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## Analysing Policy Proximity through media reporting

### Abstract

Policy changes in one subsystem can easily spill over to other subsystems. An approach that addresses these interconnections is the concept of 'policy proximity'. This concept posits that different policy issues share common features that make them more or less likely to change together. However, we unfortunately have no systematic knowledge of the proximity between policy areas. In this article, we address this shortcoming by proposing a novel measurement concept of policy proximity that captures the proximity between different policy issues based on their joint appearance in media reporting. To do so, we conduct a relational content analysis of all media reports aired by the German news broadcast 'Tagesschau' between 2013 and 2021. We show that policy issues substantially differ in their connectivity with other subjects and identify for each subsystem the closest 'neighbors'. We conclude by discussing our results in light of existing policy change theories.

**Keywords:** policy proximity; policy change; relational content analysis

### Zusammenfassung

*Eine Analyse von 'Policy Proximity' durch Medienberichterstattung*

Veränderungen in einem Policy-Subsystem können sich leicht auf andere Subsysteme auswirken. Ein Ansatz, der sich mit diesen Zusammenhängen befasst, ist das Konzept der 'Policy Proximity'. Dieses Konzept geht davon aus, dass verschiedene politische Themen gemeinsame Merkmale aufweisen, die es wahrscheinlicher oder unwahrscheinlicher machen, dass diese sich gemeinsam verändern. Leider haben wir bisher keine systematischen Kenntnisse über die exakte Nähe zwischen verschiedenen Politikbereichen. Dieser Artikel adressiert diese Forschungslücke, indem wir ein neuartiges Messkonzept der politischen Nähe vorschlagen, welches die Nähe zwischen verschiedenen politischen Themen auf der Grundlage ihres gemeinsamen Auftretens in der Medienberichterstattung erfasst. Dazu führen wir eine relationale Inhaltsanalyse aller Medienberichte durch, die von der deutschen Tagesschau zwischen 2013 und 2021 ausgestrahlt wurden. Wir zeigen, dass sich politische Themen in ihrer Verknüpfung mit anderen Themen deutlich unterscheiden und identifizieren für jedes Teilsystem die engsten „Nachbarn“. Abschließend diskutieren wir unsere Ergebnisse mithilfe bestehender Theorien zum Politikwandel.

**Schlagworte:** Policy Proximity; Politikwandel; relationale Inhaltsanalyse

## 1 Introduction

In response to the pandemic, governments have developed bundles of new policy measures and reforms (Goyal & Howlett, 2021). What started as a public health issue, has quickly cascaded into policy reforms in all kinds of areas. The public health measures

required a shutdown of the economy and public life. The shutdown, in turn, required compensatory measures for both businesses and employees as well as massive investments into the digital infrastructure to facilitate home-schooling and distance learning.

This simple observation indicates that patterns of policy change and stability do not occur *independently* across different policy subsystems: Policy development in one policy subsystem might directly or indirectly affect the patterns of policy change in other domains. Yet, existing theories of policy change are strikingly silent when it comes to the analysis of this phenomenon. This is due to the ‘subsystem bias’ that characterizes the existing policy change scholarship. Policy changes are studied with a strong focus on *individual* policy subsystems. These fields are the central analytical point of reference. Everything that happens in fields other than the one under investigation is deliberately neglected.

One of the few public policy concepts that takes account of the interdependencies across different policy subsystems is the concept of *policy proximity* developed by Nohrstedt and Weible (2010). Policy proximity captures the similarity of policies with regard to their “statutes, laws, and policies, including the instruments, ideas, and symbols therein” (p. 20). As a result of this policy proximity, some policy subsystems are more likely than others to change together in response to common crisis events and other political developments. The concept of policy proximity has become widely used in empirical (mostly qualitative) studies. Unfortunately, however, the proximity of different policy issues is typically determined in an *ex-post* assessment. In other words: policy subsystems are said to be proximate because they had changed together – not because scholars had a pre-existing knowledge about policy subsystems’ interconnections and commonalities (but see May, Jochim & Sapotichne, 2013).

In this article, we address this shortcoming and propose a novel measurement concept of policy proximity that captures the ‘distance’ between different policy subsystems based on their joint appearance in media reporting. To do so, we conduct a relational content analysis of 27.000 media reports aired by the German news broadcast ‘Tagesschau’ between 2013 and 2021. We show that policy issues differ in their connectivity to other issue areas. Moreover, we identify the ‘closest neighbours’ to each policy subsystem and briefly discuss our findings in light of the dominant theories on policy change.

Our contribution is a first step towards improving our scientific capacities in predicting and explaining policy change events within and across different policy subsystems. The remainder of this article is structured as follows. In the next section, we briefly discuss the existing literature on policy change and the ‘subsystem bias’ characterizing the existing literature (section 2). Thereafter, we introduce our novel measurement approach of policy proximity and specify the context of analysis (media outlets) as well as the policy issues under scrutiny (section 3). In section 4 we present the empirical patterns of policy proximity. Moreover, we check how our findings are influenced by the occurrence of major crisis events such as the 2015 and 2016 refugee crises and the 2020 and 2021 COVID-19 pandemic. Section 5 discusses how we can theoretically account for different degrees of policy proximity across subsystems, building on central theoretical frameworks of policy change. The last section concludes with a broader discussion of how our measures of policy proximity can help to improve the study of policy change.