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# Ideas, Political Power, and Public Policy

Edited by  
Daniel Béland, Martin B. Carstensen and  
Leonard Seabrooke



ROUTLEDGE  


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*Edited by*

**Daniel Béland, Martin B. Carstensen and  
Leonard Seabrooke**

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# Ideas, Political Power, and Public Policy

Through the last couple of decades, scholars on both sides of the Atlantic have increasingly emphasized the importance of ideas in understanding processes of change and stability in politics and public policy. Yet, surprisingly, relatively little has been done to more clearly and stringently conceptualize the relationship between political power and the role of ideas in public policy and political development. This volume addresses this major lacuna in the policy and political studies literature by bringing some of the best scholars in the field, who each write about the relationship between ideas and power in politics and public policy. The contributions frame the concept of ideational power and explore ways in which ideas shape power relations, across a number of distinct countries and policy areas. The topics covered include austerity, coalition building, monetary policy, social policy, tax policy, and macroeconomic indicators. The volume features a short introduction written by the co-editors, and a final, recapitulative essay prepared by Mark Blyth, one of the most cited scholars in the field.

This book was previously published as a special issue of the *Journal of European Public Policy*.

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*The power of economic ideas – through, over and in – political time: the construction, conversion and crisis of the neoliberal order in the US and UK*

Wesley Widmaier

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*Powering ideas through expertise: professionals in global tax battles*

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Daniel Mügge

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*Ideas as coalition magnets: coalition building, policy entrepreneurs, and power relations*

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*Ideas and power: four intersections and how to show them*

Craig Parsons

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**Chapter 10**

*Commentary: The new ideas scholarship in the mirror of historical institutionalism: a case of old whines in new bottles?*

Mark Blyth

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# Introduction

## IDEAS, POLITICAL POWER AND PUBLIC POLICY

Daniel Béland, Martin B. Carstensen and Leonard Seabrooke



Throughout the last couple of decades, scholars have increasingly emphasized the importance of political ideas in understanding processes of change and stability in politics and public policy. The aim of ideational analysis in policy studies has not just been to theorize the representation or embodiment of ideas and the interactive processes by and through which ideas are generated and communicated. It has also underlined the importance of considering both ideas and discourse in the institutional context within which political actors both 'power' and 'puzzle'. Naturally, the causal 'power of ideas' has been an important subject of study in the ideational tradition, spawning important studies on how ideas and ideologies are institutionalized and how they define the interests of strategic policy actors. The power of ideas has always reigned among the most important issues in ideational analysis. With this in mind, it may come as a surprise that relatively little has been done to more clearly conceptualize the relationship between the concept of political power and the role of ideas in public policy.

The ideational side of power relations (which may be called ideational power) requires further study. At least part of this relative lack of connection to power theory seems attributable to ideational scholars' strong focus on supporting the more general claim that 'ideas matter' as causes, thus carving out a clear position *vis-à-vis* more traditional interest-oriented approaches. This effort has clearly been fruitful – as seen not least by the growing attention to ideas within policy studies and political science more generally – but the central task of delineating how ideational scholarship can contribute to understandings of power remains.

The present edited collection sets out to do so in two principal ways. First, building on existing ideational scholarship, contributors to this collection take on the task of investigating the relation between ideas and political power to develop clearer understandings of ideational power in policy research. Second, this collection is focused on conceptualizing the relationship between

political power and ideas. In other words, the contributions combine a strong grounding in ideational analysis with an equally strong commitment to connect with and draw on the approaches to power developed in other traditions of policy studies and political science.

Studying the relationship between policy ideas and power is not only important for ideational scholarship but also relevant for the larger power debate in political science. To be sure, although students of power have acknowledged the central role of perceptions and interpretations for the practice of power in politics – perhaps most famously in Steven Lukes's third face of power – the power debate has too often depended on scholars from outside political science and policy studies to further conceptualize the relationship between power and ideas. Michel Foucault's work is noteworthy in this regard. This literature has been helpful in promoting a stronger focus on the relation between ideas and power, but there are a number of methodological and epistemological problems involved in 'transposing' these insights into policy studies. This collection seeks to develop an approach to ideational power more clearly wedded to a political science tradition.

Following a conceptual analysis by Martin B. Carstensen and Vivien Schmidt, the contributions featured in the present collection all address the relationship between ideas and political power. They study this relationship across a wide range of issues and topics, which range from coalition building and ideational explanation to neoliberalism and the role of professionals and of central bankers in public policy. The contributions relate power to ideas by delineating mechanisms through which they interact. For some this follows the 'power in', 'power over' and 'power through' ideas framework advocated by Carstensen and Schmidt, which focuses the scholars to not only consider interests as a form of idea – a common assertion in ideational analysis – but also the institutional environments, collective and personal tactics, and resources drawn upon to express ideas as interests. For other contributors the focus is more on mapping who is promoting which ideas and the institutions and networks they draw upon. Either way, the contributions theorize the relationship between ideas, power and public policy. The collection ends with a short essay by Mark Blyth. Taken together, these contributions make three central contributions. First, by moving the concept of power to the centre of ideational policy analysis and by developing a specific category of ideational power comparable to other forms of power, it brings greater conceptual clarity to the role of ideas in public policy. Second, it shows the empirical relevance of this broad approach to power by employing it in a substantive analysis of a diverse set of policy areas. Finally, to further the development of the study of policy ideas, this collection connects two literatures that up until now have too often lived separate lives, namely ideational analysis and the power debate of public policy and political science. Taken together, this collection aims to refocus the study of ideas in politics to address in clearer conceptual terms how ideas come to impact policy-making.

The contributors to the collection all participated in a two-day workshop held at the Copenhagen Business School in June 2014 and funded by the European Commission FP7 grant 'GREEN – Global Reordering: Evolution through European Networks' (#266809-GR:EEN). Further work by Carstensen and Seabrooke, and some contributors to this collection, has been supported by the Horizon 2020-funded project 'European Legitimacy in Governing through Hard Times: The role of European Networks' (#649456-ENLIGHTEN). Thanks are due to the workshop participants, including Cornel Ban, Joelle Dumouchel, Juliet Johnson and Ben Rosamond. We also wish to gratefully acknowledge the hard work of the reviewers, as well as the useful input and advice of the editors of the *Journal of European Public Policy*.

# Power through, over and in ideas: conceptualizing ideational power in discursive institutionalism

Martin B. Carstensen and Vivien A. Schmidt

**ABSTRACT** Owing to the tendency of discursive institutionalists to conflate the notion that ‘ideas matter’ for policy-making with the ‘power of ideas’, little has been done to explicitly theorize ideational power. To fill this lacuna, the contribution defines ideational power as the capacity of actors (whether individual or collective) to influence other actors’ normative and cognitive beliefs through the use of ideational elements, and – based on insights from the discursive institutionalist literature – suggests three different types of ideational power: *power through ideas*, understood as the capacity of actors to persuade other actors to accept and adopt their views through the use of ideational elements; *power over ideas*, meaning the imposition of ideas and the power to resist the inclusion of alternative ideas into the policy-making arena; and *power in ideas*, which takes place through the establishing of hegemony or institutions imposing constraints on what ideas are considered.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of discursive institutionalism as a fourth institutionalism in political science was predicated on the success ideational scholars enjoyed in arguing that ‘ideas matter’ (Schmidt 2008). To defend the emphasis on ideas as an explanatory factor in political analysis, the first generations of ideational scholarship took pains to demonstrate and theorize that indeed ideas do matter, and that they do so by providing interpretive frameworks that give definition to our values and preferences and thus make political and economic interests actionable (Beland and Cox 2011; Parsons 2007; Schmidt 2002). Considering that power is one of the central concepts of political science, it comes as no surprise that in claiming a central position for ideas in political analysis, ideational scholars often entertain the notion that ideas are somehow related to practices of power. What is perhaps more surprising is that with few exceptions (notably Beland 2010), most scholars in discursive institutionalism speak of the political power of ideas without much further theorization. Blyth (2001: 4), for example, argues that the possession and promulgation of ideas that serve to define a given moment of crisis and project the institutional



forms that will resolve it becomes 'a crucial power resource', while Cox (2001: 471, 485) analyses the 'path-shaping power of ideas' as well as the 'powerful legitimizing impact' of ideas on reform proposals. And, unsurprisingly, examples of scholars who connect the promotion of policy ideas with a more general notion of political or social power are legion (to name but a few: Beland 2009; Campbell 1998; Hay and Rosamond 2002; Kingdon 1984; Kuzemko 2014; Parsons 2002). To distinguish more clearly between the general claim that ideas matter in politics, and the more specific argument that one significant way ideas matter is through agents' promotion of certain ideas at the expense of the ideas of others, this contribution develops the concept of ideational power.

Ideational scholarship has put power front and centre, but it has done so without much explicit theorizing about what exactly ideational power is and how it relates to other forms of power. A similar development has taken place in the power debate of the last *circa* six decades: most approaches have more or less wholeheartedly accepted that ideas are important for understanding relations and structures of power, but little has been done in a general way to theorize this connection. Take for example proponents of a view of power as *compulsory*, i.e., an understanding of power as concerning relations of interaction of direct control by one actor over another where these relations allow one actor to shape directly the circumstances or action of another (Barnett and Duvall 2005: 43, 49). Classic versions of this understanding are found, for example, in the work of Weber (1947: 52) and the pluralist Dahl (1957), the latter of which defined power as instances where 'A has power over B to the extent that he (*sic*) can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do' (202–3). These notions of power are generally joined by a focus on the material foundation of power relations, but, as argued by Barnett and Duvall (2005: 50), 'Compulsory power is not limited to material resources; it also entails symbolic and normative resources.' This point was also made by Dahl (1968) – something which is seldom recognized by his critics (Baldwin 2013) – when he included values, attitudes and expectations among the factors that a power analyst might want to examine in explaining power relations.

Another prominent approach to political power is *structural*, which concerns the constitution of subjects' capacities in direct structural relation to one another (Barnett and Duvall 2005: 43). The tradition that has perhaps most clearly employed a structural approach to power is Marxism. Here the structural relation is a class relation in capitalism through which resources and thus power is distributed, in turn supported by the state's public powers of territorial rule and physical coercion that constitute the factor of cohesion between the levels of a social formation (Poulantzas 1982). Although later writers like Gramsci (1971), Althusser (1971) and Lukes (1974) – and more recently scholars like van Appeldorn (2001), Olin Wright (1997) and Therborn (1980) – have done much to bring greater prominence to ideas in their understanding of class and state power, in structuralist Marxist approaches ideas figure primarily as a means for furthering the dominance of the ruling class (Abercrombie *et al.* 1980),