytical value lies in observing how choices across dimensions combine, interact, and cohere, or fail to cohere, rather than assessing any single dimension in isolation. The chapter also qualifies the framework as an analytical orientation rather than a fixed template, demonstrating that domain-specific adaptation is a condition of its validity, not a weakness.

Keywords Policy tools · Specifications · Calibrations · Delivery packages

INTRODUCTION: DESIGNING DELIVERY PACKAGES

The framework developed in Chapter 6 identifies three dimensions of goal specifications and six dimensions of instrumental calibrations. The remaining analytical task is to understand how these nine dimensions combine to form an integrated operative unit, and the implications for the

study of policy design and performance of treating that unit as a primary object of analysis.

The notion of the ‘delivery package’, as suggested by Salamon, encapsulates this integrative logic. A delivery package comprises more than just a list of specifications and calibrations; it is a configuration: a specific combination of design choices that determine how a policy instrument influences the behaviour of target populations, allocates responsibilities among implementing agencies, and establishes feedback loops through which policy performance can be evaluated and adjusted. The three dimensions of goal specification and the six dimensions of instrumental calibration together define the ‘delivery package’ of any policy instrument.

This discussion may be summarized in the framework depicted in Table 7.1.

Table 7.1 is not a checklist, but rather a configurational map. The nine dimensions it contains—three for target specification and six for instrumental calibration—together define the operational fingerprint of any policy instrument.

As the following sections demonstrate, this mapping of the micro-level elements of policy enables policy designs to be observed, compared, and analysed systematically at this level.

This configurational view of policy instruments also has important analytical consequences, which should be considered by anyone interested in the field. Firstly, it implies that specifications and calibrations cannot be evaluated in isolation. For example, a high-stringency calibration may be appropriate for a narrowly defined target population within a short time frame. However, applying the same level of stringency to a broadly

Table 7.1 The dimensions of the ‘delivery package’ of public policy: micro-level specifications and calibrations in policy design

<i>Target specifications (policy goals)</i>	<i>Calibrations (policy means)</i>
1. Designation of the target population	1. Stringency
2. Expected outcome of the intervention	2. Public visibility
3. Time frame for achieving the aim	3. Automaticity
	4. Resource intensiveness
	5. Agencies responsible for implementation
	6. Monitoring and auditing provisions

defined, heterogeneous target population could result in systematic non-compliance. Similarly, instruments with strong monitoring provisions but weak accountability rules may generate information without consequences, leaving the disciplinary potential of the design inert. Secondly, the quality of a micro-design cannot be assessed by a simple additive index of how many dimensions are filled in; what matters is whether the choices made across several dimensions are coherent and mutually reinforcing, given the policy's causal logic and the target population's characteristics. This point is reinforced by the frequent observation in the implementation literature that policy failures often originate from internal inconsistencies at the operative level, such as specifications that are too vague for implementers to act upon, calibrations that are inconsistent with the administrative capacities of designated agencies, or accountability rules that create perverse incentives around target compliance.

Through the delivery package concept, the micro-design framework provides a systematic vocabulary for diagnosing these inconsistencies and locating them precisely within the operative content of the instrument. This is particularly important for policy evaluation, where the tendency to attribute poor performance to contextual or political factors often masks the extent to which design quality—or the absence of it—is responsible for implementation shortcomings.

This conceptualization of the micro-dimensions of policy goals and means in terms of specification and calibration is, of course, not unique to public policy, as it is common, especially regarding goal specification, to describe the strategic plans of private enterprises and public organizations in this way. This includes indicators of expected outcomes, targets to be addressed, and time frames of intervention (Capano & Howlett, 2024).

But this configurational map is also a political map. That is, the configuration of any given delivery package is not the result of purely technical deliberation. Rather, it is the product of political negotiation, coalition pressure, bureaucratic interests, and the strategic use of ambiguity, as described by Stone (2002). Actors with incompatible distributional preferences commonly reach an agreement on the type of instrument and the formal goals, while deferring their conflicts to these operative dimensions. The delivery package is where political settlements are encoded and where the discrepancy between a policy's announcements and its actual actions is determined.

APPLYING THE FRAMEWORK: VARIATIONS ON A THEME

An important qualification is in order here. The specifications and calibrations set out in Table 6 should not be viewed as a fixed or complete template that can be applied in the same way to all policy sectors and research purposes. Rather, they represent the analytical core of the micro-design perspective: the systematic decomposition of the operative content of policy instruments into their constituent dimensions. The specific dimensions identified—three for target specifications and six for instrumental calibrations—reflect the attributes that are most recurrent and analytically consequential, as identified in the existing literature and in the comparative study of public policies across multiple sectors. However, there is no uniquely correct set of such factors and choices and decisions made at this level may often be incorrect.

The existing empirical literature already demonstrates what domain-specific adaptation looks like in practice. As we have seen, in their micro-design framework for comparative health policy, for example, Capano and Toth (2023) operationalize the calibration side through five domain-specific dimensions—primary recipients, intrusiveness, resource intensiveness, organizations responsible for implementation, and implementation rules—rather than applying a generic set. The same was true for the climate policy instruments across Austria, Germany, and the United Kingdom, compared by Schaffrin et al. (2014, 2015) to derive their six operative dimensions from the characteristics of instruments in that sector: objectives, scope, integration, budget, implementation, and monitoring.

But this is also true of other studies. In their comparative study of Research Excellence Centres across six OECD countries, for example, Gofen et al. (2023) developed the concept of calibration flexibility, mentioned earlier, defined as the degree to which implementing agencies can adapt calibrations to the local context. And in the most systematic application of the delivery package framework to date, Capano and Pritoni (2026) coded instruments across eight Italian NRRP reform areas using a seven-dimensional calibration structure. This retained accountability rules as a distinct dimension from monitoring provisions, warranted by the multi-level accountability chains between implementing ministries and the European Commission that characterize NRRP governance. None of these examples represents a departure from the framework; each one illustrates what domain-specific adaptation looks like in practice.

Researchers working in specific policy areas may refine or emphasize some of these dimensions according to what is most analytically productive in their context. For example, a framework for conditional cash transfer programmes may need to treat verification burdens and reassessment frequency as distinct dimensions, whereas a framework for regulatory policy may give greater weight to enforcement discretion and the automaticity of sanctions. These choices do not represent concessions to empirical complexity; rather, they are the means by which a general analytical framework generates valid and meaningful findings.

The framework's value lies not in its finality, but in its structure: it shows that the micro-level of policy design can be systematically described, that its components can be analytically distinguished, and that their configuration can be observed, compared, and evaluated. In this sense, the framework is best understood as an invitation to rigorous micro-analytical enquiry, rather than as a prescription for a single mode of enquiry or a single recommendation for a particular configuration.

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Operationalizing the Framework: From Model to Empirical Application

Abstract The micro-design framework set out in the previous Chapter is both a conceptual device and an empirical analytical instrument. Its value as a contribution to policy design research hinges on the ability to translate its dimensions into observable and comparable attributes of actual policy instruments. This chapter sets out the operationalization logic that enables this translation to be achieved, without prescribing a single methodological protocol. The chapter addresses the unit of analysis, coding scales, and data sources; illustrates the procedure through examples of increasing empirical scale and complexity; and clarifies the methodological relationship between the micro-design framework and the older Institutional Grammar tradition discussed in earlier Chapters.

Keyword Operationalization · Unit of analysis · Coding · Measurement validity · Domain adaptation · Institutional grammar · Delivery package

METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

The micro-design framework proposed in Chapter 7 is a conceptual contribution as well as an empirical instrument. Its value hinges on the ability to translate its dimensions into observable, comparable attributes of actual policy instruments. This chapter sets out the operationalization logic that enables this translation. Three questions are addressed in

sequence: what is the appropriate unit of analysis, coding scale, and data source; how should the framework be applied comparatively; and how does this approach relate to the Institutional Grammar tradition?

However, before any coding procedure can be specified, a prior methodological question must be addressed: should the nine dimensions of the framework be treated as a fixed template, identical across all applications, or as a structured analytical orientation whose specific content is adapted to the policy field and research design under examination? The answer is important not only for methodological consistency, but also for the validity of the measurements produced by the framework.

The case for treating the framework as an analytical orientation is based on the fundamental principle of measurement validity. Adcock and Collier (2001) established that valid measurement requires attention to the contextual specificity of measurement claims; a measure that is valid in one empirical domain may be systematically misleading in another if the underlying concept manifests differently in different contexts.

When applied to micro-design, this principle has immediate consequences. What constitutes adequate monitoring, high stringency, or precise target designation varies across environmental regulation, health-care access, and conditional cash transfer programmes. Forcing all instruments onto a single fixed scale achieves consistency at the expense of validity—precisely the error that the framework is designed to avoid.

The empirical literature already demonstrates what this kind of domain-specific adaptation looks like in practice. As discussed in previous chapters, Capano and Toth (2023), Schaffrin et al. (2014, 2015), Gofen et al. (2023), and Capano and Pritoni (2026) each applied aspects of the framework's logic to a specific policy domain, making adaptations that were analytically warranted by the governance logic of the examined sector.

The implication for researchers is clear. The nine dimensions in Table 6 provide a structured starting point for micro-level analysis, offering the most likely questions needed to reveal consequential operative variation across a broad range of policy domains and research designs. In any specific application, researchers need to assess which dimensions are most analytically productive, given the nature of the empirical field and the questions under examination. They should also determine whether additional domain-specific dimensions are needed to capture and important operative content that the general model does not address.

UNIT OF ANALYSIS AND CODING LOGIC

The primary unit of analysis in any such study is the delivery package and the individual policy instruments and objectives within it, understood as discrete legal or administrative provisions, often in written form such as a statutory article or clause that specifies obligations, entitlements, or enforcement arrangements directed at a defined target population. This choice is significant for two reasons. It situates analysis below the level of policy programmes or sectors, which are meso-level units, and it focuses attention on the specific operative content of each provision rather than its formal label or declared intent.

The boundary between one instrument and the next is not always self-evident in legislative text, however, and this is a genuine methodological challenge. Legal statutes, for example, also frequently embed multiple operative provisions within a single article or clause. Analysts must develop explicit rules for when any such provision constitutes a distinct instrument, typically when it specifies a distinct target population, a distinct expected outcome, or a distinct set of enforcement arrangements and apply these rules consistently across the corpus. Documenting these boundary decisions is as important as documenting the scale anchors for the dimensions themselves, because it determines what is being compared when comparisons are drawn.

With respect to the former, each dimension of the micro-design framework can be coded on a scale running from absence to presence, or from low to high intensity, depending on its nature. The critical distinction for the dimensions of specifications is between formal presence and operational functionality. Adcock and Collier (2001) emphasize that the relationship between a background concept and its empirical indicators is mediated by a systematized concept, and that categorizing decisions must be grounded in that conceptual structure rather than in surface textual features. Applied here, this means that specification dimensions can be coded according to whether each component provides an implementing agency with the information it needs to act, not merely whether the dimension appears in the text.

Petek et al. (2022) demonstrated that goal specifications in practice range from purely symbolic aspirational statements to technically precise and legally binding criteria, and that this variation is analytically consequential for implementation behaviour. A time frame that reads ‘as resources permit’ is formally present but functionally absent. A target

population defined as ‘vulnerable groups’ without eligibility criteria is indeterminate regardless of the deontic force of the provision.

Calibrations, on the other hand, are more precise and involve a greater degree of ordinal variation. Stringency ranges from voluntary compliance to coercive obligation backed by automatic and what might be thought of as proportionate sanctions. The key coding criterion is not the formal presence of a sanction clause but the credibility and automaticity of the enforcement mechanism: an instrument that specifies sanctions but assigns no agency responsibility for their application, or that attaches penalties too low to affect behaviour, scores low on stringency regardless of its formally coercive vocabulary.

Automaticity ranges from instruments requiring new administrative infrastructure for each application to those triggered automatically by the occurrence of defined conditions within existing systems. This distinction carries distributional consequences, because low automaticity creates administrative burdens that systematically exclude those with weakest capacity to navigate complex application processes (Herd & Moynihan, 2019). Monitoring ranges from nominally present, that is, a general clause permitting a Ministry or some other actor to investigate complaints, to operationally binding, that is, specifying the frequency, method, responsible agency, reporting format, and sanction schedule for non-compliance.

For each dimension, in each specific instance analysts need to develop explicit scale anchors that define what constitutes a low, medium, or high score in the specific policy domain under study. These anchors are difficult to specify before engaging with the empirical material; they require domain knowledge and iterative calibration among coders working on the same corpus. Thus Schaffrin et al. (2015), for example, conducted climate policy coding with three independent coders and validated criterion validity by comparing their results with expert ratings. This is a methodological standard that applications of the micro-design framework should aim to meet. Using multiple independent coders is not just a procedural safeguard against random error; it is also the most appropriate method for interpreting complex policy texts. Where coders disagree, this disagreement is analytically informative in itself, as it signals genuine operative ambiguity in the text. As the book argues throughout, this ambiguity is often a deliberate political product rather than a drafting imperfection.

DATA SOURCES AND THEIR LIMITS

The primary data source for micro-dimensional study is in fact often the legislative or regulatory text in which certain policy instruments are formally enacted. Legislative text is publicly accessible, stable over time, and replicable across coders and studies. It captures the legislator's formal design intent and remains independent of implementation behaviour, which may diverge from the design. These are genuine advantages.

However, relying exclusively on statutory text can produce a measure of design quality as expressed in the document rather than as experienced in practice. A highly specified instrument may still fail if the administering agency lacks capacity, for example. A formally permissive instrument may also be rigorously applied through detailed administrative guidance that also does not appear in the statute. Researchers should be explicit about this limitation and, wherever possible, complement statutory analysis with additional sources of information on these latter aspects.

Three supplementary sources in particular can significantly improve the quality of coding. Firstly, administrative guidance, including ministerial circulars and standard operating procedures, often offer practical information not explicitly stated in a statute. This may include specific documentation requirements, enforcement thresholds, and discretionary criteria, for example.

Secondly, an analytical reading of legislative text can reveal information that only a surface reading miss. For example, Chen et al. (2022) demonstrated that the composition of policy text can often be seen to reflect the intensity and direction of political conflict in the legislative process. They also showed that the degree of specificity or vagueness in a provision is often a politically meaningful signal, indicating operative intent beyond what the text may explicitly state.

Thirdly, structured expert interviews with officials responsible for implementation and representatives of the target group can capture informal norms and discretionary practices that are not recorded in any formal document (Gofen et al., 2023). These interviews are particularly valuable for assessing the operational functionality of dimensions that may only be partially specified in legislative texts.

Taken together, these additional sources reflect the fundamental analytical principle that specifications and calibrations can be formally defined at any level of the regulatory hierarchy, whether in primary legislation, secondary regulation, or administrative guidance. The relevant distinction

is not between adoption and implementation, but between formal design choices encoded in authoritative texts and the discretionary practices of those working at the forefront of policy development.

ILLUSTRATIONS AND APPLICATIONS

The operationalization procedure for micro-level analysis using this approach and data is best approached in three steps. Each step adds something that the previous step cannot provide: analytical clarity about what the framework is asking; empirical validation of its diagnostic capacity in a single-country, longitudinal setting; the demonstration of its comparative portability across sectors and reform areas at scale.

THE ANALYTICAL STRUCTURE: A CONSTRUCTED ILLUSTRATION

To demonstrate how each dimension of the delivery package generates a specific coding question, consider a co-payment reduction scheme for low-income patients. This is a sufficiently generic instrument type to appear in multiple national health systems and is complex enough to engage all nine dimensions of the framework simultaneously.

Regarding the target population dimension, the question is not whether a target is mentioned, but whether it is operationally functional, whether it provides the relevant agency with the necessary information to identify those covered. An instrument that specifies ‘all residents with an annual household income below 60% of the national median, as defined and updated annually by the national statistics office’ is highly specific. In contrast, an instrument that refers to ‘low-income patients’ without providing further definition is indeterminate, regardless of the formal entitlement it declares. The provision exists, but no agency can act on it without additional interpretation.

The expected outcome dimension asks whether the instrument commits to a measurable change, such as reducing the mean out-of-pocket pharmaceutical expenditure for eligible patients to no more than 2% of their household income within three years, or if it merely declares a directional aspiration, such as improving access to essential medicines for vulnerable populations. Both are formally present as goal statements, but only the former is operationally functional. The time frame dimension is fixed if a calendar date is specified, and open-ended if implementation is

‘subject to available resources’—a formulation which is formally present, but functionally equivalent to an absence of commitment.

Regarding calibrations, instruments are considered stringent if they mandate compliance by insurers and attach automatic administrative sanctions to non-compliance. They are considered less stringent if they merely incentivize voluntary adoption through financial inducements with no enforcement consequences. The key coding criterion is not the formal presence of a sanction clause, but rather the credibility and automaticity of the enforcement mechanism. An instrument that specifies penalties that are too low to affect behaviour or that assigns no agency responsibility for their application scores low on stringency, regardless of its formal coercive vocabulary.

Automaticity is high if eligibility is determined and applied at the point of service without requiring patient-initiated application and low if, for example, annual reapplication with supporting documentation is required. This distinction has direct distributional consequences: a nominally generous scheme with low automaticity will systematically exclude those with the weakest administrative capacity, precisely the population that the instrument may be ostensibly designed to serve. Responsibility for implementation is coherent if a single designated agency holds unambiguous authority over delivery. It is fragmented if responsibilities are distributed across health ministries, insurance regulators, regional authorities, and pharmacy networks without a clear leader, creating coordination gaps that no single actor has the authority or incentive to close.

Monitoring and auditing provisions are operationally present if the instrument specifies the frequency, method, responsible agency, reporting format, and sanction schedule for non-compliance. They are nominally present but functionally absent if the instrument merely ‘allows the ministry to investigate complaints’, a clause that formally satisfies the criterion while providing no operational guarantee of its implementation.

The aggregate profile of these values constitutes the instrument’s operational fingerprint and is a key component of a delivery package. Its primary analytical value is diagnostic: it helps reveal design incoherencies before they manifest as implementation failures. High stringency combined with weak monitoring, for example, creates the appearance of compliance rather than the intended distributional effect of the policy, because actors may well and often do calibrate their behaviour to observation rather than to the rule. Conversely, precise target designation combined with low automaticity results in systematic underperformance

relative to stated goals because, as stated earlier, transaction costs screen out those with the weakest administrative capacity. These are design features rather than implementation failures, and originate in the operative content of the instrument. A delivery package analysis of this kind can identify these features at the design stage, before resources have been committed and populations affected.

EMPIRICAL VALIDATION: KOREAN HEALTHCARE REFORM

Howlett et al. (2024) recently provided a documented application of this diagnostic logic in practice, examining the micro-design content of healthcare reform instruments in Korea over three decades. Their analysis identified a recurrent pattern anticipated by the above illustration: instruments characterized by tight, operationally functional specifications—clear target populations, measurable outcome indicators, and fixed time frames—but weak calibration coherence. Specifically, they found a combination of formal compliance obligations with monitoring provisions that were diffuse and under-resourced, unable to generate actionable enforcement information. The consequence was systematic: nominal compliance without substantive change in healthcare access. Providers satisfied the formal requirements of the instrument, but the distributional effects it was expected to produce failed to materialize.

This finding is significant for the micro-design framework both methodologically and substantively. It demonstrates that the distinction between design-generated and context-generated performance—one of the framework's core analytical contributions—is empirically tractable. The Korean case shows that, at the micro-level, what appeared, from a meso-level perspective, to be an implementation capacity problem was actually a design coherence problem: the specifications were adequate, but the calibrations were not aligned with the instrument's causal requirements. This misalignment could be detected from the operative content of the legislative and administrative provisions independently of any observation of implementation behaviour.

COMPARATIVE SCALE: THE ITALIAN NRRP REFORMS

Capano and Pritoni (2026) extended this logic to a setting of altogether greater empirical ambition. Their study looked at policy instruments across eight areas of reform contained in the Italian National Recovery

and Resilience Plan, covering healthcare, education, the labour market, the justice system, public administration, competition, the environment, and infrastructure. This corpus is large and diverse enough to test the analytical capacity of the framework under genuinely demanding conditions, including multiple sectors, multiple levels of government, multiple implementing agencies, and a governance structure shaped by the specific accountability requirements of European Commission oversight.

Each instrument in the package was coded across the full set of specification and calibration dimensions set out in Table 7.1.

In terms of specifications, the analysis assessed whether target populations were operationally defined or left indeterminate, whether expected outcomes were expressed as measurable indicators or directional aspirations, and whether timeframes were fixed by calendar dates or left open-ended, subject to administrative discretion.

In terms of calibration, each instrument involved in the package was evaluated in terms of its stringency, automaticity, resource intensity, clarity of agency responsibility, and the presence and operational specificity of monitoring and auditing provisions. Accountability rules were retained as a distinct dimension from monitoring provisions, an adaptation based on the specific governance logic of NRRP implementation, where the consequences of not complying with European Commission requirements follow institutional and legal pathways that are not captured by monitoring provisions alone. This does not constitute a departure from the framework, but rather demonstrates how domain-specific adaptation, when grounded in analytical reasoning and transparently documented in the codebook, strengthens rather than compromises the framework's validity.

The findings from this study highlighted two of the framework's most significant analytical contributions. The first is to reinforce its use in distinguishing between nominal and substantive reform. Several NRRP reform areas that generated significant political visibility were shown, upon micro-level analysis, to involve limited operative reconfiguration: instrument labels changed, declared goals were updated, and political communication signalled transformation; however, specification and calibration profiles remained substantially unaltered. In contrast, other reform areas that attracted considerably less public attention introduced genuine operative changes, such as new target designations, tightened monitoring provisions, restructured accountability chains, and meaningful shifts in the distribution of implementation responsibility.

This distinction is invisible to meso-level analysis and inaccessible to any approach that treats declared reform intent as a proxy for operative change. It only becomes apparent when the instruments themselves are systematically examined at the micro-level.

The second contribution concerns cross-sectoral portability. By applying a shared analytical vocabulary across eight distinct policy domains within a single national context, Capano and Pritoni were able to compare operative design intensity and calibration coherence across sectors that are rarely brought into direct analytical dialogue. The result is a cumulative body of findings that addresses the integration problem identified in Chapter 4: micro-design choices are coded using the same dimensions, scale anchors, and codebook logic. This produces findings that can be compared, aggregated, and used to test hypotheses about the relationship between operative design content and reform outcomes.

RELATIONSHIP TO THE INSTITUTIONAL GRAMMAR

Any framework that claims to operationalize the operative content of policy instruments at the textual level must consider its relationship with the most well-developed existing tradition of doing precisely that. This is the Institutional Grammar (IG), originally formulated by Crawford and Ostrom (1995) and substantially revised in IG 2.0 by Frantz and Siddiki (2022). It has produced a cumulative body of methodological work and empirical applications over three decades that no serious contribution to efforts to code policy content can ignore. This section appears here for methodological reasons: the question is not whether the two approaches address the same phenomena, but what each one codes, at what level of analysis it operates, and what kind of analytical insight each provides.

The Institutional Grammar decomposes individual regulative statements into five syntactic components: Attributes, which identify the actor to whom the statement applies; deontic, which specify whether the action is obligatory, permitted, or prohibited; aim, which designates the required action; conditions, which define the context of application; and “or else”, which specifies the consequences of non-compliance.

This decomposition produces fine-grained, reproducible, and computationally tractable representations of institutional content at the level of individual provisions. Siddiki et al. (2011) demonstrated the utility of this approach in their analysis of aquaculture policy designs. They showed that the distribution of deontic operators and condition specifications varied

systematically across instruments in ways that instrument-type classifications could not capture. Dunlop et al. (2022) applied the same logic to measuring design diversity across regulatory instruments. In both cases, the object of analysis is the individual syntactic statement: what the provision says, to whom it applies, under what conditions, what obligation it imposes, and what the consequence of non-compliance is.

The micro-design framework operates at a fundamentally different level of aggregation, however. Rather than decomposing individual syntactic statements, it produces instrument-level dimension profiles that characterize the operative content of a policy instrument as a whole across the nine dimensions of the delivery package. While the Institutional Grammar focuses on the construction of individual provisions, the micro-design framework considers the actions of instruments, such as how they define their targets, what they demand of them, how they enforce these demands, what resources they commit, who is responsible for their implementation, and how their effects are monitored and held accountable. These questions concern the instrument as an operative configuration, rather than the grammatical structure of its constituent provisions.

This difference in the unit and object of analysis has direct consequences for the capabilities of each approach. The Institutional Grammar is uniquely suited to fine-grained syntactic analysis of individual provisions, such as mapping argumentative structures, detecting missing ‘or-else’ clauses, and identifying textual patterns that convey information about legislative intent and political conflict. In contrast, the micro-design framework is suited to something that the Institutional Grammar cannot easily support without substantial additional aggregation: the systematic comparison of operative design content across instruments, sectors, levels of government, and national contexts, all within a shared analytical vocabulary. Therefore, the two approaches occupy different positions in the methodological landscape of micro-design research, covering different parts of it rather than competing for the same analytical territory.

CONCLUSION

The arguments developed in this chapter demonstrate that, rather than a single universal protocol, a micro-level framework requires a shared analytical logic that is applied with disciplined, transparent, and domain-sensitive judgement. Valid measurement requires contextual specificity.

Coding requires explicit scale anchors, iterative codebook development, and transparent reporting of inter-coder reliability. The distinction between formal presence and operational functionality, between what an instrument says and what it enables an implementing agency to do, is the key coding principle on which the framework's diagnostic capacity relies.

One of the most significant applications of this form of analysis concerns the measurement of policy change. If the operative content of instruments—their specifications and calibrations—is the level at which policies are most consequentially configured, then it is also the level at which change needs be detected and measured.

Chapter 9 elaborates on this latter argument, demonstrating how a micro-design perspective resolves some of the most persistent methodological issues in the study of policy change, offering a more principled and empirically tractable account of policy transformation than more common approaches operating at the paradigm or instrument-type level.

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Measuring Policy Change through Micro-Design Analysis

Abstract Earlier chapters in the book have shown how existing frameworks for studying public policy are typically too abstract to reveal the reconfigurations through which policies frequently transform. This chapter argues that the micro-design framework helps address this issue in the study of policy change by enabling the distinction between nominal reform, where the operative content remains substantially unchanged despite declared changes, and substantive reform, where the specification and calibration profiles are genuinely reconfigured. The chapter applies this logic to the measurement of policy innovation, identifying several alternative trajectories of policy change in which micro-level choices function as the primary mechanisms of transformation, rather than paradigmatic shifts or instrument substitutions.

Keywords Policy change · Micro-design · Nominal reform · Substantive reform · Policy innovation · Policy trajectories

INTRODUCTION: THE MICRO-DIMENSIONS OF POLICY CHANGE

One of the most significant applications of the micro-design framework is to provide a more principled and detailed account of policy change than is possible simply by looking at other more macro-level dimensions like policy paradigms or governance mechanisms, which almost by definition only change very slowly and infrequently. While meso-level dimensions such as instrument choices and policy objectives may change more frequently, they also can be rare. Most change in fact occurs at the level of micro-specifications and calibrations.

As we have seen, existing frameworks for studying policy change clearly exhibit this macro and often meso-level bias in analysing change. For example, the three-order framework proposed by Hall (1993), which constitutes the orthodoxy in the field, as we have seen, distinguishes between changes in policy goals, instrument types, and the overarching policy paradigm and gives primacy to the latter. Similarly, the oft-used typologies of policy change proposed by Mahoney and Thelen (2010)—layering, conversion, drift, and displacement—describe how policy or governance regimes transform over time, but do not specify the operative content of these transformations at either the meso or micro-level.

The micro-design framework, on the other hand, offers a different, but complementary perspective. By providing a fixed set of dimensions along which each instrument can be systematically coded, it enables analysts to detect change at the operational level, a change that may be invisible from a macro or meso perspective, yet which materially alters what a policy actually does, when, and to whom. For example, an instrument may remain nominally unchanged in type—still a regulatory obligation—but undergo significant micro-level reconfiguration, such as a narrowing of the target population, a tightening of the outcome indicator, a shortening of the time frame, a shift from voluntary to compulsory compliance, an increase in the resources allocated, or the introduction of monitoring provisions where none previously existed. Each of these changes is meaningful, and their combination constitutes a needed empirical measure of the depth and direction of reform.

Capano and Pritoni (2026), for example, as reported in the previous chapter, operationalized this logic in their analysis of the micro-design in eight Italian policy reforms, systematically drawing on the specifications and calibrations framework to code a large sample of policy measures and

assess the extent to which these instruments, both individually and collectively, represent genuine design changes or merely repackage pre-existing configurations. As we have seen, their analysis shows that comparing instruments at the micro-level makes it possible to distinguish between nominal reform, where instrument labels change while the operative content remains substantially unaltered, and substantive reform, where the specification and calibration profiles of instruments are genuinely reconfigured.

This distinction is analytically crucial as it enables researchers to determine whether a politically announced reform has actually altered the operative content of public action or merely reframed it rhetorically.

Furthermore, systematic micro-level comparisons over time allow for the development of more fine-grained and theoretically principled indices of design change than those available from the application of existing macro and meso-based frameworks. A policy instrument that demonstrates change across multiple calibration dimensions simultaneously (such as a tightening of stringency, an increase in resource intensity, and the introduction of new monitoring provisions) can be categorized as undergoing profound reform, even if the instrument type and overarching paradigm remain unchanged, something which is not to be expected in the Hallsian three-order model. Conversely, a reform that alters only the instrument's label while leaving its operative content intact can be considered superficial, regardless of its political salience.

This micro-design perspective on policy change also integrates well with work on the relationship between policy change and policy performance. Existing studies of policy effectiveness tend to evaluate outcomes relative to stated objectives without considering whether the operative content of the deployed instruments was adequate to produce the specified outcomes. By making the elements of the micro-design measurable, the framework enables the contribution of design quality to be disentangled from that of contextual factors in explaining why reforms succeed or fail, a methodological advance with important implications for the study and practice of policy design (Capano & Howlett, 2024; Howlett et al., 2024).

MEASURING POLICY INNOVATION THROUGH MICRO-DESIGN ANALYSIS

A related but distinct application of the framework concerns the measurement and conceptualization of policy innovation. Existing approaches have tended to focus on the importance of adopting new instrument

types, borrowing solutions from other jurisdictions, introducing new governance arrangements, or altering dominant policy ideas. However, none of this captures innovation at the operative level, where a policy's actual mode of action is determined (Borras & Edquist, 2013; Edler & Fagerberg, 2017; Flanagan et al., 2011).

The micro-design framework, on the other hand, enables a more precise, empirically tractable definition of policy innovation: an instrument is considered operationally innovative if it introduces a configuration of specifications and calibrations that significantly departs from established design conventions within the relevant policy sector or national context.

This definition has two important properties. Firstly, it is context-sensitive, as innovation is assessed against the prevailing design regime rather than against a universal benchmark. For example, an instrument introducing binding monitoring provisions in a sector where such provisions have been absent may represent significant innovation, even if monitoring has long been routine in other sectors.

Secondly, the definition is multidimensional: innovation can occur along a single dimension (for instance, the introduction of a fixed time-frame in a sector where instruments have historically been open-ended) or across multiple dimensions simultaneously. The latter constitutes a higher degree of innovation as it implies a more fundamental reconfiguration of the instrument's operative logic.

Capano and Pritoni (2026) provide a directly relevant illustration of this logic. Using the micro-design framework, they identified specific instruments that introduced novel operative configurations in Italian strategic policy by combining target populations, outcome indicators, stringency levels, and monitoring provisions in ways with no direct precedent in the Italian regulatory tradition. They also distinguished these instruments from those that appeared innovative in their political framing but retained conventional design profiles in their operative content. These findings highlight a broader methodological consideration: political claims regarding the novelty or ambition of a reform should not be taken at face value but rather require empirical verification at the operational level, something only a micro-level analysis can often deliver.

The ability to measure policy innovation at this level also has important implications beyond the academic study of policy design. For practitioners, it offers the possibility of a disciplined approach to learning from experience. By identifying the operative configurations of design packages deployed in successful reforms and the combinations of specifications

and calibrations that have proved internally incoherent or empirically ineffective, the framework supports evidence-based design in a way that is considerably more actionable than the general prescriptions of meso-level analysis. For evaluators, it provides a systematic basis for assessing not only whether a reform has achieved its stated goals, but also whether it has achieved the operative quality that is a precondition for attaining those goals.

Taken together, such applications to policy change and innovation require an empirically grounded, theoretically informed, and methodologically replicable research agenda—the combination of properties that the field of policy design most urgently requires at this stage of its development—and this is provided by the framework set out here in this volume.

RE-THINKING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE MACRO-, MESO-, AND MICRO-DIMENSIONS OF POLICY CHANGE

Generally, as we have seen, following the ideas about policy composition set out by Hall (1993) and modified by Cashore and Howlett (2007), many studies commonly conceive alterations in policy paradigms and governance styles or preferences to be the primary drivers of policy change. That is, changes in these macro elements, rather than those at the meso or micro-level, are said to be able on their own to drive ‘fundamental’ policy change, with changes in aspects of policy such as policy tools or policy settings following along in the wake of changes at the macro-level of policies. Although occasionally the significance and impact of changes in policy components at meso- and micro-levels is sometimes acknowledged by policy scholars, as we have seen that level remain both under-investigated and under-theorized on its own and with respect to policy dynamics (Cashore & Howlett, 2007).

The fundamental reason for this under-investigation lies in the theoretical framework for studying policy change—Hall’s three-order model—which, despite acknowledging the importance of the micro-level, subordinates it as a driver of change to ideational change at the macro-level. As discussed in earlier chapters, Hall’s (1993) disaggregation of public policies into three components—paradigms, instruments, and instrument calibrations—remains the foundational reference point for many discussion of policy change.

Hall's contribution was decisive: it challenged the then-dominant tendency to treat 'policy' as a single variable and introduced a hierarchical model in which different components of a policy change can be seen to alter at different rates and with different consequences for the overall direction of policy. In Hall's account, it is changes at the third order that drive non-incremental, paradigmatic change, with first and second-order changes following in their wake or remaining largely inconsequential.

The limitations of this view are well established in the empirical literature, even if their theoretical implications have not been fully drawn out.

Empirical studies in areas such as energy and climate change, for example, have revealed numerous instances of significant policy transformation driven not by paradigmatic change but by endogenous shifts in instrument choices and tool calibrations (Carley & Miller, 2012; Hogan & Howlett, 2015; Schaffrin et al., 2014; Verbruggen & Lauber, 2012). As Sewerin et al. (2022) have argued, the polarization between paradigmatic and incremental change obscures the variety of policy trajectories through which policies actually evolve. These trajectories cannot be adequately captured without systematic attention to the operative content of instruments.

What the orthodoxy misses, in short, is not simply the empirical frequency of micro- and meso-driven change, but the theoretical basis for that frequency: the fact that the operative content of instruments—who is targeted, by what means, under what monitoring regime, with what accountability rules—is itself a locus of causal power in the policy process. Changing a target population, tightening a compliance threshold, or introducing a new monitoring provision can alter the distribution of costs and benefits among actors, modify the incentive structure facing implementers, and cumulatively shift the political equilibrium in which a policy regime is embedded.

These are not trivial adjustments: they are the operative mechanisms through which policy intentions are either realized or frustrated on the ground. Recognition of the limitations of the Hall orthodoxy has generated a body of work identifying alternative trajectories of policy change. Three such trajectories are particularly relevant here.

The first, and most familiar, is an intra-paradigmatic model similar to Hall's original logic but also to classical incrementalism (Hayes, 1992; Lindblom, 1959), in which significant change occurs through the continuous adjustment of calibrations and settings within an otherwise stable

paradigmatic and institutional framework. As depicted in Fig. 9.1, in this model, the macro-level of policy goals and governance arrangements remains essentially unchanged while micro-level specifications and calibrations are progressively refined. Change may be slow and barely visible at any given moment, but its cumulative effect can still be substantial over time.

The second trajectory is a more bottom-up, tinkering, model, in which micro-level changes are not simply derivative of macro-level goals but become the primary locus of change, with the potential to generate cumulative pressures that eventually alter meso and macro configurations (Fig. 9.2). The progressive relaxation of enforcement rules and penalty thresholds in drug policy in North America over several decades is a documented example of this dynamic: micro-level and how recalibrations accumulated over time to produce a policy reality that ultimately required and enabled paradigmatic re-framing of illegal drug use and in some cases legalization of marijuana and other ‘soft’ drugs (Gourdet et al., 2017; Wesley & Salomons, 2019). The significance of this trajectory for the argument of this book is that it demonstrates that the causal arrow in

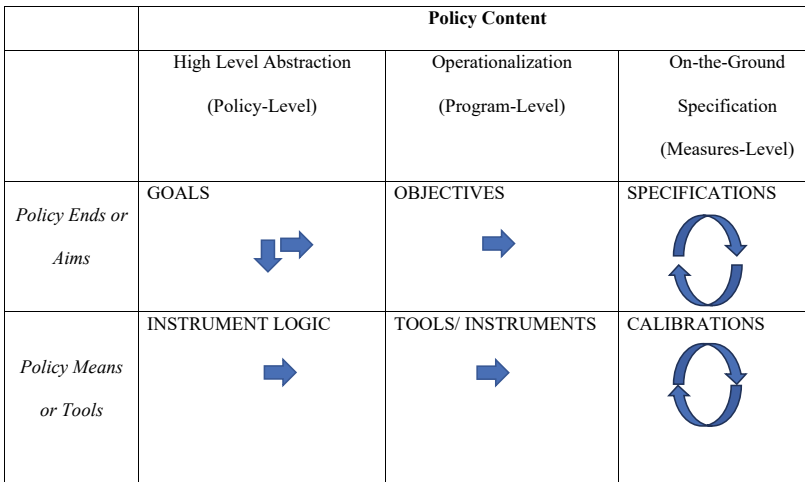


Fig. 9.1 The Pattern of intra-paradigmatic change (*Note* Arrows indicate direction of change)

policy change does not always run from the top down: micro-level operative decisions can accumulate into macro-level transformation and are not just self-referential.

The third trajectory is a patching and learning one (Fig. 9.3), in which significant change originates at the both meso- and micro-level through the active interaction between instrument choices and micro-level calibrations—a process of ‘packaging’, ‘patching’, or ‘stretching’ existing policy mixes (Howlett & Rayner, 2013; Howlett & del Rio, 2015) that generates new operative configurations without necessarily disrupting the macro-level paradigm.

Oliver and Pemberton’s (2004) re-examination of Hall’s own UK economic policy case demonstrated that this third pattern provides a better empirical fit for the transition from Keynesian to monetarist economic policy than Hall’s original account focussed on top-down paradigmatic change. Similarly, the post-2008 development of the US Affordable Care Act involved the gradual accretion of new specifications

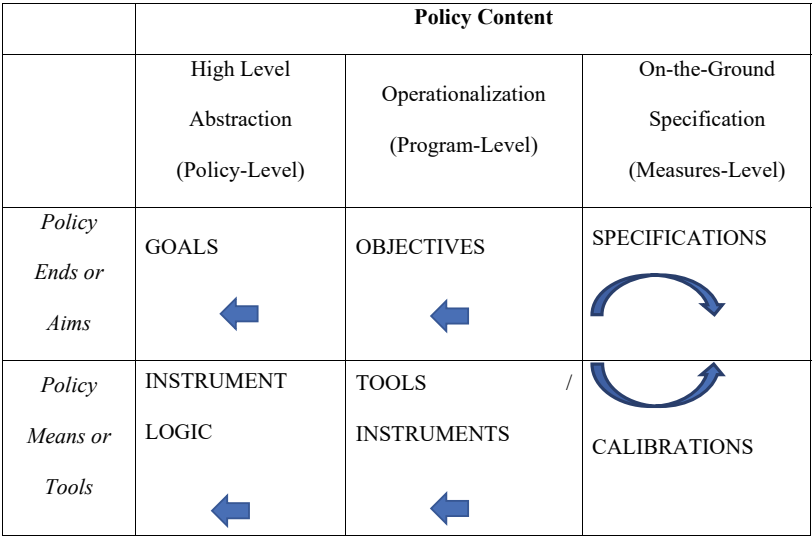


Fig. 9.2 Alternative 1: Policy development through incremental tinkering (*Note* The primary locus of change is the micro-level. Cumulative micro-level adjustment generates upward pressure that can eventually alter meso and macro configurations)

	Policy Content		
	High Level Abstraction (Policy-Level)	Operationalization (Program-Level)	On-the-Ground Specification (Measures-Level)
<i>Policy</i> <i>Ends or</i> <i>Aims</i>	GOALS 	OBJECTIVES 	SPECIFICATIONS 
<i>Policy</i> <i>Means or</i> <i>Tools</i>	INSTRUMENT LOGIC 	TOOLS/INSTRUMENTS 	CALIBRATIONS 

Fig. 9.3 Alternative 2: Policy development through patching and learning (Note Bidirectional exchange ($\rightleftharpoons$) between meso- and micro-levels)

and calibrations—individual mandates, insurance market regulations, subsidy thresholds—within an existing governance framework, ultimately producing a policy regime whose operative content was substantially different from its predecessor (Beland et al., 2016).

These three alternative trajectories all differ from the Hall-inspired orthodoxy and are all united by their dependence on the operative content of instruments as the medium through which change is generated and sustained. In all three cases, it is the specific design choices encoded in target specifications and instrumental calibrations, rather than abstract ideological or ideational shifts, that constitute the proximate mechanisms of change. This observation is not merely descriptive; it demonstrates that any serious theory of policy change must be able to observe and measure these operational choices as well as trace shifts in ideational discourses.

The framework developed in this book provides precisely this capability.

CONCLUSION: MICRO-LEVEL DRIVERS OF SIGNIFICANT POLICY CHANGE

The argument of this chapter has been cumulative. It began with the observation that Hall's foundational model of policy change and its subsequent extensions by Cashore and Howlett leave a systematic gap: while the operative content of policy instruments, their specifications and calibrations, is identified as a component of policy, it is not adequately theorized as a source of causal power in the policy process. The chapter then demonstrated that the alternative policy change trajectories identified in the empirical literature (incremental tinkering, patching, and learning) are precisely those in which micro-level operational choices function as primary mechanisms of change. Furthermore, it was shown how the micro-design framework resolves this issue by addressing the dependent variable problem head-on, making the distinction between nominal and substantive reform observable, and establishing a direct analytical link between operative design content and policy performance and dynamics.

Finally, the chapter also advanced two further contributions of the framework that go beyond the conventional analysis of policy change. Firstly, the framework reveals the substantive content of policy decisions at the operational level, highlighting the distinct choices (three relating to specifications and the six relating to calibrations) that determine whether a policy instrument can deliver on its promises. Secondly, it reveals the politics of micro-design as a distinct and analytically important domain of political conflict, where the most significant battles over the distribution of costs, benefits, and administrative discretion are often fought. Existing theories of political conflict have overlooked this domain in large part because, until now, they lacked the analytical vocabulary to recognize it.

Taken together, these contributions constitute a reorientation of the field's attention, shifting it from the question of which broad policy approach is adopted to the question of what policies actually say and do at the operative level. The analytical and practical implications of this reorientation, in terms of designing more effective instruments, evaluating reform, and governing implementation, are further discussed in the concluding chapter.

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Conclusion: The Micro-Dimension and the Politics of Governing

Abstract This concluding chapter synthesizes the book's argument and draws out its implications for policy theory, design practice, and the future of micro-design research. It distills the arguments of the book into several cumulative propositions: that micro-design is a constitutive rather than residual layer of policy; that it configures the causal mechanisms linking intent to outcomes; and that micro-level changes are a primary vehicle of politically consequential policy transformation that existing frameworks systematically under-report. From these propositions, the chapter derives three analytical shifts that follow from taking the operative layer more seriously as a first-order object of inquiry relating to policy change, design quality, and policy innovation, before stating its limits with candour. It synthesizes the political argument built across the book into a dedicated section, showing that the micro-level is often the primary terrain on which the most consequential distributional choices in governance are made, encoded, and contested, and that making it analytically legible is a condition of democratic accountability as much as a scholarly contribution. The chapter closes with a research agenda for the systematic development of future micro-level design research.

Keywords Policy design · Micro-design · Policy change · Delivery package · Calibrations · Specifications · Design quality · Democratic accountability · Research agenda

INTRODUCTION: WHAT THE BOOK HAS ESTABLISHED

This book proposes a straightforward yet challenging reorientation of the policy field's primary object of inquiry in policy design and studies of policy change. The argument is that policy analysis must not stop at instrument choice, programme labels, or declared reform intentions. Nor accept that all significant policy change is driven by paradigmatic wobbles.

Instead, it argued that analysts must delve more deeply into the operative content through which policies are realized, the rules that determine access, compliance, burden distribution, and administrative action. At this micro-level, design is not merely technical; it is where political commitments are translated into enforceable entitlements and obligations, where discretion is allocated and constrained, and where the causal mechanisms connecting intent to outcome are activated or blocked. While the field has long been aware of this in a general sense (the implementation tradition has made it impossible to ignore), it has lacked the conceptual framework to treat the operative layer as a systematic and manageable subject of analysis rather than a by-product of discretion and context.

The book's contribution has three distinct and mutually reinforcing dimensions.

The first is conceptual: establishing micro-design as a constitutive and analytically tractable level of public policy, distinct from both macro-level paradigms and governance arrangements, as well as from implementation discretion and administrative routines. The operative micro-layer has not been absent from the literature: Salamon, Linder, Peters, Ostrom, and Hall have each addressed its significance. However, it has typically been treated as something that occurs after the actual design is finalized and is derived from higher-level decisions. Consequently, it is not thought to require its own analytical framework. This book argues that the opposite is true. Micro choices are not the downstream consequences of paradigms and instrument selections; rather, they are the point at which those choices become consequential for real actors in real situations as the delivery package for a policy. This conceptual autonomy is the precondition for everything else.

The second dimension is methodological. By developing a framework of specifications and calibrations as the constitutive dimensions of the delivery package, setting out the logic through which this framework can be applied to individual instruments, policy portfolios, and comparative analyses. The book enables us to observe and measure what policies

actually say and do with a level of detail that instrument-type and goal-level analysis cannot achieve. Crucially, these methodological advances render two previously impressionistic judgements empirically tractable: the distinction between nominal and substantive policy change, and the distinction between design-generated and context-generated performance. Both distinctions are important for scholarship, evaluation, and governance practice.

The third dimension is theoretical. By demonstrating that changes at the micro-level can drive policy transformation upwards across the macro-, meso- and micro hierarchies, and by making the distributional conflicts over operative design choices, which existing theories have consistently assigned to the margins, analytically visible, the book challenges the residual status of the micro-level in dominant policy dynamics frameworks. These three dimensions are not simply additive. The conceptual clarification creates the possibility of a methodological advance, providing the tools for testing the theoretical claims. Once established, these claims give the conceptual framework its full analytical and political reach.

These three dimensions can be distilled into several propositions that, together, constitute the book's contribution to the field and to future research.

The first proposition, to repeat, is that micro-design is a constitutive rather than residual layer of policy design. Any instrument, such as regulation, taxation, spending, information, or organizational provision, must be specified and calibrated to be implementable. These choices determine the reach, intensity, and administrative feasibility of the policy in ways that cannot be predetermined by macro- and meso-level decisions.

The second proposition is that it is the micro-elements of policy which configure the causal mechanisms linking intent to outcomes. Deterrence of unwanted behaviour, for example, depends on monitoring probability and sanction severity, while inclusion depends on eligibility criteria and the administrative burden of access. Learning in turn depends on feedback channels, reporting obligations and evaluation mandates. When these operative elements are misaligned, a policy can fail, even if its goals are coherent and its instrument selection is theoretically appropriate.

The third proposition is that micro-design changes commonly constitute a primary vehicle for policy change, including politically significant changes that are under-represented in analysis. Policies frequently transform through their recalibration, layering, and procedural redesign rather than the replacement of instrument types or paradigms (Cashore &

Howlett, 2007). A micro-design lens is the only analytical tool capable of observing and evaluating such shifts.

Taken together, these propositions do not claim that micro-design determines everything. Rather, they propose a more modest and verifiable claim: without considering this operative layer, explanations of how policies work, how they change, and who bears their costs and reaps their benefits, remain incomplete, incapable of grasping the terrain on which governance has the greatest impact.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY DESIGN

If these propositions are accepted, even provisionally, they produce a set of analytical shifts that extend well beyond the specific framework developed here.

Before outlining these shifts, it is important to clarify that micro-design is not synonymous with instrument choice and is not reducible to implementation behaviour. While instrument choice involves selecting a broad governing technology, such as regulation, subsidy, tax, or organizational provision, micro-design focuses on the practical construction of that technology, including the rules that define targets and the calibrations that determine delivery, enforcement, and accountability. Implementation refers to how organizations and frontline actors enact, adapt, and sometimes subvert authoritative prescriptions in practice.

Many gaps and limitations persist in works on policy tools (Capano & Howlett, 2020) and on policy goals and objectives (Petek et al., 2021), despite these subjects being studied in the policy sciences for decades. While there is an increasing number of empirical studies on the effectiveness of policy instruments, especially in sectors such as innovation policy, environmental policy, and climate change policy (Borras & Edquist, 2013; Edler et al., 2016; Flanagan et al., 2011; Rogge & Reichardt, 2016), the usefulness of these studies is limited by their lack of attention to policy calibrations and specification.

This is a problem for both scholars and practitioners seeking more comprehensive models and frameworks for analysing, designing, and implementing policies and their components.

The operative micro-level, however, is precisely where instrument choice and implementation converge; it structures discretion without eliminating it and makes some implementation outcomes more probable than others. Distinguishing between these concepts is not pedantic; it

enables the operative layer to be treated as a measurable object of change rather than an explanatory residual. Three analytical shifts follow.

The first analytical shift concerns the unit of analysis. When the micro-level is treated as constitutive rather than residual, the relevant object of policy design research is no longer exclusively the instrument type, programme category, or declared reform intention. Rather, it is the delivery package, the specific configuration of specifications, and calibrations that determine what the policy actually demands of, and provides to, different actors. This change in unit of analysis provides a different view of policy content and change. Policies that appear similar at the instrument level are revealed to be substantively distinct when their operative configurations are compared. Similarly, transformations that appear modest at the programme level are revealed as significant when the redistribution of burdens, access conditions, and enforcement intensity is traced at the micro-level. Conversely, policies that generate substantial political noise and legislative activity are sometimes revealed, upon closer examination, to have changed little in how they actually function. The ability to distinguish between these cases is not just a minor methodological improvement; it is a prerequisite for acquiring knowledge through cumulative learning about the effects of policies and how to change them.

The second shift concerns the relationship between design and performance. The persistent (negative) gap between policy content and policy effects has long been attributed primarily to implementation, street-level discretion, administrative capacity, and inter-organizational coordination (Lipsky, 1980; Winter, 2015). These factors are real and cannot be dissolved into design analysis. However, the micro-design perspective raises a prior and frequently neglected question: was the instrument adequately specified and coherently calibrated in the first place? Many so-called implementation failures are, upon closer inspection, design failures, cases where the operative content was internally inconsistent or insufficient to activate the required causal or behavioural chain. Examples include a regulatory standard without credible monitoring, a subsidy without accessible eligibility procedures, a public service without defined accountability for delivery outcomes, or any provision that assigns responsibility without allocating resources. These issues are not implementation problems, but rather design-generated implementation impossibilities. The micro-design framework enables such failures to be identified before they manifest themselves in poor outcomes and distinguishes between

design- and context-generated performance gaps in a way that generic capacity arguments do not.

The third shift is perhaps the most politically significant. A micro-design perspective reveals political conflict at the level at which it most frequently occurs in governing practice. The dominant frameworks in policy analysis locate political contestation at the level of paradigms, advocacy coalitions, and instrument preferences, that is, at the level of major decisions about the role of government. However, a significant proportion of the most consequential distributional decisions in the policy process concern operational details, such as who is covered by an eligibility rule and who is excluded, what documentation standard is required, how much discretion is granted to frontline officials, what sanctions are attached to non-compliance, and how the burden of proof is distributed between the state and the citizen in establishing entitlement. These choices encode assumptions about deservingness and risk, shaping the material and symbolic experience of policy in ways that aggregate programme statistics can mask (Herd & Moynihan, 2019; Schneider & Ingram, 1997). A micro-analytical vocabulary that renders these choices nameable, comparable, and traceable over time is, in this sense, also a vocabulary for democratic scrutiny—a point to which we will return shortly.

THE IMPACT OF ALTERING THE OPERATIVE ARCHITECTURE OF POLICY DESIGN AND CHANGE

Beyond its contribution to the analysis of policy change, the micro-design framework puts forward a broader claim about the nature of policy-making itself. It suggests that the operative content of policy decisions is richer and more significant than conventional accounts indicate, and that this content has been systematically overlooked not least because the necessary analytical tools required for its analysis have been unavailable.

The dominant frameworks for analysing policy decisions—whether focused on the role of ideas and paradigms, the configuration of actor coalitions, institutional path dependencies, or the dynamics of agenda-setting—all have one thing in common: they primarily concern the question of ‘which’ policy is adopted, rather than ‘what’ the policy actually does at an operational level. They are theories of relatively high-level policy selection, not policy content. This distinction is important because

choosing between broad policy alternatives, such as whether to use regulation or subsidies, or to pursue universal or targeted coverage, is only the first of many consequential decisions in the policy design process. The operative content of the chosen instrument is determined by a subsequent, largely separate series of decisions concerning target specifications and calibrations. Ultimately, these decisions determine whether the policy can deliver on its promises.

The framework set out here makes this second layer of decisions analytically visible. It reveals that any policy decision involves a certain number of distinct operative choices, concerning the specification of policy goals and the calibration of the delivery instrument. Each of these choices is consequential in its own right and interacts with the others to produce the instrument's overall operative logic. The quality of a policy (its internal coherence, administrative feasibility, and capacity to activate the behavioural changes required for goal achievement) depends on how these choices on micro-dimensions are made and how they fit together.

This perspective transforms the way policy decisions should be studied. Rather than simply asking whether a government chose the 'right' instrument, analysts can now ask whether the instrument contains the necessary operative specifications: is the target population defined with sufficient precision? Is the compliance obligation stringent enough to overcome resistance? Are the monitoring provisions detailed enough to generate actionable information? Do the accountability rules create appropriate incentives for implementation effort? These are not technical questions that are separate from the study of policy: these are the questions through which the same actors who chose the general goals and instruments often decide who is actually covered, how strictly compliance is enforced, who monitors, and who is accountable. These choices are qualitatively distinct from the selection of paradigms and instruments because they determine the concrete operational consequences of abstract political commitments. They concern the practical implications of public authority, such as who pays the costs and reaps the benefits of policy choices, and how discretion is distributed between legislators, administrators, and implementing organizations. The framework provided in the book provides the analytical vocabulary needed to ask and answer these questions.

The book proposes a framework, built on a few existing contributions on goal specifications and instrumental calibrations, to better understand the operational side of policy design, centred on the micro-level

components of policies. The combination of these specifications and calibrations concretely activates those mechanisms—related to setting the decision rules and the procedural side of instruments (Howlett, 2018) and defining the parties involved in their management and their relationships (Bouwma et al., 2017)—that drive a policy towards an expected or hoped-for outcome.

All in all, the framework offers a new perspective for understanding and explaining policy-making and for better grasping both the theory and practice of policy design. It suggests a new path of research through which the long-lasting gap between policy design and policy performance can be reduced, thus making public policy studies more relevant for policy practitioners and policymakers. It contributes to both the theory and practice of policy design by making the micro-level of policy analytically tractable. For policy theorists, it offers a conceptual architecture through which the operative content of policy instruments can be systematically described and compared, and through which hypotheses about the relationship between design quality and policy outcomes can be rigorously formulated and tested. For policy practitioners, it offers a systematic map of the kinds of decisions that must be made if an instrument is to be fully specified and operationally coherent.

Such a micro-design perspective does not replace macro theories of policy change; rather, it alters the level of detail at which those theories can be tested and the phenomena they can observe. Hall's classic distinction between changes in settings, instruments, and overarching goals remains influential precisely because it provides an ordinal logic for analysing change (Hall, 1993). However, the gap between policy design and policy performance—one of the most persistent problems in the policy sciences—is unlikely to be closed by attention to paradigms or instrument types alone. It requires, above all, a clearer and more disciplined understanding of what policies actually say when they say it. That is precisely what a micro-analytical perspective makes possible.

In the day-to-day functioning of many public policies, the 'settings' that Hall describes are not just parameters; they are bundled with procedural and organizational calibrations that can alter the lived meaning and distributional consequences of a policy without any formal change in instrument type or goal. Similarly, policy feedback approaches remind us that policies influence politics by structuring resources and interpretations. Micro-design is where these feedback channels are built or blocked, and therefore where the political consequences of past design decisions

can be traced most precisely (Pierson, 2004). This implies a methodological and conceptual shift: rather than merely asking whether a policy has changed its goals or instruments, we should routinely ask whether it has altered the configuration of the delivery package through which it allocates burdens and benefits, and whether these changes were deliberate, incidental, or the result of political pressure.

This adjustment also illuminates an important empirical pattern in contemporary governance. In regimes characterized by institutional stability, veto points, or high polarization, policy transformation may primarily proceed through the micro-layer because it is politically feasible and can be administratively framed as ‘technical’, often being easier to enact through secondary legislation, administrative guidelines, and enforcement discretion than through formal legislation or programme redesign.

This is not a marginal phenomenon; it is a primary mode of governance in systems where formal institutional change is difficult. A policy that alters its eligibility criteria, monitoring intensity or administrative burden may profoundly impact the lives of those it governs, far more so than a legislative announcement of new objectives. The result is a style of governance in which transformation is often incremental, distributed over time, and only legible when operative arrangements are systematically tracked (Hacker, 2004; Pierson, 2004). A direct consequence is that much of what is conventionally categorized as ‘implementation drift’ in comparative policy research may be more accurately analysed as micro-level redesign, sometimes intentional, sometimes opportunistic, and sometimes driven by capacity, but not analytically accidental. When procedures, specifications and calibrations change, policy changes. Treating that as implementation rather than policy formation or design obscures the politics and responsibility of the change.

The implications for design quality are equally concrete. Policy design scholarship has long warned against the naïve assumption that choosing the right instrument guarantees success (Howlett, 2019; Linder & Peters, 1989). The micro-level analysis presented here sharpens this warning and makes it actionable. Design quality should be assessed in terms of configurational coherence, the correspondence between specifications and calibrations, and the consistency of both specification and calibration choices.

A policy can have a theoretically sensible mix of instruments and still be incoherent at the micro-level: ambitious targets with inadequate resources, strict sanctions with low monitoring probability, universal rhetoric with exclusionary eligibility criteria, or high discretion allocated to implementing agencies with no guidance on how to exercise it. These are not peripheral imperfections; they are often the main cause of performance gaps. And they can be identified before implementation, meaning the micro-design framework is not only an analytical tool but also a practical instrument for improving policy before it fails. Capacity matters, but from a micro-level design perspective, capacity is not merely an external constraint; it is also shaped by design decisions, such as funding allocations, staffing rules, IT systems, reporting requirements, and coordination mechanisms (Knill et al., 2024).

The implications this has for the concept of policy innovation deserve particular attention, since they correct a persistent conflation of novelty with change. Public policy innovation is often equated with novel instruments (new tools, programme categories, or governance forms) or with rhetorical ambition and political commitment. However, a micro-design lens reveals a more pragmatic and empirically verifiable approach, as novelty often lies in reconfiguring operational elements, such as new eligibility thresholds, data infrastructures, compliance automation, monitoring regimes, accountability chains, and burden distributions.

A policy that introduces a new instrument label while retaining the operative architecture of the old one has not innovated in any meaningful sense for those it governs. Conversely, a policy that retains the same instrument label while fundamentally reconfiguring its delivery package may represent genuine operative innovation with real consequences for performance and equity.

This is important because innovation claims can otherwise become entirely detached from substantive changes in how policy operates. The framework supports a pragmatic innovation metric, innovation as a micro-configurational departure from an established design template, which is compatible with the literature on the policy mix's recognition that novelty often emerges through the (re)combination of existing instruments and the redesign of their settings (Howlett & Rayner, 2007). Crucially, it also enables analysts to distinguish between innovation for marketing purposes and innovation that results in operative change. Furthermore, it allows them to evaluate whether novelty, wherever it occurs, represents

an improvement or a degradation in the internal coherence and causal plausibility of a delivery package.

Several further implications of this reorientation also deserve greater attention. The first concerns the relationship between policy design and democratic accountability. If the most consequential distributional choices in the policy process are made at the operative level, then citizens' and legislatures' capacity to hold governments accountable for what policies actually do depends on the operative level being analytically legible. A framework that makes specifications and calibrations visible and comparable is, therefore, not only an instrument of scholarly analysis; it is a precondition for informed democratic scrutiny of what governing in practice amounts to.

A second implication concerns the acceptability of public policy. This depends more on the micro-design dimensions of a policy than on the general principles it invokes, i.e. the 'principle-policy gap' (Veselý, 2024). Agreement on a general policy goal does not predict acceptance of the specific delivery package through which that goal is pursued. Therefore, the choices that determine whether a policy can work are also the choices that determine whether it will be accepted by those it governs.

The third implication concerns the normative standards appropriate to policy evaluation. Evaluating a reform as successful or unsuccessful based on its declared goals or instrument labels is, as this chapter has shown, insufficient. Evaluation must reach the operative level: did the specifications adequately define the target? Did the calibrations cohere with the causal requirements of the instrument? Did the delivery package generate the resource and interpretive effects that effective governance requires? These are not secondary technical questions; they are the central questions of a policy science that takes seriously both the performance of government and the political conditions under which that performance can be democratically assessed.

No framework should claim universality without clearly stating its limits, and two boundary conditions of the micro-design approach should be acknowledged. The first is that the framework analyses formal design intent (what policy instruments say in their authoritative legal and administrative texts) and not implementation practice, *per se*, or the informal norms and discretionary routines that shape frontline delivery.

A highly specified and coherently calibrated instrument may still drift from its design through selective enforcement, bureaucratic adaptation, or the exercise of discretion by street-level officials. Conversely, a loosely

specified instrument may be implemented with considerable rigour by a capable and motivated administration. The framework measures the operative content of design as a distinct phenomenon from implementation behaviour; it does not claim that design determines behaviour, only that it structures it in ways that cannot be adequately understood without attending to the operative layer. Connecting micro-level analysis to implementation research, particularly to the literature on administrative burden and street-level bureaucracy, is one of the most important next steps for the development of this research programme.

A second limit concerns the political determinants of micro-level choices themselves. The book identifies the political stakes of operative design decisions and demonstrates their distributional consequences; it does not offer a systematic theory of the political process through which calibrations are adopted, by whom, under what conditions, and with what consequences for subsequent contestation and feedback.

This is a significant gap, and it defines a research programme in its own right. Why do some governments embed high administrative burdens in otherwise generous programmes? Why do enforcement calibrations systematically differ across target groups even within formally universal policies? Under what conditions are operative redesigns politically feasible when formal programme reforms are not? These questions require a theory of micro-design politics that remains to be developed, although the present framework provides the necessary conceptual vocabulary for its construction.

THE POLITICS OF GOVERNING AT THE MICRO-LEVEL

The political relevance of micro-level design issues has been demonstrated throughout this book. Chapter 2 established that distributional conflict is most consequentially resolved at the micro-level, rather than in open contests over paradigms and instrument types. Instead, it is resolved through quieter negotiations over eligibility thresholds, enforcement intensity, administrative burden, and discretionary authority.

Chapter 4 showed that the fragmentation of classical contributions rendered the political implications of operative choices largely analytically invisible. This invisibility is no accident: what cannot be named cannot be contested. Chapter 6 demonstrated that choices concerning stringency, visibility, automaticity, and monitoring reflect assumptions regarding deservingness, risk, and the appropriate scope of state authority that are

far from technically neutral. Each specification and calibration dimension is a site where political conflict over costs and benefits is resolved, typically far from public scrutiny. And Chapter 7 showed that actors often reach agreement on formal goals by deferring real distributional conflicts to the micro-level where they can be resolved without attracting the scrutiny that open legislative choice would require. Chapter 8 showed that the degree of precision or vagueness in a statutory provision carries information about the intensity and direction of the political conflicts that shaped it; the text of a policy is a political document, even when it appears technical. Chapter 9 demonstrated that governments can alter the impact of a policy on real people while leaving its label, declared goals, and formal architecture intact, without triggering any accountability mechanism designed to scrutinize such changes. This quiet mode of transformation is not exceptional, but routine in the many systems where open legislative revision is politically costly.

Taken together, these contributions demonstrate that the micro-level is a not merely the technical residue of political and policy decisions made elsewhere. Rather, it is very often the primary arena in which the most significant decisions regarding who receives what, how, and under what conditions are made, recorded, and disputed. Governing largely involves managing this terrain. Making this terrain analytically legible, therefore, contributes not only to policy science. It is also a prerequisite for democratic accountability, enabling citizens, legislators, and evaluators to question not only what a government announces, but also what it actually does, to whom, and at whose expense.

CONCLUSION: A RESEARCH AGENDA AND A POLITICAL ARGUMENT

Five research directions follow from the arguments presented here.

The first of these is the further development of micro-design coding and comparability standards, building on the Institutional Grammar tradition and the operationalization logic developed in Chapter 8. The standards contained in the book allow for more systematic cross-sectoral and cross-national comparisons, extending the approach of comparative politics to institutional variables by tracking operative changes over time with the same rigour. Without such standards, micro-level research risks remaining a collection of insightful single-case analyses that cannot generate cumulative theoretical knowledge.

The second direction is for more empirical study of the political determinants of micro-level design choices, such as the conditions under which operative details become sites of overt political conflict and the strategies through which actors embed their interests in calibrations rather than just in instrument types. This involves studying in more detail the feedback effects through which operative arrangements shape the politics of subsequent reform (Beland et al., 226).

The micro-level is not a politically neutral territory that simply executes decisions made at higher levels. It is where the most consequential choices about the distribution of social goods, risks, and obligations are often made, frequently in ways that are invisible to legislative oversight, inaccessible to legal challenge, and opaque to the citizens most directly affected. Administrative burdens that effectively screen out weaker claimants, enforcement asymmetries that protect concentrated interests, and discretionary provisions that allow differential treatment while maintaining a façade of formal neutrality are not implementation accidents.

These, rather, are governing choices and deserve to be recognized, analysed, and challenged as such. A framework that makes these choices analytically legible is therefore a valuable contribution to policy science. It also contributes to democratic accountability by better enabling the evaluation of governmental actions against stated intentions and holding those in power accountable for the consequences of their design decisions.

The third direction is for more systematic linking of micro-level configurations to performance and outcomes, testing the framework's hypotheses about greater compliance, access, and implementation failure through methods such as quasi-experimental designs where feasible and comparative process tracing where not. More mixed-methods approaches are needed to handle the complexity of the operative layer.

The fourth direction is for more dynamic analyses, involving longitudinal studies of how delivery packages evolve within policy regimes. These studies would document the cumulative effects of incremental operative change and connect micro-level trajectories to macro-level transformation. These studies would help reveal the details of the modes of gradual change (layering, drift, conversion, and displacement) identified by Mahoney and Thelen (2010) at the institutional level and trace them at the level of specific specifications and calibrations.

The fifth direction, which is arguably the timeliest, is applying the micro-design perspective to digital governance, including algorithmic decision systems, automated eligibility checks, platform-mediated service

delivery, and digital-by-default administration. In these emerging governance forms, operative design is increasingly embedded in technical infrastructures, making it more consequential and even more difficult to observe, contest, and hold accountable through conventional political and legal mechanisms. Emerging work on digital and experimental instruments, such as regulatory sandboxes, algorithmic decision systems, and behavioural ‘nudges’, has brought micro-design issues to the fore (Chen & Taeihagh, 2026).

These new tools are often explicitly justified by their precise calibration of incentives, information, and default options. Their success hinges heavily on the specifics of design choices regarding eligibility, data usage, oversight, and transparency (e.g. studies of regulatory sandboxes and innovation portfolios, such as Dunlop et al., 2024; Migone & Howlett, 2024). Consequently, they provide an ideal setting for analysing micro-design and emphasize the importance of developing concepts and methods that can capture the subtle yet significant effects of design details in increasingly complex governance environments.

Ultimately, this research agenda points towards a deeper argument about the relationship between policy analysis and democratic governance. At its core, governing is the allocation of burdens, benefits, and discretion through enforceable rules. Many of these allocations are made, contested, and revised in the operative layer. When policy analysis focuses solely on goals, paradigms, or instrument labels, there is a risk of mistaking public narratives for policy substance, confusing announced intentions with actual governance arrangements and being misled by a narrative which highlights technique and the technical aspects of policy-making. A micro-level design perspective offers a disciplined approach to reconnecting policy analysis with the actual impact of policies: who they affect, what is demanded of them, how they are enforced, and where the predictable points of failure, conflict, and contestation lie.

This is important for practitioners, evaluators, and ultimately citizens. Without a vocabulary for the micro-level, practitioners are poorly equipped to diagnose design failures before implementation exposes them, to transfer lessons from successful policies without losing the operative features that made them work, or defend design choices against pressures that would hollow out their operative content while leaving purely formal structures intact. Evaluators who assess policy performance without considering operational design cannot distinguish between failures caused by the design and those caused by the context. They are

therefore unable to generate the diagnostic knowledge that improves future policy. Furthermore, citizens and the organizations that represent them cannot hold governments accountable for the actual effects of policies if the operative layer remains analytically invisible—if the discrepancy between announced intentions and actual outcomes is attributed solely to ‘implementation’ rather than being traced back to deliberate or negligent design choices.

Ultimately, the study of policy is the study of how collective choices about the distribution of social goods, risks, and obligations are made, contested, and institutionalized. This field of study has been immeasurably enriched by attention to paradigms, coalitions, institutional dynamics, and instrument logics. However, it has been limited by a tendency to treat the operational translation of these high-level forces as either automatic or exogenous, as something that simply happens, rather than something that is designed, and can therefore be improved.

In contemporary governance, much of what matters, though, happens through calibration rather than proclamation, operative amendment rather than paradigmatic rupture, and the redesign of delivery architectures rather than the replacement of programmes. Reclaiming the micro-level as a primary object of analysis does not narrow the ambitions of policy scholarship. Rather, it extends those ambitions to the level at which political choices about who gets what, how, and under what conditions are made most directly and consequentially.

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