Policy Making
Latin American Public Policy Review

POLICY PROCESS RESEARCH IN LATIN AMERICA

Christopher M. Weible
University of Colorado Denver

Alejandra Medina
University of Colorado, Denver

José Sánchez
University of Colorado Denver

What is the policy process as a field of study? How does it relate to other disciplines and fields? Why are theories central to advancing knowledge in this area? And how can policy process scholarship in Latin America continue to advance? This essay addresses these questions with particular emphasis on its theoretical and empirical scholarship in Latin America. It starts with a brief recount of the emergence of policy process research as an area of study, largely rooted in scholarship in the United States, offering multiple descriptions to clarify understanding what the field encompasses. It then argues for the continuing importance of theory in generating systematic and generalizable knowledge of the policy process using the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) as an illustration of what policy process theories can accomplish. The essay then explores the challenges and opportunities shaping past, present, and future policy process research in Latin America.

Keywords: Policy Sciences, Comparative Public Policy, Policy Process Theories, Advocacy Coalition Framework.

A agenda de pesquisa sobre políticas públicas na América Latina

O que é o processo de políticas públicas como campo de estudo? Como ele se relaciona com outras disciplinas e áreas? Por que as teorias são fundamentais para o avanço do conhecimento nessa área? E como a pesquisa sobre políticas públicas na América Latina pode continuar a progredir? Este ensaio aborda essas questões com ênfase particular na produção teórica e empírica na América Latina. Começa com um breve relato da emergência da pesquisa sobre políticas públicas como área de estudo, amplamente enraizada na produção acadêmica nos Estados Unidos, oferecendo múltiplas descrições para esclarecer o que o campo abrange. Em seguida, argumenta sobre a importância contínua da teoria na geração de conhecimento sistemático e generalizável sobre políticas públicas, utilizando o *framework* de Coalizões de Advocacy, ou de Defesa (ACF) como ilustração do que as teorias de políticas públicas podem alcançar. O ensaio explora, então, os desafios e as oportunidades que moldam a pesquisa sobre políticas públicas na América Latina no passado, presente e futuro.

Palavras-chave: Policy Sciences, Políticas públicas comparadas, Teorias de políticas públicas, *Framework* de Coalizões de Advocacy.

Editado por:
André Marenco
Lisandro Abulatif

Revisado por:
Giordano Tronco

Este artigo foi submetido para Analytics, uma seção da revista Policy Making
Publicado: 20 Abr 2026

Como citar:
WEIBLE, C. M.; MEDINA, A.; SÁNCHEZ, J.Policy Process Research in Latin America. Policy Making, Porto Alegre, v.1, p. 2-16, 2026.

La agenda de investigación sobre políticas públicas en América Latina

¿Qué es el proceso de políticas públicas como campo de estudio? ¿Cómo se relaciona con otras disciplinas y áreas? ¿Por qué las teorías son fundamentales para el avance del conocimiento en este ámbito? ¿Y cómo puede la investigación sobre el proceso de políticas públicas en América Latina seguir progresando? Este ensayo aborda estas preguntas, con especial énfasis en la investigación teórica y empírica en América Latina. Comienza con un breve repaso del surgimiento de la investigación sobre el proceso de políticas públicas como área de estudio, con raíces principalmente en la investigación realizada en Estados Unidos, ofreciendo diversas descripciones para clarificar su alcance. A continuación, argumenta a favor de la importancia continua de la teoría para generar conocimiento sistemático y generalizable del proceso de políticas públicas, utilizando el Marco de Coaliciones de Advocacy o Defensa (ACF) como ejemplo de lo que las teorías del proceso de políticas públicas pueden lograr. El ensayo explora los desafíos y las oportunidades que configuran la investigación sobre el proceso de políticas públicas en América Latina, tanto en el pasado como en el presente y el futuro.

Palabras clave: Policy Sciences, Políticas públicas comparadas, Teorías del proceso de políticas públicas, Marco de Coaliciones de Advocacy

INTRODUCTION

Policy process research is firmly part of Latin American scholarship. Yet, core questions remain: What is the policy process as a field of study? How does it relate to other disciplines and fields? Why are theories central to advancing knowledge in this area? And how can policy process scholarship in Latin America continue to advance?

This essay addresses these questions with particular emphasis on its theoretical and empirical scholarship in Latin America. It starts with a brief recount of the emergence of policy process research as an area of study, largely rooted in scholarship in the United States, offering multiple descriptions to clarify understanding of what the field encompasses. It then argues for the continuing importance of theory in generating systematic and generalizable knowledge of the policy process using the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) as an illustration of what policy process theories can accomplish. The essay then explores the challenges and opportunities shaping past, present, and future policy process research in Latin America.

We aim to reach broad audiences, from readers seeking an introduction to policy process scholarship to those interested in deepening their understanding of this field. We also hope to inspire students to continue challenging, questioning, and advancing the study of policy processes.

DESCRIPTIONS OF POLICY PROCESSES

The study of policy processes has been ongoing for at least 75 years. The origins lie, in part, with the visions of Harold D. Lasswell (e.g., Lasswell, 1951), who helped provide some of the categorical foundations and descriptions of the term in the mid-20th century, all tied toward a greater realization of human dignity for all. However, the development and the emergence of the science around policy process lie with other scholars and really emerged in the 1960s with foundations in areas such as group theory (Bentley, 1908; Truman, 1951; Garson, 1978), power (Dahl, 1961), democratic theory (Dahl, 1961; Cobb & Elder, 1971), and decision-making (Simon, 1957).

From these foundational pillars, descriptions of policy process have been and remain varied. One standard description originates with the “policy cycle” (Lasswell, 1956; Jones, 1970; Brewer,

1974; deLeon, 1999). From this perspective, policy processes consist of the distinct and major functions of all governments, often described in a sequence: agenda setting, policy formulation, policy adoption, policy implementation, evaluation, and policy termination. This life-cycle interpretation of policy processes — i.e., of how ideas are given life in a public policy and die — helped structure and direct the study of public policy for the latter quarter of the 20th century, an argument made with poise and persuasion by Peter deLeon (1999).

One of the strengths of the policy cycle is its simplicity. For example, if a person were to describe policy processes to someone outside academia, describing them as how issues get on the agenda, what drives policy change and implementation, and how policies are evaluated and terminated would be effective and not inaccurate.

Given the policy cycle's straightforward simplicity, it will likely remain invaluable as a communication tool. The problem with the policy cycle is the assumptions rolled into its theoretical infrastructure and the implications that follow, especially in constraining and curtailing both our imagination of what policy processes could and should be and the theoretical and empirical development of the field of policy process research. For example, embracing the policy cycle tends to box theoretical work into its stages and exclude important phenomena that fall outside those stages, from the role of the general public to the study of narratives and discourse. It also suggests that the policy process was far cleaner and simpler, when, in fact, it is far more complex (for the seminal critique of the policy cycle, see Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier, 1993).

Another useful way to describe the policy process is as an integrated field of political science. This explanation might work best for those who are somewhat knowledgeable about the discipline of political science. For example, many political science curricula organize courses around a fragmented view of government and politics. There might be courses taught on public opinion, courts, legislatures, executives, interest groups, voting and elections, bureaucracies, and so on. Policy processes as a field of study emerged to integrate these topical areas that comprise many political science programs in the past and present (Lasswell, 1956; Easton, 1953; Jones, 1970). The rationale for describing the policy process as an integrated version of political science is straightforward: analyzing any policy issue requires knowledge and insights that span the field.

While policy processes, as an integrated field of political science, provide appropriate imagery, especially when talking to people knowledgeable about political science, there are, however, limits. One limit is that policy processes can and should expand beyond political science. For example, some aspects of the policy processes overlap with other disciplines, such as economics, organizational theory, and sociology (e.g., Jones, 2001; Ostrom, 2010). Nonetheless, the policy process, as an integrated field of political science, offers considerable descriptive traction.

Another description of policy processes is research that focuses on public policies and the surrounding contexts, dynamics, people, events, and outcomes (Weible, 2023). This description recognizes the inherent complexity and fuzzy boundaries of policy process research by neither assuming a linear sequence nor bounding the study under a political science umbrella. Weible goes further by describing the area of study as ambiguous, amorphous, multifaceted, and complex. Furthermore, this description explicitly builds on and echoes descriptions of when the field began, see Shipman (1959) and Lindblom (1968). At the same time, the description might be too abstract and open-ended for some.

These three descriptions of the policy process (a simple, linear description of the policy cycle; an integrated field of political science; and a complexity-oriented, fuzzy-boundary description) help provide an orientation that presumes that no single description can fully capture what we mean by policy processes. In this essay, we assume an intentional pluralism in such descriptions, not only because the phenomena of study require it, but also because these varied descriptions

themselves offer multiple vistas for understanding and studying policy processes. In other words, this argument recognizes the multifaceted nature of policy processes and offers a pragmatic way of understanding and communicating the field, depending on the audience.

The preceding paragraphs show that the policy process can be described in multiple ways and located across disciplines. Such ambiguities inherent in this area of study also suggest a need for original theorizing on policy processes distinct from other fields and disciplines to generate systematic and generalizable insights. Such theorizing does not eliminate ambiguities but helps manage them and give platforms for the emergence of policy process research programs that include people across academia.

RELATING POLICY PROCESSES TO OTHER FIELDS AND DISCIPLINES

For any field, scholars have come and gone, each of whom has provided their own categorizing and naming of policy processes and how it can be understood as a field but also in relation to other fields. In other words, there have been ongoing attempts at labeling policy processes that have created a historical lexicon of terms with overlapping and even contradictory meanings. The point is not to say there is a definitive lexicon but rather to recognize the ongoing use of words to categorize and label the field and that studying policy processes requires at least an understanding of this lexicon.

For starters, Lasswell used the term "policy sciences" to describe two areas of scholarship: policy analysis (giving policy-oriented advice, as in benefit-cost analysis) and policy process (as described above), both for Lasswell's purpose of advancing human dignity. Today, policy sciences, as a term, can still be used to capture these two areas of study, though "public policy studies" or simply "policy studies" work equally well.

One challenge with using policy sciences is that it draws on Lasswell's scholarship while overlooking his in-depth approach to the policy sciences, which reached its own crescendo in the Policy Sciences Framework in the early 1970s (Lasswell, 1971). However, over the decades, Lasswell's Policy Sciences Framework is no longer central to contemporary policy process research (Cairney & Weible, 2017). While policy sciences remain an appropriate term for the combined study of policy process and policy analysis studies, terms such as policy studies avoid invoking the broader theoretical commitments of Lasswell's original project.

Insights into policy processes can also be gained by relating them to other fields or disciplines. For example, few would deny that policy processes emerged from political science, especially given that political scientists were its original contributors, including Robert Dahl, Theodore Lowi, Thomas Dye, Charles Lindblom, Aaron Wildavsky, and others. As a result, in many political science departments, the study of policy processes remains a specialization, a niche area of scholarship. In other areas of academia, policy processes are studied outside of political science, such as in public affairs schools and colleges. Furthermore, while political science journals and conferences often feature policy process research, there have also emerged policy process-focused journals and conferences. Today, there is no definitive answer to whether the field of policy processes stands alone or still fits within political science. This ambiguity is acceptable and reflects the plurality of descriptions of policy processes, which converge on the point that it is a recognizable area of scholarship.

Policy processes and public administration also have an ambiguous relationship with regard to what distinguishes them. This ambiguity lies, for example, within academic units and in the overlapping areas of research. In many parts of the world, the study of policy processes is institutionally placed within public administration without much differentiation between them. One

reason is that public administration programs began earlier, subsuming policy process courses and faculty. In other situations, policy processes and public administration fall under the same department or school, with distinctions that recognize scholars as experts in one or both. Outside academic institutions, policy process and public administration research can be found in different journals (e.g., *Public Administration Review* and *Policy Studies Journal*) and conferences (*American Society for Public Administration* and *Conference on Policy Process Research*), though there is often significant overlap with journals and conferences covering both (e.g., large political science conferences). More generally, professional infrastructure both differentiates and blurs policy process and public administration research. Such ambiguity is also not a problem *per se*, instead it reflects two sibling fields that have specialized over time while focusing on similar phenomena involving politics and government.

Extending beyond public administration and political science, policy process research also spans boundaries with researchers and courses in law programs, environmental management studies, social policy, and more. Many of these programs offer courses or degrees involving aspects from the policy process literature. However, there are also major regions of the world where policy process research is not institutionalized in instruction or research.

THE NEED FOR POLICY PROCESS THEORIES — FOCUS ON THE ADVOCACY COALITION FRAMEWORK

Policy process research is the study of complexity, an integration of political science, interdisciplinarity, and encompassing of varied functions of government. One implication is the need for theories to help make sense of its phenomena. Any advance in knowledge about the policy process requires articulating abstract concepts, transforming them into something observational and measurable, developing constellations of expectations and hypotheses, and conducting empirical research while learning from successes and failures over time. Because of this, policy process theories have been a central feature of this area of study since the field began. These theories have emerged, evolved, and sometimes are no longer used.

For example, if we were to write this essay in 1976 instead of 2026, we might have highlighted a different theory, such as Hofferbert's Funnel of Causality (1974). In this theory, Hofferbert described a metaphorical funnel that constrained possibilities from the broad opening at the top to the narrow bottom. His funnel started with historical and geographic conditions that constrain current socioeconomic conditions, which might constrain mass political behavior, which might constrain governmental institutions, which might constrain government leaders in making policy decisions, with policy output as the dependent variable.

Hofferbert's theory enveloped many of the political factors spanning political science, including political geography, public opinion, government institutions, and elites. However, the funnel of causality didn't last — it was absorbed conceptually into other theories and found to have inadequate descriptive validity and limited explanatory power, including concerns about the constraining effects of the different layers in the funnel. Nonetheless, subsequent theories incorporated its major lessons, such as the importance of historical and geographic conditions, and rejected the rest.

In 2026, the study of policy processes is populated by multiple theoretical orientations (Weible, 2023). By theory, we mean a lens that interrelates concepts pertinent to policy processes, specifies mechanisms, generates expectations, and enables comparisons. Examples of contemporary theories include (1) the Multiple Streams Framework (Herweg, Zahariadis, & Zohlnhöfer, 2023),

which highlights agenda setting, policy change, and policy implementation; (2) the Narrative Policy Framework (Jones *et al.*, 2023), which addresses the roles of narratives in persuasion, collective action, and policy change, and (3) the Ecology of Games Framework (Lubell *et al.*, 2023), which focuses on the polycentric structure of governments as it relates to political behavior around policy issues. These three examples highlight the nature of how policy process theories approach complexity and the multifaceted nature of policy processes differently.

Another example of policy process theories, which is used as an illustrative focus, is the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) (Nohrstedt *et al.*, 2023). This theory was originally created by Paul Sabatier and Hank Jenkins-Smith in the 1980s (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993).

The ACF is a theoretical approach in which agency lies within an individual engaged in the policy process (a policy actor). Like all policy theories, policy actors are assumed to be goal-oriented but limited in their abilities to select, filter, and make sense of their environments; that is, they are boundedly rational. For the ACF, these individuals rely on their belief system to motivate their behavior. The ACF's belief system consists of three tiers: deep core beliefs of broad, axiomatic, fundamental values and identities; policy core beliefs of general policy views about problems, solutions, and populations of concern; and secondary beliefs or instrumental beliefs to implement the policy core. In situations where beliefs conflict, policy actors will form alliances and coordinate their behavior with other policy actors who share their beliefs to help achieve their shared goals. These alliances are called advocacy coalitions — the core collective action unit in the ACF.

Advocacy coalitions operate in two general settings. The first is a policy subsystem, defined by a policy topic and domain, where policy actors plan, coordinate, and allocate resources to achieve their goals. The second is coalition opportunity structures, the venues within which they seek to influence public policy and its implementation. Sometimes coalitions are in high conflict (an adversarial subsystem) over problems and solutions pertinent to a subsystem. Alternately, coalitions can be in low conflict over policy issues and cooperate among opponents (a collaborative policy subsystem). In other situations, there is little or an unorganized opposition to a dominant coalition (a unitary subsystem). Similarly, some decision-making venues operate across policy subsystems (e.g., a country's supreme court) and can be thought of as being situated outside the subsystem. Other venues are very specific to the subsystem (e.g., a regulatory arena focused on the subsystem's topical area) and can be thought of as situated within the subsystem.

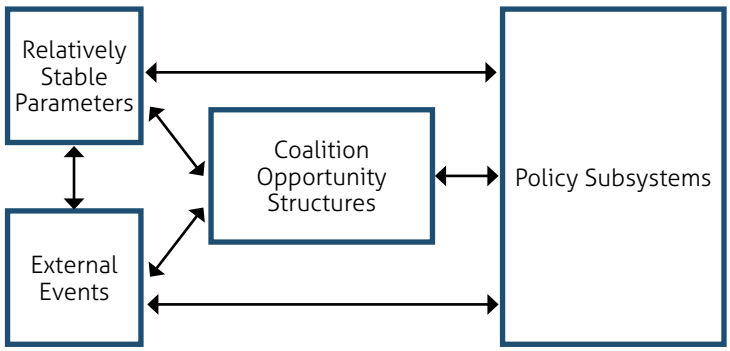
As settings of collective action, policy subsystems and coalition opportunity structures vary within and between countries. They can also change over time. Sometimes policy subsystems and coalition opportunity structures provide very few opportunities for coalitions to mobilize and sustain themselves. In other settings, more than one coalition can emerge. Moreover, some settings limit the diversity of policy actors who engage in policy subsystems, such as favoring businesses and government entities. In other settings, nonprofits, research think tanks, citizen-based organizations, and more flourish. The ACF does not presume the composition of its coalitions; they are best determined empirically.

There are two categories of factors that analytically lie outside ACF's coalition opportunity structures and policy subsystems. The first is relatively stable parameters, which are the conditions that tend to be — but are not always — stable in a political system. These include, but are not limited to, historical and geographic conditions, basic constitutional structures, cultures, socio-economic conditions, biophysical factors, and more. Relatively stable parameters represent the upper part of Hofferbert's funnel of causality. The second is external events, which are the dynamic factors that can impact coalition opportunity structures and policy subsystems. These include but are not limited to crises and disasters, elections, rapid changes in public opin-

ion, impacts from other subsystems or political systems, and so on.

A simplified version of ACF's basic structure is shown in Figure 1, with relatively stable parameters and external events on the left, and coalition opportunity structures and policy subsystems toward the right, with feedback loops throughout. These boxes are left blank purposely. This is because subsystems can comprise a multitude of factors, best examined empirically. For example, a subsystem can have zero, one, two, or more advocacy coalitions within and across countries. Their resources and strategies will vary considerably as well. The coalition opportunity structures might include a few venues, up to many, some of which might be open and others closed. Coalition opportunity structures will include government institutions, including courts, regulatory arenas, legislatures, etc. While political parties can be found within the coalition opportunity structures, they can also be advocacy coalition members contributing to policy subsystems. The relatively stable parameters might include consensus-based democracies to authoritarian regimes. The external events might include natural disasters or political interference by international non-governmental organizations. In other words, for Latin American scholars, these boxes are to be filled accordingly.

Figure 1. Simplified depiction of the major components of the Advocacy Coalition Framework



Source: Author's own elaboration.

The ACF supports three central theories: one involving the behavior of coalitions, one involving coalition members' tendency to learn, and another involving policy change. While these theories can be explicated with hypotheses, below is a short vignette which expresses the textbook version of the ACF's expectations (adapted from Osei-Kojo *et al.*, 2022, pg 185–186).

> *In high-conflict situations and in polyarchal political settings, policy actors will coordinate their political behaviors among allies in an advocacy coalition to influence public policy through the coalition opportunity structures. At the same time, their opponents will do the same. Coalesced by their policy core beliefs and showing stability over time, these advocacy coalitions engage in debate and argumentation, with most learning occurring among individuals within the same coalition. In contrast, learning rarely occurs between coalitions, possibly leading to changes in beliefs. Some policy actors, particularly policy brokers, might facilitate cross-coalition learning and the possibility of policy agreement. Given the friction in policymaking, advocacy coalitions need to exploit opportunities through internal and external events, rare cross-coalition learning, and, sometimes, negotiated agreements to achieve their policy goals.*

While the strength of the ACF lies in these three central theories, its applicability is much broader, with the potential to agenda setting and policy formulation, narratives and discourses, the role of scientists and expertise, democratic representation, power, and more.

Finally, while the ACF was created in the United States, it was designed to apply principally to polyarchies, that is, under some conditions of democratization. However, it is also readily applied across all political settings and can be adapted and modified when necessary. For example, in authoritarian regimes, we'd expect coalition opportunity structures to constrain coalition behavior, limiting the number of coalitions, their membership, and the resources and strategies they deploy. As discussed in the next section, we expect the general structure of the ACF outlined in Figure 1 to hold in Latin American countries, but the contents of those boxes will differ within and between Latin American countries and in comparison to outside the region.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN APPLYING THE POLICY LENS IN LATIN AMERICA

The above-mentioned policy process theories such as the ACF, the Multiple Streams Framework, and the Ecology of Games were primarily developed and empirically refined within the United States' institutional and political landscape. When these theories are applied to new environments, they confront distinct institutional arrangements and governance customs that differ significantly from the federal, pluralistic, and relatively open U.S. system (Cabrero, 2000). Transposing these theories across policy settings demands careful consideration of local variables that shape how policy actors engage, how agendas shift, and how decisions are reached. Factors such as institutional stability, administrative capacity, political conflict dynamics, coalition opportunity structures, economic development levels, and the strength of the nonprofit sector all play crucial roles in shaping the mechanisms these theories assume to be universal.

Institutional Architecture and System Context

The textbook ACF assumes fragmented authority, multiple veto points, and well-organized interest groups (Cairney, 2019; Jenkins-Smith and Weible, 2025). These features shape coalition strategies, agenda-setting opportunities, and policy stability. In highly centralized or unitary systems — such as Chile or Costa Rica — agenda control is often concentrated in the executive or in a small set of ministries, reducing opportunities for venue shopping as studied in the Ecology of Games Framework (Lubell et al., 2023). For example, while punctuated equilibrium would anticipate punctuations emerging from shifts across multiple institutional venues, in centralized systems, punctuations may instead stem from executive turnover or shifts in national government priorities.

While not explicitly assuming administrative capacity and a professionalized civil service, frameworks like the ACF or Ecology of Games are built on the assumption of bounded-rationality individuals with the technical knowledge to identify opportunities to advance their interests. When they decide which venues or games to engage with, these frameworks assume a minimum level of administrative capacity to interact with other actors (Lubell *et al.*, 2023). In contexts where bureaucratic agencies are understaffed, politicized, or experiencing drastic turnover, the mechanisms of policy learning and evidence use may diverge. For instance, in Chile, municipal governments are limited in their organizational size based on a population formula (Nickson, 2024), and elections at the municipal level in Mexico result in layoffs and new public officials every three years (Cabrero, 2004).

Political complexity and conflict are two elements on which theories of the policy process

place special emphasis. However, different institutional designs lead to conflicts at different levels. Unlike most of the United States, elections at the local level are partisan in many Latin American countries, producing tension both within and across regions. Political arenas in which citizens can be represented by multiple parties or those in which a dominant party controls the agenda and opportunities for policy change (as described by Carrera, 2024) produce conflict that policy lenses might be robust enough to read but might challenge some of their assumptions or hypotheses, as conflict influences coalition formation, actor strategies, and the stability of policy subsystems (Jenkins-Smith and Weible, 2025). For example, in dominant-party systems, opposition coalitions may be marginalized from formal policymaking venues, leading them to adopt informal or extra-institutional strategies that these frameworks do not fully capture.

Specific to the ACF, the composition of coalitions and the coalition opportunity structures will not only look different from those of the United States subsystems but might also challenge some of the general lessons learned from studying coalitions in the Global North. The nonprofit sector and the opportunities for non-organized civil society to influence policy change are drastically different in Latin American contexts compared to the United States, where nonprofit organizations have long been recognized as central actors in the policy process, supported by a well-defined legal framework that facilitates their creation, operation, and participation in public affairs (Salamon, 2002). The regulatory environment encourages pluralism, enabling nonprofits to engage in advocacy, policy monitoring, and coalition building with relative autonomy. This institutionalized openness has shaped the assumptions embedded in many policy process theories, including the textbook ACF, which presumes a diverse and active civil society capable of sustained engagement in policy subsystems (Jenkins-Smith and Weible, 2025).

In contrast, the historical relationship between governments and nonprofit organizations in Latin America has often been adversarial or ambivalent. Many governments in the region have intentionally limited nonprofit participation in the political arena by failing to establish clear, stable legal frameworks governing their formation, funding, and permissible activities (Appe & Layton, 2016). Ambiguous regulations, discretionary enforcement, and bureaucratic hurdles have constrained the sector's autonomy and discouraged overt political engagement. As a result, nonprofit–government interactions frequently take the form of informal negotiations, clientelistic exchanges, or service-delivery arrangements rather than open policy advocacy (Gundelach, 2016). This distinct nonprofit landscape poses several challenges for applying the ACF in Latin America. First, the ACF presumes the existence of relatively stable advocacy coalitions composed of actors who share policy beliefs and engage in coordinated strategies over time. In contexts where nonprofits face legal uncertainty, political intimidation, or resource scarcity, maintaining sustained coalition activity may be difficult. Organizations may avoid overt political alignment to reduce exposure to state retaliation, leading to more fluid, informal, or short-lived coalitions than the ACF typically envisions.

Second, the textbook ACF assumes that civil society actors can access policy venues, contribute technical information, and influence subsystem debates. These assumptions reflect a context in which nonprofits and citizen groups participate in coalition opportunity structures such as legislative testimony, public hearings, advisory committees, and other institutionalized channels for policy input. In many Latin American countries, however, access to policymaking arenas is highly centralized and often restricted to actors with political connections or state approval (Weyland, 2002). As a result, many of the participatory venues that the ACF presumes — especially those that allow coalitions to present evidence, contest policy proposals, or engage in policy-oriented learning — are either absent, weakly institutionalized, or selectively opened. This institutional closure is closely tied to what O'Donnell (2015) characterizes as "low-intensity

citizenship," where political engagement is largely reduced to voting, and citizens have limited opportunities to influence public decisions between elections. By contrast, the ACF implicitly presumes what Subirats (1998) describes as "high-intensity democracies," in which citizens and civil society organizations are both empowered and motivated to mobilize around shared beliefs and to participate actively in policymaking. In Latin American contexts, the absence of such participatory infrastructures limits individuals' and organizations' ability to function as policy brokers or technical experts — roles central to ACF dynamics in the U.S. context.

Third, the adversarial state–nonprofit relationship can distort the flow of information within policy subsystems. Nonprofits may lack the institutional protections needed to challenge official narratives or provide independent evidence, reducing opportunities for policy-oriented learning, a key mechanism in the ACF. When learning does occur, it may be confined to closed networks of state-aligned actors rather than emerging from broad, cross-coalition exchanges. Finally, the uneven development of the nonprofit sector across Latin America means that advocacy capacity varies widely across policy domains and countries. In some areas — such as human rights or environmental protection — internationally connected organizations may approximate the roles envisioned by the ACF (Landim & Thompson, 1997). In other policy areas, particularly where civil society is weak or heavily regulated (Appe & Layton, 2016), the absence of robust nonprofit participation can complicate the emergence and longevity of coalitions.

Together, these factors highlight the need for careful contextual adaptation when applying U.S.-developed policy process theories in Latin America. They also underscore the importance of comparative research that examines how variations in civil society strength and state–society relations shape the formation, stability, and influence of advocacy coalitions.

The complexities of translating policy process theories

A further layer of complexity in the international diffusion of policy process theories concerns not only their substantive transposition into new institutional settings but also the linguistic and conceptual challenges of translating these frameworks into other languages. Translation is never a neutral exercise. It shapes how theoretical constructs are understood, operationalized, and ultimately applied in empirical research. The case of the ACF in Spanish-speaking countries illustrates how translation choices can subtly redirect the meaning of core concepts and influence the trajectory of scholarly engagement.

The term *advocacy coalition* has been translated to Spanish in multiple ways, each carrying distinct implications. Two of the most common renderings — *coaliciones de apoyo* or *promotoras* (Aguilar, 2010; Martínez Hernández, 2021; Rojas & Nigrini, 2025) and *coaliciones defensoras* (Estévez & Esper, 2008) — capture different facets of coalition behavior but risk emphasizing only one side of the ACF's adversarial dynamic. *Coaliciones promotoras* suggests coalitions that promote or push for policy change, highlighting their proactive, reform-oriented dimension. Conversely, *coaliciones defensoras* evokes coalitions that defend existing arrangements, aligning more closely with Lindblom's (1959) notion of watchdogs or guardians of the status quo. While both interpretations reflect legitimate roles that coalitions may play within policy subsystems, each translation foregrounds only one pole of the ACF's dual nature. If adopted uncritically, these labels may predispose empirical research toward viewing coalitions as either inherently change-seeking or inherently conservative, thereby biasing the identification of actors and the interpretation of their strategies.

This issue is compounded by the fact that the English term *advocacy coalition* is itself a functional label designed to distinguish these coalitions from other forms of collective action. The

ACF differentiates advocacy coalitions from social movements in the sense developed by Castells (2019), and from partisan alliances or nonprofit organizations that self-identify as "coalitions" for strategic or branding purposes. Advocacy coalitions, in the ACF, are defined not by organizational form but by shared belief systems and coordinated behavior within a policy subsystem (Nohrstedt *et al.*, 2023). Translating the term into Spanish risks collapsing these distinctions if the chosen label carries preexisting meanings in local political discourse.

A direct translation, such as "*coaliciones de abogacía*," is technically accurate but fails to capture the spirit of the ACF because *abogacía* is not widely used in Spanish-speaking policy communities. In many Latin American contexts, the term is narrowly associated with legal advocacy rather than with the broader political, technical, and belief-driven engagement envisioned by the ACF. As a result, the translation may obscure the framework's emphasis on policy learning, subsystem coordination, and belief-based coalition dynamics.

These linguistic challenges intersect with the broader issue of keeping pace with theoretical developments. The most recent refinements to the ACF — and to policy process theories more broadly — are published primarily in English. Scholars working in Spanish, Portuguese, or other languages may face barriers to accessing updated conceptual debates, methodological innovations, or empirical applications. This can lead to temporal lags in theoretical adoption, uneven diffusion of new ideas, or reliance on earlier versions of frameworks that have since evolved.

Addressing these challenges requires a more deliberate effort to translate not only the terminology but also the conceptual architecture of policy process theories. High-quality translations, bilingual glossaries of key terms, and collaborative networks that bridge linguistic communities can help ensure that frameworks like the ACF are understood as their authors intended while still allowing for context-sensitive adaptation. Ultimately, improving translation practices strengthens the global applicability of policy process theories and supports more rigorous comparative research. While some notable exceptions have aimed to translate and diffuse recent developments in ACF research (Weible, 2022), many scholars in Latin America have access only to translations of the early developments of these and other frameworks (Aguilar, 2009).

CONCLUSION

Despite the challenges of translating and adapting policy process theories to Latin American contexts, these efforts also offer significant opportunities for theoretical refinement and empirical innovation. One of the most promising opportunities lies in the ability to examine how system-level institutional features — such as decentralization, unitary versus federal systems, and partisan elections at the local level — shape the formation, evolution, and strategies of advocacy coalitions or challenge the main assumptions of other policy process theories. In the United States, these institutional variables remain relatively constant across empirical studies, leading scholars to treat them as *ceteris paribus* conditions. By contrast, Latin America, as well as other regions, offers meaningful variation in institutional design, enabling researchers to investigate how differences in federalism, presidential power, or political conflict influence coalition behavior or policy learning. This variation allows the ACF, as well as other theories, to be tested under conditions that challenge its original assumptions and reveal the contextual boundaries of its mechanisms. Applying the ACF in such contexts can illuminate whether coalitions form around deep core beliefs, policy core beliefs, or more pragmatic alignments shaped by political survival or clientelist incentives. This, in turn, helps refine the ACF's assumptions about the durability of belief systems and the conditions under which cross-coalition learning is possible.

Finally, applying the ACF in Latin America creates opportunities to examine coalition behavior

under conditions of constrained civil society participation. The region's patterns of low-intensity citizenship (O'Donnell, 2015) and limited participatory infrastructures can offer a nuanced understanding of the conditions under which coalitions emerge. These constraints also allow researchers to investigate alternative pathways of coalition formation involving actors beyond those found in current empirical research focused on the Global North. These cases can reveal how coalitions compensate for weak nonprofit sectors. In doing so, Latin American applications of the ACF can broaden the framework's relevance and contribute to a more global understanding of policy processes.

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