“Let’s Fight Government Waste...Together?”: A Theoretical Analysis of Advocacy Coalition Framework and its lack of appearance in the formation of the Grant Oversight and New Efficiency Act

Deidre McVay, University of Dayton

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“Let’s Fight Government Waste...Together?”

A Theoretical Analysis of Advocacy Coalition Framework and its lack of appearance in the formation of the Grant Oversight and New Efficiency Act

By:
Deidre McVay
MPA 551-Introduction into Public Policy
Instructor: Professor Megan Warnement
Introduction: The Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) has been recognized as an acceptable research program within the field of policy process research, but has its shortcomings when it addresses coalitions that are formed due to the natural or required formations of coalitions due to the legislative process, and the structure of the coalitions after their forced formation. As a single framework, the ACF provides a general depiction of the policy process by depicting the emergence and interaction amongst coalitions, learning within and between coalitions, and major and minor policy change (Weible, 354, 2011). ACF provides a way for numerous scholars to contribute toward shared and improved knowledge over the important puzzles of the policy process. However, researchers have focused on different foci (advocacy coalitions, policy-oriented learning, and policy change) that fall within the scope of the ACF. It has become difficult to make sense of the trend ACF research is promoting and how they have fit into past researched ACF theories.

Each foci is independent of the other because researchers have deemed that one of the foci is important over the other for researching ACF. These foci provide guidelines that allow researchers to relating theories and bringing them into research practices, especially within the realm of coalition formation. Coalitions are categorized in six resources: formal legal authority to make policy decisions, public opinion, information, mobilized troops, financial resources, and skillful leadership. However, each category is hierarchically ordered by its usefulness amongst the coalitions achieving policy change, but face the challenge of understanding its timing and context.

The Grant Oversight and New Efficiency Act (GONE Act) is a policy that formed after receiving a report from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) that expired grant accounts have not been closed out and no report of these expired accounts are provided to the
federal government by the agencies that are utilizing the funds given to them. Because of the lack of formal language that promotes the implementation of guidelines that previously addressed this issue, Senator Deb Fischer wanted to create a policy that will provide a formal implementation of these guidelines. However, the Senate was not alone in creating a GONE Act. In fact, Representative Tim Walberg, along with the rest of the House of Representatives, formed a similar version of the GONE Act as well. The Senate and the House of Representatives come together to address the problem of reporting expired grant accounts and closing them out to create a more unified GONE Act that incorporates each chamber’s idea, but is this coalition a coalition defined by ACF? Thus, because ACF focuses on the venues in which coalitions seek to influence subsystem behavior and the production of desired decisions by actors, ACF does not focus the House and Senate joining together to pass the GONE Act, not because its beneficial for both parties to come together. Instead, it is because, by law, the House and Senate must come together to provide the President with a unified bill for him to determine whether or not to execute it into law. Even though ACF is open to bringing forth new research to improve the understanding of the policy process, it has not addressed the naturally, forced formations of coalitions and their structure after formation, which would be not be related to the study of ACF.

This analysis will discuss the legislative history of the GONE Act, provide an overview of ACF, and conclude with how ACF’s foci do not fully relate to how the GONE Act was formed.

**Background Information on the GONE Act:**
The federal government uses grants to achieve national primacies through state and local governments, educational institutions, and nonprofit organizations. While there can be significant dissimilarities among the grant programs, most federal grants share a common life cycle for administering the grants: award, implementation, and closeout (United States
Government Accountability Office, 2012). The award and implementation stages grant the recipients the funds for their requested projects and determines how and when the payments will be made to the recipient. The "closeout procedures ensure that grantees have met all financial requirements, provided their final reports, and returned any unspent balances" (United States Government Accountability Office, 2012). These procedures are subject to requirements derived from a combination of regulations, guidance from federal organizations, policies, and statutes. However, performance reports of grants, including a list of undisbursed balances in grants that are eligible for closeout, have not been provided on an annual basis (United States Government Accountability Office, 2012). This is due to the verbiage within the closeout section of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR). It states that, “the Federal awarding agency or pass-through entity should complete all closeout actions for Federal awards no later than one year after receipt and acceptance of all required final reports” (United States Office of the Federal Register, 2016). Because this code used recommendation terminology, such as “should”, there was no enforcement by the federal government to close out expired grant accounts.

In 2012, the GAO wrote a report that addressed the concern of federal grants having expired accounts that have not been closed. In fact, $110.9 million in undisbursed funding remained unspent more than 5 years past the grant end date (United States Government Accountability Office, 2012). Thus, the GAO recommended that the agencies should take appropriate action to closeout grants in a timely manner to ensure accountability by the federal government (United States Government Accountability Office, 2012). Because of these results, in December 2013, the Office of Management and Budgeting (OMB) revised its guidance on the grants management process, which included a section on closeouts, but as previously mentioned, it utilized recommendation terminology that could not be easily enforceable, and there was no
record as to if the OMB’s guidance was actually implemented (Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, 2015). The lack of implementation performed by the OMB was what sparked the attempt to create a policy that would address the failure of closing out expired grant accounts and providing an accurate list of grant accounts that have not been closed out.

Senator Deborah Fischer (D-Nebraska) created the GONE Act in 2013 to end the waste of government funds caused by not closing out expired grant accounts (Office of Deb Fischer, 2013). However, it did not leave the Senate, and it was left as just an idea. The GONE Act remained just an idea until Senator Fischer reintroduced the GONE Act in April 2015. As the GONE Act was being created, amended, and voted upon by the Senate, the House of Representatives was creating their version of the GONE Act since July 2015. The Senate brought forth the idea of agencies submitting reports to the Inspector General on Integrity and Efficiency (2013), which then was changed to the OMB (2015), recommending which grants should be immediately closed, and provide an explanation as to why a grant has not been closed, if it has expired 90 days prior (Civic Impulse, 2013). The House of Representatives added to their version of the GONE Act, providing the OMB with the time period of expiration, number of grants with zero dollar balances and with undisbursed balances, describe the challenges behind the grant closeouts being delayed, and allowing agencies to use multiagency data systems to submit the report (Civic Impulse, 2015). Each chamber wanted to solve the problem of government waste caused by expired grants not being closed out. Thus, each chamber took separate approaches to being able to address this problem. The House of Representatives and Senate were brought together by the requirement of passing an identical bill in order to be enacted into law by the President.
Advocacy Coalition Framework: Overview

ACF was designed by Paul Sabatier to address the shortcomings of previous public policy research during the late 1970s and early 1980s, such as the need to integrate multiple stages of the policy cycle, provide theoretical insight into the role of the scientific and technical information in political debates, and the need to provide a comprehensive approach to understanding political and policy changes over time (Sabatier and Weible, 184, 2014). In 1983, Sabatier worked with Hank Jenkins-Smith to share their understandings of the policy process. Jenkins-Smith brought forth to ACF actual experience working within a policy subsystem and recognition that advocacy coalitions were self-aware and took short-term time frames in attempting to influence the policy process (Sabatier and Weible, 184-185, 2014). Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith analyzed the evolution of scientific research programs by Imré Lakatos, which could be described as having a “hard core” of unchanging and largely accepted propositions surrounded by a “protective belt” of hypotheses that can be adjusted or rejected (Sabatier and Weible, 185, 2014). Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith also analyzed Lakatos’ argument that theories need to be progressive in order to be scientifically legitimate (Sabatier and Weible, 185, 2014). Therefore, ACF is designed as a “framework,” which provides a foundation for descriptive and prescriptive inquiry by establishing a set of assumptions, scope, and general classifications and relations among key concepts that involve understanding the formation and maintenance of coalitions and policy change (Weible, 351, 2011).

As ACF was being shared with the policy researching community, it became the foundation for answering questions regarding coalition mobilization, the extent of people joining forces, especially joining forces with their allies, role of scientists and technical information in policymaking, and factors that influence policy change (major and minor) (Weible, 349, 2011). These questions derived from five major assumptions regarding ACF: “(i) a central role of
scientific and technical information in the policy process; (ii) a time perspective of 10 years or more to understand policy change; (iii) policy subsystems as the primary unit of analysis; (iv) a broad set of subsystem actors that not only include more than the traditional iron triangles’ members but also officials from all levels of government, consultants, scientists, and members of the media; and (v) a perspective that policies and programs are best thought of as translations of beliefs” (Weible, Sabatier, Mcqueen, 122, 2009). As the framework of ACF encouraged more researchers to share their knowledge and interpretation of topics that could relate to ACF, more focal points have been shared and implemented into ACF’s practice.

ACF addresses the thoughts and beliefs of an individual, how beliefs among actors create coalitions, and the importance of utilizing subsystems as an unit of analysis. ACF also focuses on the actors that are bound to their own rationale, beliefs that enable a person to distort stimuli, and losses more than gains. (Weible, Sabatier, Mcqueen, 122, 2009). ACF also focuses on beliefs, and how the drive political behavior. Sabatier divides the beliefs into a three-tier model; deep core beliefs, policy core beliefs; and secondary beliefs (Weible, Sabatier, Mcqueen, 122-123, 2009). Deep core beliefs are broad and most stable. They can include liberal and conservative beliefs or concerns for the present over the future (Weible, Sabatier, Mcqueen, 122, 2009). Policy core beliefs are more moderate in scope and are more open to coalitions forming. They are also more open to listen to new information and experiences regarding their beliefs. Secondary beliefs are more narrow in scope, and likely to change over time because of the formation of new rules or decisions that leads actors to learning the new information (Weible, Sabatier, Mcqueen, 123, 2009). ACF specifies that subsystems are a major unit of analysis because political systems involve many topics that oblige actors to understand the complexity of a topic together to effectively produce policy change (Weible, Sabatier, Mcqueen, 123, 2009).
Nonetheless, all of these components of ACF are influenced by external forces, constraints by each actor, and new information that comes to light during the policymaking process.

ACF also focuses on paths that influence policy change. In the original version, two paths of policy change within political subsystems are also within the focus of ACF: external events (shocks) and policy-oriented learning. “External events or shocks include broad changes in socioeconomic conditions, political opinion, governing coalitions, and other subsystems” (Weible, Sabatier, Mcqueen, 124, 2009). These shocks can bring forth change in a subsystem by shifting coalitions’ power and resources, as well as, changing their beliefs. Policy-oriented learning involves new experiences and/or new information that change the thoughts or behavior of actors within coalitions, and create concern of revising policy objectives (Weible, Sabatier, Mcqueen, 124, 2009). Policy-oriented learning mostly affects secondary beliefs because of its ease to be easily changed due to new information or rules developed over time. As more research came into light, Sabatier adds two more paths to policy change: internal subsystem events and negotiated agreements involving two or more coalitions. Internal subsystem events occur within the subsystem and are expected to highlight failures in current subsystem practices (Weible, Sabatier, Mcqueen, 124, 2009). Negotiated agreements involving two or more coalitions promote coalitions to come together in a professional setting and exchange dialogue in a safe environment that will promote collaboration. Overall, ACF is a framework that not only promotes the unity of ideas by researchers to further understand policy learning, beliefs, and changes, but also recognizes different research programs focusing on different scopes of its overall concepts.

In regards to ACF’s foci; advocacy coalitions, policy-oriented learning, and policy change, the GONE Act would seem as though it could be formulated by ACF. The unity of
United States domestic coalitions (Senate, House of Representatives, OMB, Senator Fischer, Representative Tim Walberg, and agencies that are to follow the GONE Act) coming together to solve a problem of lack of policy requiring agencies to report expired grant accounts that need to be closed out and actually closing them out, learning of the GAO’s research of how much money has been wasted because none of the money that was not used had been returned to the Treasury, and pursuing joint dialogue to move the GONE Act from Capitol Hill to the White House to be enacted into law. Each actor is less likely to shift their beliefs because they want to achieve the same means of addressing government waste, while looking good to the public by ensuring that no one’s tax dollars will be wasted after the GONE Act is enacted. However, returning to my thesis statement, ACF has not addressed the formation of coalitions that are naturally or forcibly formed because of laws binding coalitions to work together. The rest of the paper will depict and explain which elements of ACF work and do not work with the GONE Act.

**Advocacy Coalition Framework: Coalitions.**

In Sabatier’s Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF), actors’ beliefs and participation in a coalition, along with integrating scientific and technical explanations and evaluations throughout the policy process are what make a subsystem successful. Success cannot necessarily mean significant policy change, but working toward change can also be considered success, especially if the issue is hot off the presses or an issue agreed upon by multiple coalitions. Albright defines success as consensus forming among formerly opposing sides, and the acceptance of agreed-upon solutions (Albright, 489, 2011). However, why do coalitions form and how long will those coalitions last during and after the policymaking process?

In situations where a high degree of consent is required, there is an incentive for coalitions to work together, compromise, and minimize devil shift (Weible, Sabatier, Mcqueen 132, 2009). There is also a sense of openness within the political system, which takes into
account the number of decision-making venues and accessibility to those venues. The federalist structure of the United States’ government is an example of the political system that has multiple venues that provide multiple access points to encourage and incentivize more participation between multiple coalitions (Weible, Sabatier, Mcqueen, 124, 2009). Multiple theorists have addressed this particular focus of ACF through their research with coalition formation and structure, coalitions and their beliefs, and coalition stability.

Adam Henry argues that strategies that promote collaborative approaches to policymaking may provide a solution to addressing the concern of policy networks becoming sparse as more coalitions or actors become disenfranchised in the decision and policymaking process (Henry, 361-362, 2011). However, it is challenging to determine whether or not coalitions are forming because of coalitions’ personal gain. It is also challenging to determine if coalitions are formed because of mandated ties. Henry argues that there are some coalitions that must work together on special issues, but coalitions that are forced to come together sometimes link to other coalitions that are outside the mandated relationship (370, 2011). ACF tries to explain policy changes that are complex in context and can easily divide individuals or coalitions, as well as, what brings coalitions together. Coalitions are brought together when they interpret evidence in a way that their beliefs and values show similarities. A sense of trust is present when coalitions are able to have shared perceptions (Henry, 365, 2011). Trust can also stem from research that is found that solidify the need to carry out policy change and the utilization of resources that were not provided to a particular coalition that could help carry out policy change. However, trust can also be a factor on how an actor overpowers another by taking resources and influence other actors (Henry, 364, 2011; Matti and Sandström, 388, 2011).
Not only trust can be a factor as to how actors can overpower other actors, but also coalition and actor structures created over time can be factors.

Simon Matti and Annica Sandström argue that ACF is the inspiration of coalitions forming (385, 2011). Coalitions form because of having similar thoughts and policy beliefs through collaboration. However, while collaboration promotes consensus of actors and their beliefs, these coalitions can shift their power, both horizontally and vertically. Horizontal management, which promotes collaboration, allows actors to work side-by-side with public officials and experts (Matti and Sandström, 385-286, 2011). Whereas, vertical management emphasizes control from central government of agencies to get to the resources they managed (Matti and Sandström, 385-386, 2011). Coalitions that form because of ACF promote shifts in power that allow all actors to work together and collaborate their beliefs. Not only coalition formation and power shifts can promote ACF, but it is also promoted by actors who specialize solely in collaboration and compromise between actors. Karin Ingold argues that the stability of coalitions is due to policy brokers, or actors who seek compromise between competing coalitions, being located between conflicting coalitions (439, 2011). If these coalitions do not conflict, then policy core beliefs merge and converge as coalitions remained stable (Pierce, 431, 2011). In fact, policy core beliefs converge toward a belief system of a single coalition over time due to coalitions shifting their beliefs with another coalition (Pierce, 431, 2011). Coalitions promote the ACF model by promoting the idea that actors work side-by-side and encourage actors to help opposing coalitions to work together to promote collaboration and further stabilizing coalitions if they have a shared belief. The GONE Act is the exact opposite, in regards to coalitions.
In regards to the GONE Act, the Senate and House formed a coalition because they had similar beliefs when it came to addressing the lack of policies requiring a report to be submitted to indicate which grant accounts are expired and have not been closed out, and not actually closing those accounts. Unlike most coalitions, that would polarize from each other if their thoughts and beliefs were different, the Senate and House had similar thoughts of creating a policy that would address these issues. However, a sense of trust must be present between coalitions. This supposed coalition formed because it is mandated by law for the House and Senate to come together in a joint committee to create one policy that will be sent to the White House to be possibly signed and enacted into law. There may have been a sense of trust that the legislative process will occur and citizens will think highly of members of Capitol Hill if they work together and not waste money, but each chamber, prior to their meeting, had their own coalitions that they were working with.

Both the House and Senate worked with the OMB to create the policy and for them to be facilitate receiving the reports and determining why the grant accounts have not been expired. The House and Senate utilized their resources to reach out to the OMB to review their grant closeout guidelines, and the GAO to review the report they provided on the issue of monetary waste due to unclosed, expired grant accounts. Although, the House and Senate may dependent on one another when unifying a particular policy to send to the White House, but each chamber is able to hold more power over actors who have the resources that they need. The OMB is a federal agency of Congress and the GAO is paid by Congress to provide reports on topics of their choice. The OMB must serve the budgetary needs of the President, and the GAO makes recommendations to Congress. They did not seek Congress for their policymaking resources to implement the GONE Act, Congress sought for their resources and telling them what they will
do to address this issue. The collaboration of diverse actors promotes inclusion of diverse ideas, interests and goals (Matti and Sandström, 386, 2011). While the actors involved with the GONE Act had shared beliefs, there was forced unity that was mandated by law between the House and Senate, and each chamber wanted to control the administrative agencies, OMB and GAO, that were below them to obtain the resources to create the GONE Act. Overall, RDT, in the sense of coalition formation, best describes the formation of the GONE Act because of power and control each chamber has over its administrative agencies to share resources. Also, no actor was a policy broker because there was no pursuit of a compromise between actors because certain actors, the House and the Senate, had power over the other actors, OMB and GAO.

**Advocacy Coalition Framework: Policy-Learning and Policy Change**

ACF studies the policy subsystem as an analytical construct that simplifies analysis of participation in the policy process (Norhrstedt, 462, 2011). In order for an actor to be able to be influential in the policy process, he or she must be able to specialize in the policy area that they are involved with. As the previous section mentioned, ACF coalitions form based on shared policy beliefs. However, situations can occur that could disturb the structure of the coalition or the resources from each actor are shifted. David Norhrstedt provides the example of increases in number of coalition members or shifts in public opinion that might tilt the balance of power (463, 2011). In fact, theorists have argued that shifts in power have occurred because of the knowledge coalitions have gained from their resources that would allow them to strategically exploit them; thus, creating a stronger chance for policy change to occur (Norhrstedt, 463, 2011). Sabatier argues that there are four paths to major policy change; external shock, internal shock, policy-oriented learning, and negotiated agreements (Sabatier and Weible, 202-203, 2014).

Policy shocks, both internal and external, affect policy learning and change (Norhrstedt, 463, 2011). For example, a large-scale event may occur that could create a pathway for policy
change or changes within the structure of the coalition. These are known as focusing events, and they are defined as “an event that is sudden, relatively rare, can be reasonably defined as harmful or revealing the possibility of potentially greater future harms, inflicts harms or suggests potential harms that are or could be concentrated on a definable geographic area or community of interest, and that is known to policy makers and the public virtually simultaneously” (Birkland, 1997, p. 22). However, policy shocks can also be a catalyst for coalitions to become more receptive to receiving new information, even if it may not sync to their beliefs. Exposure from the media, the policy becoming an important issue, and the existence of at least one powerful coalition may encourage policy learning and change in response to an extreme event, whereas constraints and confusion over the underlying causes or the politics of an event may impede learning (Birkland, 2006). Even though external and internal shocks can occur outside and within coalitions, they need to be “skillfully exploited” by minority coalitions to generate policy change (Norhrstedt, 463, 2011). It is highly unlikely that a minority coalition replaces a dominant coalition based solely on its use of newly found power, but alternatively, “they [the minority advocacy coalition] must seek to convince other actors of the soundness of their position” (Noehrstedt, 2008, p. 260; Sabatier, 1993, p. 45). Therefore, external and internal shocks may be catalysts for the creation of focusing events, but the coalitions are the ones that have the ability to exploit them and mobilize their resources that they have learned from.

Policy learning occurs when “relatively enduring alterations of thought and behavioral intentions that result from experience and/or new information and that are concerned with the attainment or revision of policy objectives” (Sabatier and Weible, 198, 2014). Similar to the formation of stable coalitions, policy learning occurs gradually over time. However, it can occur rapidly after the occurrence of an external or internal event. Policies change occurs because
more dominant coalitions revise their understanding of policies. Shocks, such as a disaster, may encourage the redistribution of political resources and motivate policy change by casting doubt on the dominant policy core belief system.

Policy change occurs by drawing attention to a policy problem. By allowing the focusing events to bring to light potential flaws within policies or new ideas to solve a policy problem, or promote the formation of alternatives to a current policy, coalitions could potentially take the lead towards policy change. Policy change also occurs because of negotiated agreements between disputing coalitions. Disputing coalitions may remain in a standstill because of their disagreements, and usually policy brokers, as mentioned in the previous section, are the ones that bring coalitions together to come to an agreement. Therefore, ACF proves that external events that are outside of the control of the policy subsystem open new pathways for policy change (Albright, 500, 2011). However, ACF is missing a more concrete definition of external shocks, which covers changes in public opinion, socioeconomic conditions, and regime shifts (Nohrstedt, 464, 2011). While the internal and external shock contradiction provides one lens in which to study the role of shocks in inspiring policy change, a more detailed analysis of the attributes of policy shocks beyond their previously researched scope is needed. The ACF does not fully clarify how a minority coalition can successfully exploit a focusing event to advance their policy beliefs. In this case of the GONE Act, it has shown that the minority coalition was not able to utilize its own resources and place itself in an analytical debate with the dominant coalition.

The GONE Act could be perceived as relating to the policy-learning and change foci of ACF because each coalition is specialized in the policy that they are trying to pass, as well as shifts in power between the coalitions brought forth policy change. These presumptions could also relate to ACF because of the focusing event that inspired the formation of the GONE Act.
united the coalitions together to create this policy. However, these presumptions are not as relatable to the GONE Act as they may seem.

Each chamber became specialized in expiring grant closeouts through the report provided by the GAO and learning of the guidelines already created by the OMB. However, each chamber was only specialized in expiring grant closeouts because of the information from the GAO and OMB. Therefore, each chamber’s influence was mostly due to the fact that the GAO and OMB work for them as federal agencies, where they’re the boss, and the agencies serve their needs. ACF promotes the rise of a minority coalition that gains knowledge and information to influence other actors to disturb the current policy subsystem to shift control into the minority coalition’s favor. However, that was not the case with the GONE Act. Each chamber within Congress has power over the minority coalitions, GAO and OMB, throughout the formation of the GONE Act. With the GAO and OMB only having recommending and guiding abilities, their influence is not strong enough to shift policy change to Congress, unless Congress comes to them for their resources. Resources help policy issues come to light and, if pushed far enough, become a focusing event. Even though it may not have seemed like a focusing event because it may not inflict future harm, the actors involved with the GONE Act perceived it to be a focusing event because expired grant accounts led to the waste of taxpayer money, which is what citizens despise most about government. However, the shocks that have occurred, externally and internally, involve new information coming to light that shift power amongst coalitions. Power has not shifted. In fact, it is one coalition (Congress) taking resources from other coalitions (OMB and GAO) to solve a policy problem themselves because they have the ability to do so as law makers. There is no way that the OMB and GAO could pass their own GONE Act without
having someone from Congress involved to push the policy through Capitol Hill and into the White House.

**Conclusion:**

ACF has inspired policy researchers to come together to answer questions that regard the policy process, such as coalition formation, policy-learning, and policy change. Even though ACF was the foundation for empirical analysis of the foci analyzed throughout this paper, ACF has missing elements that do not address the forced formations of coalitions because of laws and how coalitions form because of the forced relationship. It seems as though because the relationship between each chamber was forced in order to unify a single policy for the President to potentially sign into law, and each chamber’s relationship with the GAO, and the OMB were hierarchical, ACF is not the best fit to represent the GONE Act. This is because forming forced relationships that permanently shift power to one coalition, and utilizing resources that required to be sent to Congress do not promote the uniting of coalitions, beliefs, information, and resources to solve a similar policy problem. There would also be no horizontal aligning between coalitions. Congress will look down to the OMB and GAO to have them provide the resources Congress may need. Could these diverse actors come together to fight government waste? Well, they already have...just Congress took the reins to turn guidelines and “should do’s” into a binding law.
References


