

## **The “Advocacy Coalitions” of educational policies: Conceptual framework and its application to a country case**

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**Abstract:** This article presents and tests a conceptual framework for the analysis of educational policies from a political science perspective. Based on the works of Sabatier y Jenkins Smith, it is contended that actors in this subsector of policies tend to build “advocacy coalitions” between those who share different levels of “beliefs”, with the objective of influence the content of policies. Afterwards, this conceptual framework is applied to the study of a national case: the field of educational policies in Uruguay.

**Keywords:** Educational Policies. Advocacy Coalitions. Uruguay.

### **Las “Coaliciones Promotoras” de las políticas educativas: Marco conceptual y aplicación a un caso nacional**

**Resumen:** El artículo presenta y pone a prueba un marco conceptual para el análisis de las políticas educativas desde una perspectiva politológica. Partiendo de los trabajos de Sabatier y Jenkins Smith, se propone que los actores de este subsector de políticas tienden a construir "coaliciones promotoras" entre aquellos que comparten distintos niveles de "creencias", con el objetivo de incidir en el contenido de las políticas. Posteriormente, se aplica este marco conceptual al estudio de un caso nacional: el campo de las políticas educativas en Uruguay.

Bentancur, N. (2016) “Advocacy Coalitions” of educational policies. A conceptual framework and its application to a country case, v. 1, n. 1, pp. 150-169.

**Palabras clave:** Políticas Educativas. Coaliciones Promotoras. Uruguay.

### **As "Coalizões Promotoras" das políticas educacionais: Marco conceitual e aplicação a um caso nacional**

**Resumo:** O artigo apresenta e põe em questão um marco conceitual para a análise de políticas educacionais a partir de uma perspectiva da ciência política. Partindo dos trabalhos de Sabatier e Jenkins, propõe-se que os atores desse subsector de políticas tendem a construir "coalizões promotoras" entre aqueles que compartilham distintos níveis de "crenças", com o objetivo de incidir no conteúdo das políticas. Posteriormente, aplica-se este marco conceitual ao estudo de um caso nacional: o campos das políticas educacionais no Uruguai.

**Palavras-chave:** Políticas Educacionais. Coalizões Promotoras. Uruguai.

## **1. Introduction**

This work seeks to contribute to outline a conceptual and methodological framework that provides a basis for the analysis of cases at a country level and compare educational policies of different countries from a Political Science standpoint. In view of the fact that within the field of educational policy there is no single theoretical core, but rather many, as well as various methodological approaches from a variety of sources (Tello, 2013), our approach will be necessarily partial, addressing just one of the dimensions of educational policies. However, this approach is unavoidable, if we want to consider policies in all their complexity.

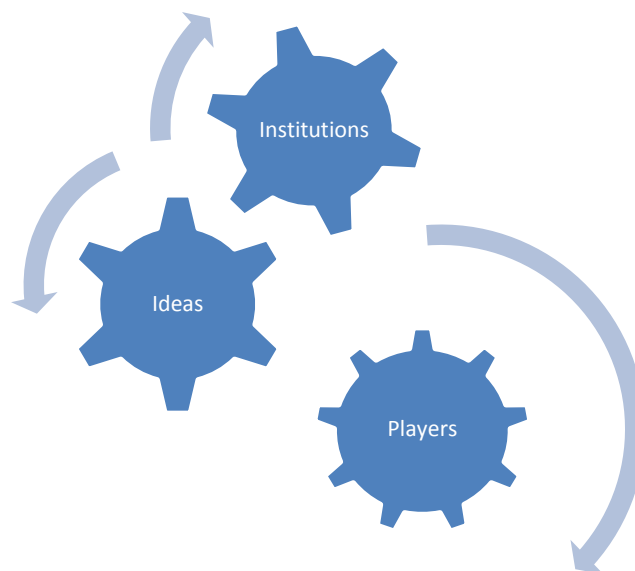
From this standpoint, educational policies can be regarded as a specific manifestation of public policies. We have applied Aguilar Villanueva's criterion (1992) to define public policies, based on the following characteristics: it is an intentional behavior, an action or omission with a sense of purpose; with the participation of various actors, such as decision-makers or political activists; it assumes a course of action or process; it is sanctioned by a formal authority – legally competent and enforceable; it affects the political and social system.

So, which are the political variables which may explain the orientation and content of public policies in general, and more specifically of educational policies? Which aspects do we need to consider in order to analyze the factors that shape their construction and enactment? Which elements may account for similarities and differences in educational government in different countries, subnational and international units? These are relevant questions if we assume, as we do here, that politics matter. In other words, that educational policies are not needed "technical" answers to problems in education, but rather the result of a political process involving a wide range of collective actors with different status, competencies, interests, beliefs and resources, intertwined in cooperative and conflictive relations, eventually ending up in particular decisions being made, in accordance with the

legal framework in force (or in some cases, replacing the legal framework, if that should be the objective of a particular policy).

In a previous study we outlined the following three main elements that shape education's political dynamics, and contribute significantly to explain educational policies outputs: a) the institutional design type; b) the existing visions, diagnosis and transformational proposals; c) the identities, perspectives and resources of the main actors in this field (Bentancur, 2015).

**Figure I. Main components of public policies**



Institutions, ideas and actors are the three key variables that need to be surveyed in order to achieve an adequate understanding of the educational policies process. Institutions exert an influence on political products because they amalgamate the identities, power and strategies of actors, and, also, they have a history, granting them strength and inertia, and therefore, the ability to influence future events (Putnam, 1993). On the other hand, ideas (and their representation on a visible act, such as discourse) form the rules, narratives, stories, and referential frameworks, which allow for the actors' interests to be constructed and understood, and to communicate their actions within public institutions (Schmidt, 2006). Lastly, in order to fully comprehend political processes, it is essential to pay attention to the actions of various actors with different interests, perspectives, resources and rationales,

who interact with one another in the political game, producing specific results. The range of said actors is wide, including: government officials, political parties, bureaucrats, and members of multilateral organizations, unions, private associations and think tanks, to cite a few. The political interaction between them introduces a "power game" through which they control one another, within the system's rules (Lindblom, 1992; Dahl, 1989).

In the following chapter we will continue to develop the theoretical base for two of these three elements: actors and ideas, resorting to one of the most influential constructs of public policies of the last two decades. We will then seek to apply this theoretical structure to the study of an actual case, that of educational policies in Uruguay.

## **2. The Advocacy Coalitions Framework and its relevance to the study of educational policies**

This framework for the study of public policies was presented in 1988 by North American authors Paul Sabatier and Hank Jenkins-Smith. In the following years they continued to develop the model through different publications either jointly or with other authors.

They introduced three "foundation stones" or assumptions for the analysis of public policies:

- (1) a macro-level assumption that most policymaking occurs among specialists within a policy subsystem but that their behavior is affected by factors in the broader political and socioeconomic system;
- (2) a micro-level "model of the individual" that is drawn heavily from social psychology; and
- (3) a meso-level conviction that the best way to deal with the multiplicity of actors in a subsystem is to aggregate them into "advocacy coalitions." (Sabatier and Weible, 2007, pp. 191-192).

Next we will develop each one of the mentioned levels of analysis in that order. From a macro level standpoint, the theoretical issue resides on defining the object of analysis of the study. The predominant approach since the 1950s has been the one following the political cycle, or "the stages heuristic" (Lasswell, 1956; Jones, 1977; Hogwood and Peters, 1983). The development of a public policy was conceived as a cycle involving certain stages: first, an issue was set in the agenda; secondly, a decision was made; subsequently, the decision was implemented; and finally, it was assessed. Many studies focused on the concepts, rationales and discussions of each one of these three stages, more specifically on the necessary conditions that should be met for a social problem to be included in the decision making process, the fairly rational ways, or interest-based notions which guided the decisions taken, the gaps between the adopted policies and their actual implementation, and the conditions and methods used to assess the merits of a given policy. In all cases, the object of the analysis used to be a specific policy, and most of the times studies focused on just one of the stages.

Conversely, the Advocacy Coalitions Framework (ACF) considers a set of policies as a whole, assuming the interdependency and interaction between the different stages, and establishing a ten-year time frame for the analysis. It is assumed that, contemporarily, public policy making is very complex – both substantively and legally- forcing the different actors (government, society, intellectuals) to specialize on a specific subject in order to increase the probabilities of success. As a result, we can see subsystems of policies, with particular functionally essential dimensions, clearly defined territories, distinctive rules, and expert and recurrent actors (Sabatier and Weible, 2010).

The relevance of using this type of approach for the study of educational policies seems reasonable to us due to four main reasons. First, even if it is a sectorial field, essentially exposed to “contamination” by other policies (economic, social, etc.), education is bestowed by a legal framework of its own, a fact which should not be overlooked. This characteristic can be seen in the evident inertia demonstrated by educational institutions to process their transformations, and also in the comparative weight that educational professionals enjoy in the making of decisions and their execution. Therefore, though being part of public policies, educational policies require an analysis that accounts for its relative heterodoxy. Second, it is true that tackling educational policies has its benefits when they are taken together as a group, in order to make sense of transformations. We can think, for example, on a process of territorial decentralization of educational functions, which would require an analysis of the necessary financial policies that are linked to the former. Third, we should acknowledge the specialization of actors: educational authorities, teaching unions, academics specialized on the subject, international organizations, student and parent associations, and textbooks publishers are some of the protagonists of this field’s political process, with a high level of expertise on education’s essential issues as well as the internal political dealings. In some occasions, this group of actors can become a true “policy network” of its own (Marsh 1998). Lastly, given the slow pace of their transformations and the postponement of the consequences of reforms over time, it is worthwhile adopting a medium-term perspective of educational policies (Pedró and Puig, 1999).

On a micro or the “model of the individual” level the most influential theories within the field of public policies fall within the rational choice philosophy. This theoretical view seeks to explain interactions between people in general, enjoying a predominant place within economic sciences, and spreading its influence to the whole universe of social and humanistic sciences. According to it, people are rational beings whose conduct is primarily driven by material motivations, with the purpose of maximizing profits. People’s preferences per se (ideology, values, and beliefs) are irrelevant; but rather the way in which they combine, producing results in society. When people refer to an ideology or values in their discourses, they do so to justify their conduct, with a utilitarian goal, just for the purpose of gaining supporters for their cause (Arrow, 1951; Olson, 1992; Buchanan and Tullock, 1993). Later on, the rational choice principles were applied to theories and research focusing on government and political parties (Downs, 1992), public administration

(Moe, 2007), and government policies (Ostrom, 2010), holding the same assumptions as those of the methodological individualism in the study of said core activities of the political arena. In the last two decades some of those studies have focused more on institutions, and their influence in shaping the choices of those rational actors (North, 1995; Shepsle, 2007).

In contrast, ACF authors have held that normative beliefs must be defined empirically, without excluding a priori the altruistic behavior of a person, driven not just by self-interest but also by his or her belief system. In this respect, they agree with other views of the sociological institutionalism school, which hold that people act according to what is expected of them following appropriate behavioral rules within their environment. Actors seek to comply with the obligations attached to their roles, identities, the group or community they are part of, and the *ethos*, practices and expectations of those institutions. Being part of a group means doing what is considered to be appropriate by it in a given situation (March and Olsen, 2009). ACF goes further, attempting to identify and classify the belief system that would drive people's actions.

With respect to public policies, ACF identifies a hierarchy of three levels of decreasing importance. The first one is that of the *deep core beliefs*, which includes normative and ontological assumptions regarding human nature, essential values (freedom, equality), prioritizing the welfare of specific groups, the roles of the government and the market, and the definition of who should participate in making public policy. Due to their intensity, they are the most difficult to change. The second level identifies beliefs related to public policies, *policy core beliefs*, which refer to a set of assumptions regarding a sub set of issues such as political priorities, collectives that should be favored, the relative power of government and markets, the expected role of government authorities and officials, etc. Often, though not always, second-level beliefs are consistent with core beliefs. These are the beliefs that usually help the most in binding coalitions together. Last, the third level is that of *secondary beliefs*, which have a narrower scope, because they do not relate to a group of subset of policies or laws, but rather to programs or specific tools. Therefore, they are, theoretically, less intense than those of the upper levels (Sabatier and Weible, 2010).

Taking a position regarding this debate of anthropological basis over the motivations behind human collective action is, certainly, of the greatest interest to the study of educational policies. Many of the policies which have earned most credit worldwide recently have assumed –at least implicitly– a perspective kindred to the rational choice principle. This has been evident in the application of economic incentives for educational institutions, teachers or even students, linked to their performance, as an efficient way to guide their conduct towards achieving certain goals. And in assuming that certain evaluation systems linked to rewards and punishments could favor transparency and institutional change. Often these policy essays underestimated other perspectives, more sensitive to the views of the world and of the sector in which people and associations act. In addition to the implications for the political practice, acknowledging the role of belief systems – generically referred to above as the “ideas” of educational policies– has also

consequences of heuristic nature. By shaping the identities of actors in education, belief systems contribute greatly to explain their actions, priorities, strategies and interactions with other political players. Due to the fact that beliefs are more stable and predictable than interests – which may change according to circumstances- studying the ideas of the different players in education contributes to explain implemented policies and to outline probable future scenarios. It is particularly interesting to analyze the discourse of these actors, as a visible expression of their beliefs.

The third and last ACF cornerstone is precisely that of the advocacy coalitions. It may also be conceived as an alternative and developed version of the pluralism theories. As we have indicated above, pluralism conceives public policy as the result of a power game, in which different actors fight to control decision-making in order to satisfy their interests. Any cooperation between actors that may take place is merely functional, resulting from pragmatic negotiations, and most probably applicable only to specific circumstances (Lindblom, 1992; Dahl, 1989).

ACF shares the view that public policy is determined by a contest between actors, but conceives them as being part of coalitions based on ideas, with more stability over time. It holds that the beliefs and the behavior of public policy actors operate within informal networks, each of them represented by a sub-sector of policies. Inside each sub-sector, policies are structured, at least partially, by the networks built by its most important participants. Each actor seeks to obtain the policies most compatible to his or her beliefs, and, in order to succeed, seek allies, share resources and develop combined strategies with groups with similar beliefs, especially if this interaction repeats over time. Most generally, there will be at least two advocacy coalitions defending opposing beliefs in any policy subsystem.

Other authors have pointed out that not all groups that share the same belief and value systems act as advocacy coalitions. Sometimes, these groups do not build the alliances needed to defend their position in the policy process. They call "discourse coalitions" to those collectives that share the same interpretation of reality and political discourse, but do not act coordinately. However, they may exert their influence in the political debate and form public opinion (Birner *et al.*, 2011).

Are the usual dynamics of educational policy ruled by the existence of advocacy coalitions? It may be not possible to provide a generic answer to this question, because, in order to do so, we should consider different country cases and historic circumstances. There is also a problem of gradation arising out of the conceptual framework, which lacks the possibility of delineating with the necessary clarity the cohesion level required for establishing the existence of an advocacy coalition sustainable over time, beyond the shared views of different actors seeking a similar result with a particular policy. A priori, the educational field seems suitable for the application of this type of constructs, given the existence of

groups with clearly defined belief systems (political parties, teachers unions, experts of different affiliations, international organizations within the sector, etc.). It may also be argued that often when there is an attempt of an ambitious educational policy reform, one may find coalitions formed by domestic and foreign actors promoting changes, and other coalitions with varying degrees of development that oppose them (this may be the case of the various reforms implemented in Latin America during the 1990s). Even at relatively stable times, it is not uncommon to find dividing lines in the actors positioning with respect to educational issues, cutting through the various collectives (parties, unions, expert associations) and delineating inter-sectorial affiliations. In order to contribute to the necessarily broad and collective task of elucidating the belief system's role in educational policies, in the following chapter I will attempt to apply this conceptual framework to a country case.

### **3. Case analysis: beliefs and discourse coalitions of educational policies actors in Uruguay<sup>1</sup>**

By the end of the XIX century, Uruguay became an *Estado Docente*, positioning itself at the forefront of all educational indicators of Latin America, a situation sustained until the last decades of the XX century. The national education system succeeded in developing a national identity and integrating great part of the popular masses to society (a crucial task for a society built upon strong migratory influxes), and also in fulfilling the cultural purposes of education.

However, since the last decades of the past century the functioning and results of the education system have been subject to critique from an increasing number of social and political actors, and the society in general. The "situation of education" is a key issue in the political and public agenda, and is one of the most important national issues for the public opinion, second to safety<sup>2</sup>. The reasons that triggered this perception are varied: the mediocre results in international tests, higher repetition and school dropping rates, lower higher education enrollment rates, the social gap in school performance, to cite a few. There is a broad consensus regarding the need for reform of the education system, but the political system seems incapable of doing it. For this reason, the characteristics of the "political game" in this sub-sector provide a unique focus of attention for protagonists and analysts alike. These circumstances make it especially suitable to test the application of the Advocacy Coalitions Framework in attempting to explain the difficulties in taking decisions regarding the education system in Uruguay.

With this in mind, we first need to identify the most important actors in the education system in the country<sup>3</sup>. In Uruguay, there is a wide range of actors that exert their influence

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<sup>1</sup> We elaborate on the findings of a previous study (Bentancur, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> According to data gathered in public opinion polls by the firms Factum, Equipos Consultores and Cifra.

<sup>3</sup> In this section we will limit our analysis to defining the main characteristics of the most important actors, leaving for another study the different ways in which they interact (strategies, exchanges, and transactions).



upon the making of public policies. First and foremost, we should cite educational authorities, who enjoy – with different degrees of intensity- a special power with regards to educational policies: the legal authority over their formulation and implementation. Among them, a prominent role is played by the Councils of the *Administración Nacional de Educación Pública* (ANEP, Public Education National Administration), which rule the system. One distinctive characteristic of the education system in Uruguay is that the main competencies regarding the system's orientation and regulation are controlled by this autonomous body, independent from the political power, though Congress elects its members. The executive government also exercises some power over education through the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC), although with a limited capacity compared to their counterparts in other countries. In recent years, new public bodies have emerged, which, although not being primarily focused in education, have embraced the development of innovative education programs. (Ministry of Social Development, *Laboratorio Tecnológico del Uruguay*) (Bentancur and Mancebo, 2010).

Naturally, political parties with congressional representation and, specially, the governing party constitute high-ranking actors in the definition of policies, due to their major influence in enacting laws and in the sector's financing and election of officials.

A third group of actors is made up of education trade unions. Unions in Uruguay are organized according to the system's different levels, and structured in federations, which group territorial (departmental) associations. The most important of them are the *Federación Uruguaya del Magisterio* (FUM, Uruguayan Teachers Federation), the *Federación Nacional de Profesores* (FENAPES, National Federation of Professors) and the *Asociación de Funcionarios de la Universidad del Trabajo del Uruguay* (AFUTU, Labor University of Uruguay Officials Association). Although they generally act autonomously, they also organize coordinated actions through the *Coordinadora de los Sindicatos de la Enseñanza del Uruguay* (CSEU, Uruguayan Education Trade Unions Coordination Association). Like in any trade union, their effective power lies in their organization, and the number of affiliated members, which varies significantly among them<sup>4</sup>. However, their ability to mobilize workers to protest exceeds the total number of members. Traditionally, teachers unions in Uruguay have developed a strong identity and participation in the definition of educational policies, at times in an integrated manner, and, at other times, having an opposing role and actively fighting the implementation of policies. As noted above, the new institutional structure has granted these actors co-management of the Councils ruling education, therefore adding to their traditional societal means of influence (persuasion, political obstruction threats, and exchange), these other key resources of formal authority.

In contrast, private education actors and other related organizations have not gained much influence in Uruguay compared to similar institutions in other Latin American countries. There is one organization of lay private schools, *Asociación de Instituciones de Enseñanza*

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<sup>4</sup> Although there are no official numbers, it has been publicized that FUM concentrates 76% of teachers and FENAPES 28% of high school teachers (*El Observador*, December 11, 2011).

*Privada* (Private Teaching Institutions Association), made up of eighty institutions, and another one of catholic schools, the *Asociación Uruguaya de Educación Católica* (Catholic Education Uruguayan Association), which has about 170 members. Neither these nor the Catholic Church have succeeded in exerting a significant influence in the definition of policies for the system as a whole.

Lastly, in Uruguay there are no think tanks, in the strict sense of the term, focused on education. There are hubs of researchers on the subject, working in different institutions – mainly universities- with varying degrees of concurrence over their orientations. In addition to the relatively weak institutional cut-off, there is that of the areas of study, which tends to generate different paradigms and perspectives of analysis according to the field (e.g., educational sciences, social sciences, economy). Applying Stone's typology (2001), most part of these researchers are "altruistic academics", who do not seek any direct influence upon policies; others work as "employed researchers" (consultants) for different public offices or supranational bodies, or even partake more or less organically assessing political parties on educational issues or play the role of political technicians or symbolic analysts.

When applying the ACF we will attempt to group this set of actors into different categories, based on their shared belief systems, leaving aside their institutional nature. By identifying the actors' categories, describing their basic positions and also the opponents' objections to them –in each case, through their own sayings-, we are able to adequately outline the scenario of educational policies' game in Uruguay, and to identify the main core issues to be solved. Our inquiry is static – about actors' beliefs- not a dynamic one – about their actual interrelation and strategies to influence policies-, because our purpose is to identify the existence of discourse coalitions, that might, perhaps, evolve into advocacy coalitions.

With this objective in mind, and using public discourse as the criterion to classify them, we propose to group the roster of actors mentioned above into the following four discourse coalitions, which we will label in the given order as follows: "autonomists", "societal-articulators", "incrementalists" and "liberals".

a) The "Autonomists"

Some of the protagonists, not only in quantitative but also in qualitative terms, of the national educational policies arena define their position based on a clear-cut division between the political and educational spheres. By doing so they are holding on resolutely to a fundamental characteristic of the national path dependence and the legal framework, which define the autonomous government of education<sup>5</sup>. But this also implies acknowledging that teachers have a central role in said government, because they are the

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<sup>5</sup> New institutionalism literature refers to path dependence as the inertial force acquired by institutions once they have been created and established (Krasner 1984). In the case under analysis, the long lasting autonomous-oriented tradition of the Uruguayan educational system embraced the emergence of actors, who define their vision and interests upon said institution, and hence, oppose its alteration.

only collective actor, which, in addition to having a special knowledge on the subject, makes sure to protect the sector from other rationales that may impair educational purposes (be it originated from political parties, the market, multilateral financial bodies, etc.). Traditionally, this category has included most unions and para-union organizations (such as the Technical Teachers Assembly), academics linked to the field of pedagogy or educational sciences and teachers training, and a big part of the leftist political wing, which has played an opposition role, and conceived autonomy as a barrier to fend off ideas and interests from traditional parties.

This position is well defined in the following quote from a group of intellectuals from the educational field, many of whom have extensive experience as teachers or in public education management<sup>6</sup>:

Uruguay has had historically a peculiar understanding of the relationship between State, politics and education, adopting a way of perceiving public education as a human right, which the State must preserve without interfering with its autonomous management... This autonomic tradition, which goes back to the very origins of our educational national system, has become an undeniable element of our identity's foundation... Autonomy in education (...) is a safeguard against the vested interests of political, economic or ideological groups which hold the hegemonic power from time to time (*Grupo de Reflexión sobre Educación*)<sup>7</sup>.

It is obvious that the autonomist position empowers teachers groups in the decision-making process of policies; however, some national political sectors support it, on the grounds that it favors other higher collective values:

We believe autonomy in education to be essential, because it is linked to development. It has been a historical bastion of Uruguay's leftist movement, which succeeded in conquering full academic freedom throughout Latin America (...) The participation of teachers, officials and students in the decisions to be taken should not be seen as a corporative interest group, but rather what is at stake is the projects we want for our country, and if we want to continue training Uruguayans for an agro-export country (Senator Eduardo Lorier, Communist Party of Uruguay, *Frente Amplio* alliance)<sup>8</sup>.

Autonomy has become in recent years the main controversial issue in the field. Almost unanimously, opposition parties reject its fundamentals and criticize the current institutional design (especially after the passing of the General Education Act of 2008), for constituting, according to them, a confiscation of citizens' right to govern the sector through the political representatives, to the benefit of teaching unions. Two former

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<sup>6</sup> Made up by Agustín Cano, Lilián D'Elía, Marta Demarchi, Walter Fernández Val, Elsa Gatti, Olga Gumila, Mauricio Langón, María Teresa Sales, Miguel Soler and Luis Yarzabal.

<sup>7</sup> "Contribution to the current educational debate in Uruguay" (Mimeo 2011).

<sup>8</sup> *El Observador* newspaper, 06/24/2011.

Republican presidents from the National and *Colorado* Parties have expressed their views accordingly:

It is imperative a national leadership of education. Today, democracy does not apply to education, because the government elected by its citizens does not govern education. We need to repeal the laws giving corporations too big a share. The Ministry of Education has little to do with education. The ANEP is tainted with corporatism (Luis A. Lacalle, National Party)<sup>9</sup>

In matters of education, the government does not rule, but rather the union rules. Union activity is ideology-biased, trying to establish a model of society. The right way to do it is not through unions, but through the people and democracy (Jorge Batlle, *Colorado* Party).<sup>10</sup>

In the last years, these negative views have also spread to part of the leadership of the *Frente Amplio*. In this sense, the acting republican Vice President at the time made his opinion known:

In our country there has been an institutional framework, traditionally ruled by autonomies. These are obstacles for a national leadership of education. The entity to rule over the national education process should be the Ministry of Education and Culture (Danilo Astori, *Frente Amplio*)<sup>11</sup>.

#### b) Societal – Articulators

This coalition of actors has emerged in recent years. It is characterized by the concern from many influential persons over social problems such as poverty, exclusion, for which education appears as a cause and, at the same time, as one of the best ways to solve them. Therefore, it is essential to discuss the purpose, functions, organization and programs of education with this broader perspective, and not just the sector's common language. People in this group come mostly from union organizations, ranking positions in government, and the intellectual world more closely linked to the management of social or educational policies.

The following is a quote from an education union leader representing this view:

More budget for community teachers is needed... We need to revert the trend in the more vulnerable sectors. We need to support these sectors, which are excluded from the public system, through social policies. With health, food, and also education. Young offenders are a clear example of a system that has failed (Gustavo Macedo, *Federación Uruguaya de Magisterio*)<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> ACDE Meetings "Uruguay 2030. A Nation Project", 9/1/2011.

<sup>10</sup> ACDE Meetings "Uruguay 2030 Nation Project", 9/1/2011.

<sup>11</sup> *El País* newspaper, 6/23/2011.

<sup>12</sup> Supplement "What's Up", *El País* newspaper, 4/29/2011.

Those in this group of actors most identified with social policies are particularly aware of the differences between the target beneficiaries of public interventions, and promote differentiating and segmenting educational services:

The current educational matrix is the strongest and most resilient legacy from the traditional concept of universality in the social sphere, which sought standardization, hiding or ignoring anything diverse or different. In the field of education it assumed the development of similar educational proposals and curricula for all, regardless of their particular conditions or profiles (...) Curriculum and evaluation have become the ultimate mechanisms of dismissal of a system, which is conceived to be more a sum of subsystems and educational offers, than a provider of real educational opportunities (Renato Opertti, former Coordinator of ANEP's *Programa de Mejoramiento de la Enseñanza Media y la Formación Docente* - High School and Teachers Training Enhancement Program).

These concerns have also been expressed at more formal settings, the most elaborated being the conclusions made within the framework of the Adolescence and Childhood National Strategy initiative, promoted during the first term in government of the *Frente Amplio*. Due to its strategic importance, to the above referenced "societal" features, it is added here an institutional dimension, consisting of the need for articulation between the different levels and programs relative to children and teenagers' education.

The following passage reflects such ideas:

An efficient implementation of policies for childhood and adolescence requires that there be an articulation and coordination systemic strategy, which ends once and for all the current institutional fragmentation (...), and whose starting point must be a joint definition of the problems in the respective political spheres, which will demand the implementation of permanent and systematic coordination mechanisms. This joint definition of political decisions should be made in conjunction with the development of cross-sectorial spheres of joint implementation, in which the sectorial body in charge of conducting the policy leads its implementation (Consejo Nacional de Políticas Sociales, 2008, p. 52).

Although relatively new, this discourse coalition has had an increasing influence on educational policies in the last twenty years, giving rise to the emergence of opponents. It is not surprising that most critiques emerge from the "autonomists", mainly directed at the societal views of education, as it is the case of the following comments made by teacher union leaders:

The situation is such that students come to class for the economic incentive given by the government, or due to family pressure, but have no desire to study (...) The State has succeeded in reducing the number of boys in the streets, however, these

boys create huge disciplinary problems in the classroom, hindering the progress of those who really want to do things right (Walter Zunino, President of FENAPES) <sup>13</sup>.

(with the changes in rules and the constant lowering of expectations), it is being instilled upon students a culture that despises hard work and effort, consistent with the "poor thing, just promote him" idea (José Olivera, leader of FENAPES) <sup>14</sup>.

The "articulator" streak is also challenged, in the sense that it could weaken the capacities granted to the Councils that rule education, as it has been voiced by some academic sources: "The MEC's role is ever stronger, a demonstration of the overwhelming force against autonomy. We are faced here with a tension between legality and legitimacy" (Domínguez and Gatti, 2011, p. 365).

### c) The "Incrementalists"

We employ the word in the sense given to it by Lindblom (1992), referring to two fundamental characteristics of its conception and actions: one, the assumption that, in a plural society, for a decision making process to be legitimate and sustainable over time, it is required that there be agreements between groups representing different perspectives and interests; and two, that, in part as a consequence of the former, this policy making process will respond to a pattern of gradual transformations, of an incremental nature, in connection with the already existing policies. In the specific case of Uruguay, adhering to this view implies assuming the limitations derived from the institutional framework, the validity of the multi-party system and the influence of teacher trade unions. As of today, most of the "incrementalists" are part of the governing political party, although they are subject to increasing criticisms even from their own space, given the widespread deception with the results obtained by this strategy.

The more "agreement prone" faction of this group contemplates not only the political but also the social scenario, with varying opinions as to leaning to one or the other. This is acknowledged by the then Minister of Education and Culture:

Changes required by education, changes required in the National Public Education System, need the support and commitment of society and the political space to make them happen (...) The consensus used to be political. We now understand that we need to transform it into a national agreement. The political space represents all citizens, the society as a whole, but we need to engage them, get them to commit to act. The changes we are seeking are very profound. The educational system must be a priority... (Minister of Education and Culture Ricardo Ehrlich) <sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> *El País* newspaper, 6/22/11.

<sup>14</sup> *Búsqueda* magazine, 5/19/2011.

<sup>15</sup> Interview broadcast by *En Perspectiva* radio talk show on October 14, 2011. Available at <http://www.espectador.com/politica/223953/ricardo-ehrich-el-sistema-educativo-tiene-que-estar-en-primera-linea-para-lograr-cambios-profundos>

Meanwhile, the gradualist point of view has been expressed with sheer clarity by the former President of ANEP, Luiz Yarzabal, who underscored the difference between the "reform" and the "constant transformation" strategies:

... I do not think we should discuss any specific reform of the educational system at all. Reforms are painful and produce the results we have already seen here: dismemberment, trauma, conflicts that do not do education any good. I favor those who promote constant transformation processes. This is what we are trying to achieve in this administration<sup>16</sup>.

In this sense, the incrementalist strategy of building up educational policies comes under the crossfire from the range of actors of the rest of the discourse coalitions, and even from the governing party itself. As an example of this, we can cite the comment from the parliamentary representative for the governing party, José Bayardi, who criticized the gradualism evidenced in the education administration:

There are many more resources, but a turning point is necessary, because at ANEP we see management is weak, and progress is not visible. There are problems both in elementary and high school; the educational model demands a turning point that places the student at the center of the administration.<sup>17</sup>

Opposition parties have insisted on the need to implement cross-party agreements, accusing the leadership of ANEP of delaying their implementation, and favoring the unions' points of view: "The agreement is not enforced, it is stuck. The reason is union corporatism, and the apathy of educational leaders, who do not dear to knock on those walls" (Senator Jorge Larrañaga, National Party)<sup>18</sup>.

#### d) The "Liberals"

Given the historical background that led to an *Estado Docente*, liberal ideas over education have not received wide support from Uruguay's mainstream political and social sectors. However, in the last years it has gained support the idea of individuals' right to choice as a fundamental principle, and the notion that state intervention is necessary but in a supplementary way. Increasing dissatisfaction with the way the education system works, the almost unchecked state control over it, as well as its high geographical and functional centralization, and the limitations of the attempted "systemic" reforms have given rise to supporters of greater plurality in the administration of education, in accordance not only with the freedom of choice principle, but also with an alleged greater efficiency of the service.

Some of the comments we include here belong to the academic world:

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<sup>16</sup> "Educational management by the first leftist government. Change of environment." Supplement published in *Brecha* magazine, March 12, 2010.

<sup>17</sup> *El Observador* newspaper, June 7, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> *Últimas Noticias* newspaper, June 25, 2012.

One of the reasons of the system malfunctioning is the reform made in the XIX century, which united two things that could go separate. On one hand the ruling of education (...) which must be necessarily the responsibility of the State, and on the other hand, the daily management of education, which may or may not be done by the State (Pablo Da Silveira, Education Administration Program's Director, *Universidad Católica del Uruguay*)<sup>19</sup>

Also the Catholic Church has expressed its support for this idea, making reference to the scope of secular views and the role of the State in financing the educational institution choice of families:

The State should not benefit state-run education institutions, because citizens have the right to choose them according to their beliefs (...). It does not do justice to parents' right to choose, nor is it guaranteed or promoted by the State if it simply tolerates private education institutions, whose financial support resides on the same parents (Episcopal Conference of Uruguay).<sup>20</sup>

These ideas have been received with hesitation so far in political camps, although some features have started to emerge since 2009 in traditional parties' educational programs.

#### **4. Actors, beliefs and controversial issues of the Uruguayan educational system**

By identifying these four discourse coalitions, each one of them representing its own identity and beliefs, we may extrapolate four issues subject of controversies in this field:

- a) The first of them has to do with the government of education administration, and the dispute between an autonomous leadership model in charge of the Councils like the one we see today, and a political leadership more linked to the partisan political system and the acting government;
- b) The second one refers to the ways and strategies to build educational policies, of which the two main sides are represented by the prevailing gradualism and a demand for a more "rationalist" style in the actions taken, more open to profound transformations in less time (be it under the traditional public model, or the liberal alternative we have outlined);
- c) The third component of the educational debate concerns the purpose of education, and its implications for the definition of plans and programs, where we see a view which prioritizes the cultural role of education as opposed to those who conceive it as a fundamental part of social policies;

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<sup>19</sup> *Punto Edu* magazine, 5 (17), 2009.

<sup>20</sup> Pastoral by the Bishops of Uruguay, on occasion of the Bicentennial 1811–2011, 2011.



d) The fourth and last issue is about defining the main protagonist in the management of education, which confronts those who defend a broad and hegemonic involvement of the State versus those who promote a distribution of power among multiple entities: private providers, families, educational centers, etc.

The following table shows the position adopted on these four issues by each one of the discourse coalitions of actors identified:

**Table 1. Actors' position for each issue of controversy**

	Government	Design	Purpose	Management
<i>Autonomists</i>	autonomy	gradualism	cultural	State
<i>Societalists</i>	political leadership	racionalism	social	mix <sup>21</sup>
<i>Incrementalists</i>	mix	gradualism	mix	State
<i>Liberals</i>	political leadership	racionalism	mix	private / social

The above table leads us to conclude that the difficulties of the political system in Uruguay to implement profound reforms in education are a consequence –at least partially- of the existence of various coalitions of actors with radically different “beliefs” – in the sense conceived by Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith- over the sector’s policies. In a plural political system as the one in Uruguay, in which reaching a consensus is the norm and there are multiple stages to veto policies (Tsebelis, 2000), the high degree of antagonism severely compromises the possibility to adopt significant measures that may offend a big number of actors.

It should be noted as well that most of the ideas that define the different discourse coalitions are those classified as “deep core beliefs” by the ACF, and are the least likely to change or to be negotiated. These include essential matters such as the roles of State and market, and the ways to legitimize public decisions. Other assumptions belong to the second level beliefs, concerning fundamental aspects of this specific area (policy core beliefs). This is the case of the debate over the purpose of education, or the way educational transformations should be carried out. The existence of so deeply rooted beliefs in the narratives analyzed make it very unlikely for decisions to be reached through

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<sup>21</sup> This concept refers to hybrid values in the surveyed variables.

pragmatic agreements, or through collective learning processes which may lead to a transformation of those beliefs, at least in the short or medium term.

## 5. Conclusion

The ACF is a promising theoretical construct for the study of the political science aspects of educational policies. It assumes a model of the individual with ideological motivations, rather than the limited scope of the utilitarian theories, it focuses on the educational system as a whole and not solely on specific isolated measures, and transcends the fragmented analysis of each one of the actors by integrating them into coalitions, structured around their shared beliefs.

The test made in this work of applying the ACF to the study of educational policies on a specific country –Uruguay– proves that it succeeds in providing plausible explanations for the fundamental characteristics of the political game in a specific policy sector.

However, our attempt has been restricted to proving the existence of *discourse* coalitions. Future research should test whether these communities of ideas effectively: a) operate coordinately to promote their views; and b) are relevant actors. In other words, whether they really constitute *advocacy* coalitions; and, if so, whether their actions can account for the dynamics and results of the political game in the educational sector.

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