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NEGOTIATING AMBIGUITY: AGENDA SETTING IN EU STI POLICY

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Context

- Edler & James (2015) – showed how Commission policy entrepreneurs used ambiguity (of goals & means) to build a winning coalition in support of a new H2020 research theme
- Ambiguity an under-examined aspect of agenda setting process
- This paper develops a framework to examine interaction between ambiguities of goals & means
- Framework then used to analyse emergence of three different EU STI policies

Ambiguity

- Ambiguity is the quality of a word, term or idea being open to more than one meaning
- Ambiguity differs from uncertainty - uncertainty can be resolved by obtaining more information
- Ambiguity may be inherent in complex (“wicked”) policy problems & organisational decision making....
- but it may also be used instrumentally in an attempt to create & sustain winning coalitions
- “Constructive ambiguity” - the deliberate use of ambiguous language on a sensitive issue in order to advance a political purpose

Ambiguity & the agenda setting process

- Literature on (EU) agenda setting examines the process by which “problems” & alternative solutions gain attention & are adopted by policy makers
- Draws on Multiple Streams Framework (Kingdon, 1984) which in turn uses “garbage can” model of organisational choice (Cohen et al, 1972)
- Three “streams” of problems, policy & politics. “Windows of opportunity” allow the streams to combine & new policy ideas emerge
- Multiple Streams Framework assumes that ambiguity is an integral part of the agenda setting process

Ambiguity as a tool of the policy entrepreneur

- Policy entrepreneurs use ambiguity to construct meaning from ambiguity & place particular policy problems or ideas on to the policy agenda (Edler & James, 2015; Ackrill et al, 2013; Zahariadis, 2008)
- Policy entrepreneurs are individuals or teams “who seek to initiate dynamic policy change” (Mintrom, 1997: 739) and are “willing to invest their resources—time, energy, reputation, and sometimes money—in the hope of a future return” (Kingdon, 1984)
- Policy entrepreneurs seek to use ambiguities to create a coalition of different interest actors
- Constructive ambiguity makes coalition building easier because actors can attribute all kinds of meaning to a policy idea
- Ambiguity can be used to moderate conflict between potentially competing interests and views on a “desirable” policy
- The more contentious the policy the more likely it is that policy entrepreneurs will seek to use a strategy of ambiguity

The research problem & contribution of the paper

- Ambiguity rarely a central focus of study in EU agenda setting
- With a few (recent) exceptions, it is often a “taken-for-granted” context condition for agenda setting
- Focus on either goal ambiguity or (institutional) ambiguity of means
- Remarkable given that ambiguity has been described as a “central ontological premise” of the Multiple Streams Framework (Johanna Kuhlmann, 2016)
- Contribution of the paper is primarily theoretical
 - Develop a more nuanced understanding of the role of ambiguity in the emergence of new ideas onto the policy agenda
 - Develop a framework that examines the interaction between two types of ambiguity: ambiguity of goals and ambiguity of means.

Ambiguities of goals & means

- Goal ambiguity:
 - Key element of organisational theory (Cohen et al, 1972; Cohen & March, 1974; March, 1994) & underpins the Multiple Streams Framework (Zahariadis, 2007)
 - Policy makers – like other decision makers - have unstable, inconsistent, incompletely evoked, and imprecise goals
 - These opaque policy preferences can be manipulated politically by policy entrepreneurs to build a winning coalition in favour of a particular policy

- Ambiguity of means:
 - Poor understanding of the problem & solution set
 - Organisational technology needed to reach a policy's goals does not exist
 - “Institutional ambiguity” as a result of the complexity of the structure of EU decision making (Ackrill & Kay, 2011; Copeland & Scott, 2014; Edler & James, 2015)

Figure 1: Framework

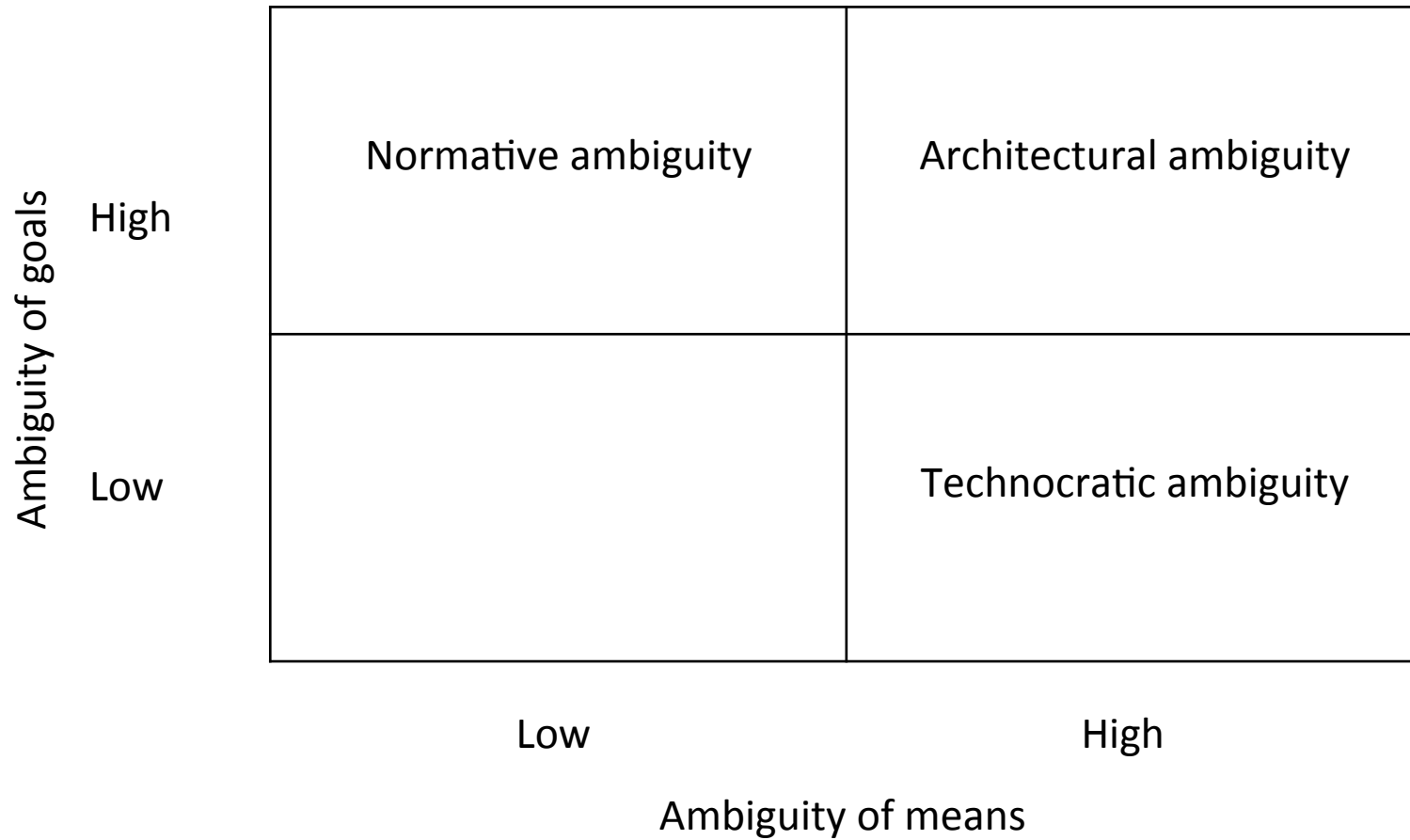


Figure 2: Illustrative examples

Ambiguity of goals	High	EU science diplomacy (Normative ambiguity)	FP7 European Security Research Programme (Architectural ambiguity)
	Low		European research space integration (Technocratic ambiguity)
		Low	High
		Ambiguity of means	

Fig 3: Do different combinations of ambiguities require different forms of policy entrepreneurship?

Ambiguity of goals	High	<p>Normative ambiguity: emphasis on the ability to manage the creation of policy “visions” that are open to multiple interpretations from different interest actors</p>	<p>Architectural ambiguity: the most complex challenges and greatest opportunities to policy entrepreneurs</p>
	Low		<p>Technocratic ambiguity: policy entrepreneurs need detailed knowledge of institutional structures, implementation, etc.</p>
		Low	High
		Ambiguity of means	

Summary

- Ambiguity an under-examined aspect of the agenda setting process
- This paper has developed a framework to examine interaction between ambiguities of goals & means
- Framework then used to analyse emergence of three different EU STI policies
- Suggests that the character of policy entrepreneurship may be contingent on the types of ambiguities