research article

Advocacy coalitions, power and policy change

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This article examines one of the causal concepts in the second advocacy coalition framework (ACF) policy change hypothesis: the notion that major policy change will not occur as long as the advocacy coalition that instated the policy status quo remains 'in power' in a jurisdiction. It examines the role of this causal concept in ACF theory. It then reviews existing scholarship on the causal concept, identifying relevant empirical evidence and critically examining how the concept has been operationalised. A standard operationalisation is proposed, defining status quo advocacy coalitions as 'in power' if they control a veto player in a jurisdiction's policy process. Changes in Canadian firearms policy between 1976 and 2012 are used to illustrate the operationalisation and explore its potential.

Heclo (1974) famously argued that policymaking has two faces: 'puzzling' and 'powering'. That is, policymaking is simultaneously an exercise in collective learning and problem-solving and a power struggle between competing interests, ideas and beliefs. Any theory of the policy process aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of policymaking must somehow acknowledge, engage and reconcile these two faces.

One approach that has tried to do so is the advocacy coalition framework (ACF). The ACF, and ACF scholarship, is well-known for studying the puzzling face of policymaking, particularly the role of scientific information in policymaking and the factors that facilitate or impede policy-oriented learning. Yet, the ACF also makes room for the powering face of policymaking, as ACF scholars have developed a typology of coalition resources and have acknowledged that, in most policy subsystems, the relative power of advocacy coalitions shapes policymaking. The ACF's incorporation of power is most explicit in its theory of policy change, particularly in the second policy change hypothesis which states that major policy change will not occur as long as the advocacy coalition that instated the policy status quo remains 'in power' in a jurisdiction. Despite its centrality in ACF policy change theory, this

causal concept has been somewhat neglected in ACF scholarship, as the second policy change hypothesis 'has been tested but a few times' (Jenkins-Smith et al, 2018: 147).

The purpose of this article is to engage this causal concept and to explore what it means for a status quo advocacy coalition to be in power in a jurisdiction. It begins with an examination of ACF policy change theory and the role of this causal concept in that theory. It then reviews the existing scholarship on this causal concept, identifying relevant empirical evidence in the ACF literature and critically examining how the concept has been operationalised in ACF studies. A standard operationalisation is then proposed, drawing on the veto players literature, and is illustrated using Canadian firearms policy as a case study. It argues that the proposed operationalisation is an improvement on existing practices and could contribute to the accumulation of knowledge about ACF policy change theory.

ACF policy change theory

For the past three decades, the ACF has been one of the most popular approaches for conceptualising and understanding policy processes. Based on the framework, three bodies of theory have developed that deal with different aspects of policymaking: the formation and maintenance of advocacy coalitions, policy-oriented learning and major policy change. ACF policy change theory is centred on two hypotheses which, for simplicity's sake, are referred to here as H1 and H2. Both hypotheses were first specified in Sabatier's (1988) foundational article[1] and both have been revised in response to subsequent empirical research, with H1 last revised in 2007 and H2 last revised in 1993. H1 is commonly known as the pathways hypothesis (Jenkins-Smith et al, 2018: 147) and is the more popular of the two; dozens of studies make reference to it and comparatively few make reference to H2 (Pierce et al, 2020).

In its original form, H2 posited the following:

> The core (basic attributes) of a governmental program is unlikely to be significantly revised as long as the subsystem advocacy coalition that instituted the program remains in power. (Sabatier, 1988: 148)

The hypothesis is based on the idea that advocacy coalitions seek power to translate their core beliefs into policy and that successful coalitions will protect these policies while they remain in power (Sabatier, 1993: 34). Sabatier does not specifically define what it means for an advocacy coalition to be 'in power' but he intimates the importance of political influence, writing that a minority coalition's 'basic hope of gaining power within the subsystem resides in waiting for some external event to significantly increase their political resources' (Sabatier, 1993: 35).

H2 was tested by Mawhinney (1993) and Sabatier and Brasher (1993) in Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith's (1993b) edited volume on the ACF. The results of these investigations prompted Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993a: 217) to revise the hypothesis in the volume's final chapter, and it has remained substantively unchanged since:

> The policy core (basic attributes) of a governmental program in a specific jurisdiction will not be significantly revised as long as the subsystem advocacy coalition that initiated the program remains in power within

the jurisdiction – except when the change is imposed by a hierarchically superior jurisdiction.

Two revisions should be noted here, one obvious and the other more subtle. The obvious revision was the caveat added at the end of the hypothesis with respect to policy imposition by a hierarchically superior jurisdiction. This was to reflect the realities of policymaking in federal and multilevel polities where many policy subsystems feature nested jurisdictions and advocacy coalitions have opportunities to venue shop and bypass jurisdictions in which their policy change efforts have been frustrated, thereby having policy change imposed from above. The more subtle revision was a shift in language from probabilistic terms ('a governmental programme is *unlikely* to be significantly revised as long as') to deterministic terms ('a governmental programme… *will not* be significantly revised as long as'). The latter is a stronger causal claim as it implies that the hypothesis outlines a necessary condition for policy change.

More precisely, H2 can be understood as having a SUIN structure with sufficient (S) but unnecessary (U) parts of an insufficient (I) but necessary (N) condition (Mahoney, 2008: 419). That is, H2 is a necessary condition, and either the status quo coalition no longer being in power in a jurisdiction or policy imposition by a hierarchically superior jurisdiction is sufficient to satisfy it. H1 also has a SUIN structure[2] and the deterministic nature of the ACF hypotheses distinguish them from most other theories of policy change which tend to be ontologically probabilistic.

Deterministic theories make strong causal claims, but both H1 and H2 do so within a limited scope. They specifically restrict themselves to explaining significant revisions to the core attributes of policy; that is, major policy change. In this way, H2 (and H1) specify SUIN conditions for major policy change – and only major policy change – making this a scope condition for both hypotheses. The ACF can be used to explain minor policy change, but the conditions for minor policy change are not (yet) explicitly hypothesised.

This article focuses on what it means for a status quo advocacy coalition to be in power in a jurisdiction because, despite its centrality and lineage in ACF policy change theory, it has been neglected in ACF scholarship. In the fourth edition of *Theories of the Policy Process*, Jenkins-Smith et al (2018: 147) report that there is 'strong to partial support' for H2 in the ACF literature but it has only been tested a few times. In their review of the ACF policy change literature, Pierce, Peterson and Hicks (2020) largely overlook H2, focusing their review on the four policy change pathways in H1 and treating policy imposition (from H2) as a fifth pathway. Findings about the relationship between status quo advocacy coalitions in power and major policy change are not compiled or included in the analysis.

This exploration of what it means for a status quo coalition to be in power begins with a review of the existing literature and how this causal concept has been operationalised by ACF scholars.

Status quo advocacy coalitions 'in power'

Relevant literature on status quo advocacy coalitions in power was identified by using the lists of ACF applications compiled by Weible and Sabatier (2007) for the 1998–2006 period and by Pierce, Peterson and Hicks (2020) for the 2007–14 period. Every manuscript on these lists was word-searched for the phrase 'in power' to identify studies that explicitly

Table 1: Studies of advocacy coalitions in power, 1998–2021

Studies	Policy Area(s) Investigated
Ellison (1998)	US water policy
Kübler (2001)	Swiss drug policy
Elliot and Schlaepfer (2001)	Swedish forestry policy
Freudenberg and Gramling (2002)	US offshore oil policy
Bukowski (2007)	Spanish water policy
Van Gossum et al (2008)	Flemish forestry policy
Hirschi and Widmer (2010)	Swiss foreign policy
Ellison and Newmark (2010)	US water policy
Pollak, Phillips and Vajjhala (2011)	US carbon capture policy
Montefrio (2014)	Philippine indigenous rights policy
Anderson and Maclean (2015)	New Brunswick forestry policy
Li and Wong (2020)	Chinese population control policy
Heinmiller, Osei and Danso (2021)	Ghanaian public sector information policy

addressed this causal concept. Relevant literature in the 2015–21 period was identified through a Google Scholar search of manuscripts containing the Boolean search string 'advocacy coalition' + 'in power'. Searching manuscripts for the phrase 'in power' should identify the existing investigations of H2, given that this phrase is unique to the hypothesis, and that it would have to be stated at least once to be investigated. These search procedures yielded some superfluous results – such as studies that state H2 in passing but do not investigate it – but a review of the search results identified a total of 13 studies between 1998 and 2021 investigating status quo coalitions in power, as summarised in Table 1.

What is immediately evident from Table 1 is the wide variety of settings in which the causal concept has been investigated. Furthermore, 11 of the 13 studies find the causal concept to be empirically supported with only Freudenberg and Gramling (2002) and Anderson and Maclean (2015) finding it unsupported. However, the confidence one can place in this (un)supportive evidence is directly tied to the causal concept's operationalisation. Much more confidence can be attributed to the findings of studies that formally operationalise whether status quo coalitions are in power than in the findings of those that do not, and this is where there is weakness in the literature.

Only two of the 13 studies make efforts to formally operationalise status quo coalitions in power. Not operationalising this causal concept leaves it largely to the judgement and interpretation of study authors as to whether the concept is empirically (un)supported in their cases. If authors have different ideas of what it means for a coalition to be in power, the validity and reliability of the findings on this causal concept is significantly impaired, creating low confidence results, and holding back theory testing and development.

The two studies that operationalise the causal concept do so by drawing on the typology of coalition resources. The typology of coalition resources was introduced by Sabatier and Weible (2007: 201–3) to identify the various resources – including, formal legal authority to make policy decisions, public opinion, information, mobilisable troops, financial resources, and skilful leadership – that coalitions can utilise in pursuit of their policy goals. Given that the more resources a coalition has, the more powerful it tends to be, there would seem to be a connection between coalition resources and coalitions in power. Montefrio (2014) makes this connection and uses qualitative

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coding of primary documents and interview transcripts to operationalise the resources available to the advocacy coalitions in his study. Heinmiller, Osei and Danso (2021) also draw on the typology of coalition resources but, based on Nohrstedt's (2011) findings that the formal legal authority to make policy decisions is most important for determining coalition power, they focus on this resource alone, operationalising an advocacy coalition as in power 'if it was aligned with a political party possessing the formal legal authority in the Ghanaian political system to make policy decisions' (Heinmiller et al, 2021: 80).

The difficulty with relying on the typology of coalition resources to operationalise coalitions in power is defining a resource threshold separating those coalitions that are in power from those that are out of power.[3] Because it is ontologically deterministic, H2 implies that status quo coalitions are either in power or out of power in a jurisdiction, and the distinction is crucial in investigating the hypothesis. So, this causal concept should be operationalised as a categorical (or nominal level) variable and a clear threshold set to determine when an advocacy coalition is in or out of power in each case.

This article proposes that the threshold for status quo coalitions in power be defined according to whether they control a veto player in a jurisdiction's policy process. This is not the first article to suggest the importance of veto players in ACF explanations of policy change. Nohrstedt (2011: 480) has argued that '[w]hen seeking to explain why public policy programs change, formal legal authority should enjoy unique status compared with other political resources because legislators are veto players whose agreement is needed for policy change'. Sotirov and Winkel (2016) also remark on the importance of advocacy coalitions overcoming veto players in their efforts to change the policy status quo, and several other ACF studies (Elliott and Schlaepfer, 2001; Hirschi and Widmer, 2010; Pollak et al, 2011; Quaglia, 2012; Leifeld, 2013; Heinmiller et al, 2021) identify the importance of advocacy coalitions having the support of legislative majorities or the control of executive offices – both of which are likely veto players – in making or blocking policy change. In this way, using veto player control as an operationalisation is a logical extension of existing ACF research, one that is more rigorous and replicable than current practices.

Power is a complex and multi-dimensional concept (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962; Lukes, 2005) and the operationalisation proposed here considers only the first dimension of power, decision-making power. Sievers and Jones (2020) advocate for the incorporation of all three dimensions of power in policy process theories, including the ACF, and while this is a worthwhile suggestion, clarifying the places of the second and third dimensions of power in the ACF is beyond the scope of this article. The focus here is on operationalising how status quo coalitions acquire decision-making power which, as H2 implies, could be an important causal concept in explaining major policy change.

The operationalisation proposed here focuses on two key concepts: the veto players in a jurisdiction, and status quo coalition control of one or more of these veto players.

The veto players in a jurisdiction can be identified using Tsebelis (1995; 2002) as a guide. A veto player is any individual or collective actor whose agreement is required to change the policy status quo (Tsebelis, 1995: 289), and there is a basic distinction between institutional and partisan veto players. Institutional veto players are the 'veto players specified by the constitution' whose agreement is required for policy change to occur (Tsebelis, 2002: 79). For example, in the US presidential system, typical institutional veto players in a policy process would be the House of Representatives,

the Senate, and the President, while in the Canadian Westminster parliamentary system, the typical institutional veto player would be the House of Commons. After identifying the institutional veto players, one then investigates the presence of partisan veto players, 'the veto players who are generated inside institutional veto players by the political game' (Tsebelis, 2002: 79). An example here would be the parties forming a coalition government in a parliamentary system, each of which must agree to legislation for it to pass. Best practice is to identify the institutional veto players first, then identify the partisan veto players within each institutional veto player, if any are present.

Determining whether a status quo coalition controls any of the veto players in a jurisdiction requires a close examination of the relationships between the coalition and the prevailing veto players. Assuming the status quo coalition has been accurately identified, there are two basic indicators of such control. One indicator is when a veto player is a member of the status quo coalition. As a member, the veto player holds the coalition's core beliefs, coordinates with other actors in the coalition and can be expected to wield their veto power in the coalition's favour. When this indicator is present, one can conclude with considerable certainty that a status quo coalition controls a veto player and is in power in a jurisdiction. The other indicator is when a veto player is not a member of the status quo coalition but is successfully pressured or persuaded by this coalition to uphold its policy preferences. In these situations, veto players exercise their veto on behalf of a status quo coalition because of political calculation, not necessarily because they share the coalition's core beliefs. Finding evidence of this usually requires some reconstruction of the policy process being investigated and, depending on the quality of the evidence, conclusions using this indicator may be less certain than those in the coalition member indicator.

It is important to note that these two indicators are not mutually exclusive when collective veto players, such as political parties, are present. It is quite possible that some elected members of a political party are members of the status quo coalition, while other elected members of that party are not. In such cases, a coalition may gain control of a veto player through a combination of both coalition membership and pressure/persuasion, and evidence of both may be present.

The rest of the article provides an illustrative case study – Canadian firearms policy between 1976 and 2012 – that applies this proposed operationalisation of H2. The next section discusses the methods used in the case study, followed by an overview of the case study results.

Methods

Canadian firearms policy in the 1976–2012 period was selected as an illustrative case study for two reasons. First, existing studies (Pal, 2003; Bottomley, 2004; Brown, 2012; Heinmiller and Hennigar, 2022) have already investigated the advocacy coalitions and policy processes in this policy subsystem during this period, providing data necessary for the proposed operationalisation. Second, this case provides nine instances of attempted policy reforms (both major and minor, successful and unsuccessful) across six governments (both majority and minority) by three different political parties (the Liberals, Progressive Conservatives and Conservatives). This within-case diversity provides a range of political contexts in which to explore the efficacy of the proposed operationalisation. A timeline of the firearms policy reform efforts and major political events is provided in Figure 1 for those unfamiliar with the case.

Figure 1: Canadian firearms policy: a timeline, 1974–2012

Major Political Events	Year	Firearms Policy Reform Efforts
	2012	**Bill C-19 is passed(major policy change)**
Conservatives elected to a majority govt.	2011	
	2010	
	2009	Bill C–391 is voted down (no policy change)
Conservatives elected to a minority govt.	2008	Bill C–24 is voted down (no policy change)
	2007	Bill C–21 is voted down (no policy change)
Conservatives elected to a minority govt.	2006	
	2005	
Liberals elected to a minority govt.	2004	
	2003	
Auditor General's report documents the failings of the universal firearms registry	2002	
	2001	
Liberals elected to a majority govt.	2000	
	1999	
	1998	
Liberals elected to a majority govt.	1997	
	1996	
	1995	**Bill C-68 is passed (major policy change)**
	1994	
Liberals elected to a majority govt.	1993	
	1992	
	1991	Bill C–17 is passed (minor policy change)
	1990	Bill C–80 is abandoned (no policy change)
Largest mass shooting in Canadian history (to that point) in Montreal	1989	
Progressive Conservatives elected to a majority govt.	1988	
	…	
	1977	Bill C–51 is passed (minor policy change)
	1976	Bill C–83 is abandoned (no policy change)
	1975	
Liberals elected to a majority govt.	1974	

Note: major policy changes highlighted.

In Figure 1, the nine policy reform efforts are identified as either major or minor reform efforts, in accordance with the ACF distinction between major and minor policy change. The core policy attribute in dispute in the Canadian firearms subsystem was the appropriateness of state intervention to control firearms in the name of public safety. Gun control advocates regarded guns as inherently dangerous and pushed for universal state interventions, such as universal licensing of firearms users and universal registration of firearms. Gun rights advocates opposed universal measures because they saw most guns as recreational, vocational and cultural items of little inherent danger. Major policy change efforts were those that sought to introduce or repeal universal control measures, such as: Bill C–83 in 1976 that tried but failed to introduce universal licensing; Bill C–68 in 1995 that succeeded in introducing both universal licensing and universal registration; and, Bills C–21, C–24, and C–391 in 2006–09 and Bill C–19 in 2012 that attempted, and eventually succeeded, in repealing universal registration. Minor policy reform efforts were those that sought to introduce or repeal piecemeal control measures, including: Bill C–51 in 1977 which required new firearms users,

but not existing ones, to obtain a Firearms Acquisition Certificate before purchasing their first firearm; and, Bills C–80 and C–17 in 1990–91 that required registration of some types of semi-automatic weapons and introduced a 28-day waiting period in obtaining Firearms Acquisition Certificates. The distinction between major and minor reform efforts is relevant given that the scope of H2 is limited to explaining the introduction of major policy changes. Accordingly, the policy outcomes being explained are whether (or not) major reforms were adopted.

For each of the nine attempted reforms, data were collected on several variables including the veto players present, the advocacy coalitions present, the prevailing status quo advocacy coalition, and the relationship(s) between the status quo coalition and the veto player(s).

Veto players were identified following the best practice outlined earlier: identifying institutional veto players in a jurisdiction, then any partisan veto players working within the institutional ones. Institutional veto players were determined by analysing the Canadian constitution, both the written (entrenched) and unwritten (conventional) parts, and identifying the actor(s) with constitutional authority to make and block firearms policy. Partisan veto players in each policy reform attempt were then identified by calculating the configuration(s) of political parties that could control a majority in the House of Commons, the only institutional veto player in the Canadian legislative process.

Advocacy coalitions were identified by investigating the collaboration efforts and policy core beliefs of actors in the Canadian firearms policy subsystem. Data on both variables were collected through content analyses of newspaper articles in the 1974–95 period, and through organisational analyses in the 1996–2012 period.

For the 1974–95 period, the overall research strategy, similar to the one used by Matti and Sandström (2013) and Gronow and Ylä-Anttila (2019), was to identify collaboration networks in the Canadian firearms policy subsystem, then evaluate the extent to which the actors in the collaboration networks shared policy core beliefs. Data were generated from a set of contemporaneous newspaper articles, as used in several previous ACF studies (Olofsson et al, 2018; Heikkila et al, 2019). The articles were drawn from the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, Canada's largest circulating national newspaper. The *Globe and Mail* was selected because of its reputation for credible reporting and because of its centre/centre-right editorial orientation, which made it more likely to report on all sides of firearms policy issues than other newspapers leaning further left or right.

Two content analyses of the article set were undertaken, one coding for advocacy-related actor collaborations and one coding for actor policy core beliefs.

The collaboration content analysis identified all reported instances of actors trying to advocate for a firearms policy, then coded each instance to determine whether collaboration was present and, if so, the actors collaborating. The list of advocacy coalition strategic actions in Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1999: 142) was used as a non-exhaustive reference list to identify advocacy-related actions in the articles. Two independent coders then coded the actions for collaborations, achieving a Krippendorf's alpha of .94, indicating a high level of inter-coder reliability (Krippendorff, 2018). Using these data, actor X actor adjacency matrices were constructed in UCINET, one for the 1968–77 period and one for the 1989–95 period. Collaborations were identified at the organisational level and the adjacency matrices were undirected, symmetrical and binary. Collaboration networks were investigated by using UCINET

to identify components and blocks[4] in the two matrices (Hanneman and Riddle, 2005: chapter 11; Borgatti et al, 2018).

The core beliefs content analysis was based on Leifeld's (2013) discourse network analysis, a common technique in ACF research (Kukkonen et al, 2017; Kukkonen, et al, 2018; Schmid et al, 2019). The analysis of core beliefs focused on policy core policy preferences, those 'normative beliefs that project an image of how the policy subsystem ought to be, provide the vision that guides coalition strategic behaviour, and helps unite allies and divide opponents' (Sabatier and Weible, 2007: 195). Policy core policy preferences were conceptualised as actors (individuals and/or organisations) taking positions (supporting or opposing) on various policy concepts (screening firearms users, punishing gun crimes, registering firearms, prohibiting firearms, regulating the storage and usage of firearms, and undertaking gun control in general). Two independent coders achieved Krippendorf's alpha scores of .84 for policy concepts and .85 for policy positions, indicating high levels of inter-coder reliability (Krippendorff, 2018). The data were divided into the 1968–77 and 1989–95 periods and analysed at the organisational level. Composite variables for each period were created based on policy preferences that were strongly correlated and statistically significant at the .01 level. The composites served as indicators of actors' overall disposition to gun control. Based on their composite scores, actors were identified as having either gun rights beliefs, gun control beliefs, or ambivalent beliefs. These actor dispositions were then mapped onto the previously identified collaboration networks, to determine whether components and blocks had internally consistent core beliefs, indicating the presence of advocacy coalitions.

Having found strong evidence for the presence of a gun rights coalition and a gun control coalition in the early 1990s, organisational analyses were conducted to determine whether these coalitions continued beyond 1995. The focus of the organisational analyses were the national and umbrella organisations serving as focal points for political mobilisation of gun rights and gun control advocates. The existence of such organisations provides confirming evidence of the continued presence of the advocacy coalitions; the absence of such organisational evidence would not disconfirm their presence, making further research necessary, but that was not the case. The national and umbrella organisations were identified from the 1989–95 network data and newer organisations were added based on the findings of Pal (2003), Bottomley (2004) and Brown (2012). These organisation names were searched in Canadian major daily newspapers during the 1996–2012 period to identify their presence in policy development. These efforts verified that the gun rights and gun control coalitions remained active until at least 2012, and anecdotal evidence suggests that they remain active today (Naumetz, 2021).

Based on the advocacy coalition findings, the status quo coalition for each of the nine policy reform attempts was identified. The status quo coalition was defined as the coalition that worked to preserve the policy status quo and whose core beliefs most closely matched the core attributes of the policy status quo.

Finally, status quo coalition control of a veto player was determined by using the two indicators described earlier: veto player membership in the status quo coalition, and pressure/persuasion of a veto player by the status quo coalition. Veto player membership in the status quo coalition was determined by reviewing the advocacy coalition analyses described earlier. Coalition pressure/persuasion of a veto player was determined by reconstructing policy processes, to the extent possible, using media sources, primary sources and secondary historical analyses such as Brown (2012).

Results: Canadian firearms policy, 1976–2012

The case study results are described here starting with the veto players and advocacy coalitions, then examining the control that status quo coalitions exerted over veto players and how this impacted each of the nine policy reform attempts. The results are also summarised in Table 2.

The federal government has jurisdiction to regulate firearms under the Canadian constitution (Supreme Court of Canada, 2000), and the only institutional veto player in the federal legislative process is the House of Commons. Canada has a bicameral parliament and for any bill to become law it must pass the House of Commons (the lower house), it must pass the Senate (the upper house), and it must be given Royal assent by the Governor General. This gives the impression that typical Canadian policy processes have three institutional veto players but, in constitutional practice, this is not the case. The Governor General is an appointed and largely symbolic figure representing the Crown, and no governor general has ever refused to provide Royal assent to a bill, effectively negating this position as a veto player (Smith, 2013). Similarly, the Senate is an appointed chamber with its members selected by the governing party as vacancies arise. Because it is unelected, it lacks the democratic legitimacy of the elected House of Commons, and it is very rare for the Senate to veto legislation that has been passed by the elected House. It does, on occasion, send bills back to the House, but almost always defers to the House in cases of disagreement (Parliament of Canada (House of Commons), n.d.). This disqualifies the Senate as a meaningful veto player in the legislative process, meaning that the House of Commons is the only institutional veto player in Canadian firearms policymaking as shown in the second column of Table 2.

Within the House of Commons, the number of partisan veto players varies according to whether there is a majority or minority government. When there is a majority government, only the consent of the governing party is needed to change the policy status quo, so it is the only partisan veto player in the policy process. When there is a minority government, however, multiple partisan veto players are present. Canada is somewhat unusual in having almost no tradition of coalition government;[5] instead, minority governments typically rely on bill-by-bill bargaining and brinksmanship with opposition parties to pass legislation through the House (White, 2009). This means that policymaking in minority parliaments is characterised by configurations of partisan veto players that may shift from issue to issue, and any combination of political parties whose members add up to a majority can be considered a potential partisan veto player. Thus, in the periods of minority government in 2006–08 and 2008–11, several combinations of political parties are listed as partisan veto players in the third column of Table 2.

With respect to advocacy coalitions, the data show that the Canadian firearms policy subsystem evolved from a unitary structure in the 1970s to an adversarial structure in the early 1990s. In the Bill C-83 and Bill C-51 processes in 1976–77, the subsystem was dominated by a lone gun rights coalition that mostly got its way with policy. A gun control coalition did not emerge until 1990, and every reform attempt thereafter took place in an adversarial subsystem with the gun rights and gun control coalitions vying for policy influence.

Both coalitions enjoyed stints as the status quo coalition in the policy subsystem, the turning point being the passage of Bill C-68 in 1995. Before Bill C-68, firearms

Table 2: Veto players, advocacy coalitions and Canadian firearms policy outcomes, 1976–2012

Policy reform efforts	Institutional veto player	Partisan veto player(s)	Status quo advocacy coalition	Did the status quo coalition control a veto player?	Policy outcomes: did policy change occur?
1976–77	House of Commons	Liberal Party (majority)	Gun rights coalition	Yes (coalition membership; pressure and persuasion)	Major reform (Bill C-83) abandoned; minor reform (Bill C-51) adopted = No major policy change
1989–91	House of Commons	PC Party (majority)	Gun rights coalition	Yes (coalition membership; pressure and persuasion)	Minor reform (Bill C-80) abandoned; minor reform (Bill C-17) adopted = No major policy change
1994–95	House of Commons	Liberal Party (majority)	Gun rights coalition	No (only veto player is a member of the gun control coalition)	Major reform (Bill C-68) adopted = Major policy change
2006–08	House of Commons	Con + Lib Con + BQ Lib + BQ + NDP (minority)	Gun control coalition	Yes (coalition membership; pressure and persuasion)	Major reform (Bill C-21) rejected; major reform (Bill C-24) rejected = No major policy change
2008–11	House of Commons	Con + Lib Con + BQ Con + NDP Lib + BQ + NDP (minority)	Gun control coalition	Yes (coalition membership; pressure and persuasion)	Major reform (Bill C-391) rejected = No major policy change
2011–12	House of Commons	Conservative Party (majority)	Gun control coalition	No (only veto player is a member of the gun rights coalition)	Major reform (Bill C-19) adopted = Major policy change

Con = Conservative Party; Lib = Liberal Party; BQ = Bloc Quebecois; NDP = New Democratic Party

regulations were partial and piecemeal in Canada (Brown, 2012), and the gun rights coalition fought to keep it that way as the status quo coalition. After Bill C–68 and the introduction of universal licensing and registration, the gun control coalition became the status quo coalition, defending policies it had advocated since its inception. It remained the status quo coalition until 2012 when universal registration was repealed, as shown in the fourth column of Table 2.

Status quo coalition control of veto players varied across the nine firearms policy reform attempts and this control involved various combinations of coalition membership and coalition pressure/persuasion, as described later in the article.

Gun control came onto the policy agenda in 1975 after two school shootings in Ontario caused public opinion to swing strongly in its favour (Doney, 1975: A3). The Liberal party, which had won a majority government in the 1974 election and was the only veto player in the policy process, took up the issue and introduced Bill

C–83 in early 1976, a major reform to introduce universal licensing of firearms users (Brown, 2012: 172–5). Several shooting and hunting groups responded by forming the Canadian Association for Sensible Arms Legislation (CASAL), which served as the nucleus of a gun rights coalition.

The gun rights coalition gradually gained control of the Liberal veto player through a combination of coalition membership and pressure/persuasion. While the Liberal party generally supported gun control, a minority of Liberal MPs did not, and they resisted Bill C–83 within the governing caucus (Manthorpe, 1976). Brown also describes (2012: 175–94) how CASAL undertook a concerted pressure campaign to convince the Liberals to abandon Bill C–83, specifically targeting electorally vulnerable Liberal MPs in rural and western Canada where gun control was unpopular. No gun control coalition existed at the time, so pressure on the Liberals was largely one-sided. Eventually, the gun rights coalition persuaded the Liberals to abandon Bill C–83 in favour of Bill C–51 in 1977, a comparatively minor reform that regulated acquisitions by new firearms users and that was adopted with the support of several gun rights groups (Brown, 2012: 188–94). In this way, the gun rights coalition used control of the veto player to prevent a major gun control reform, while accepting a minor one.

The next reform effort was in 1990–91 and the gun rights coalition was, again, the status quo coalition, defending the policy regime it had helped shape in the 1970s. The 1990–91 effort was initiated by a mass shooting of female students at Montreal's École Polytechnique in December 1989, the largest mass shooting in Canadian history to that point (Brown, 2012: 203–4). In the wake of the shooting, the governing Progressive Conservatives (PCs), who had won a majority in the 1988 general election and were the only veto player in the policy process, came under intense pressure to adopt new gun controls. Some of this pressure came from the newly formed Canadian Coalition for Gun Control which served as the focal point of a nascent gun control coalition (Heinmiller and Hennigar, 2022)

As in the 1970s, the gun rights coalition gained control of the only veto player in the policy process through a combination of coalition membership and pressure/ persuasion. As Canada's major centre-right political party, several members of the PC caucus were members of the gun rights coalition and worked on its behalf inside the government (Rathjen and Montpetit, 1999). However, the PC leadership favoured new gun controls and, in 1990, sought to strengthen aspects of the existing gun control regime through Bill C–80. The gun rights coalition immediately mobilised against it and, through another pressure and persuasion campaign, split the PC caucus and forced it to abandon the bill. The PC leadership responded by introducing a similar bill in 1991, Bill C–17, and whipped the votes this time to ensure its passage (Brown, 2012: 208–12). Nevertheless, by gaining control of the PC veto player, the gun rights coalition pre-empted any move toward major gun control reforms and delayed the adoption of minor reforms.

The passage of Bill C–17 did little to stem demands for stronger gun control and another reform effort was undertaken in 1994–95, with the gun rights coalition still working to defend the policy status quo. This round of reform was initiated by a second school shooting in Montreal in 1992 and by a series of high-profile gun crimes in 1993 and early 1994 (Bottomley, 2004: 35–6). It was also facilitated by the 1993 general election in which the PCs were replaced by a majority Liberal government, becoming the only veto player in the policy process. This was the first

time in Canadian history that a party sympathetic to gun control held government in the presence of a gun control coalition.

This time, the gun rights coalition was unable to gain control over the Liberal veto player because the Liberal party became a member of the gun control coalition. Some Liberal MPs from rural and western Canada continued to oppose gun control, but the party itself committed to the gun control cause. In April 1994, a Liberal policy convention voted to adopt as party policy a range of new gun control measures, including consideration of 'a national system of registration for all firearms' (Liberal Party of Canada, 1994). This led to the introduction of Bill C-68 in 1995, a major reform requiring universal licensing of firearms users and universal registration of firearms. Though the gun rights coalition launched a pressure campaign against the bill, there was counteracting pressure from the gun control coalition, and the Liberals stayed the course (Bottomley, 2004). The status quo coalition was unable to control the Liberal veto player, and the most sweeping gun control reforms in Canadian history were adopted.

With the introduction of universal licensing and registration, the gun control coalition now found itself in the unfamiliar position of defending the policy status quo. They were not helped in this task by the scandalous implementation of the universal gun registry which involved long delays, massive cost overruns, and serious technical problems (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2002). Yet, while the Liberals retained their majority government, the gun control coalition kept control of the only veto player in the policy process. The Liberals won majorities in the 1997 and 2000 general elections due, in part, to vote-splitting between the PC and Reform/Canadian Alliance[6] parties on the political right. In 2003, these competing parties merged to create the new Conservative Party and, in the 2006 and 2008 general elections, the Conservatives won two consecutive minority governments.

The Conservatives interpreted their election victories as mandates to repeal universal firearms registration, but the gun control coalition was determined to defend it. The new Conservative party was a stalwart member of the gun rights coalition. Conservative MPs actively cooperated with gun rights organisations and took their firearms policy platform directly from the National Firearms Association (Somerset, 2016). Moreover, there was no dissent on the issue within the Conservative caucus, as there had been in the old PC party (Heinmiller and Hennigar, 2022). With minority governments, however, the Conservatives were not, by themselves, a veto player in the policy process because they could be outvoted by the opposition parties.

This was important because the gun control coalition was able to muster enough support from opposition MPs, through a combination of coalition membership and pressure/persuasion, to block three Conservative attempts to repeal universal registration through Bills C-21, C-24, and C-391.[7] The Liberals remained a member of the gun control coalition, as were the Bloc Quebecois, a left-leaning Quebec separatist party that supported strong gun control because it was popular in Quebec. The New Democratic Party (NDP), Canada's social democratic party, also supported gun control as a matter of party policy, though some individual MPs from rural and western Canada opposed it. Those opposition MPs who were not members of the gun control coalition voted against the Conservative bills as a political manoeuvre to embarrass the government. By banding together in the House, the three opposition parties repeatedly voted down Conservative attempts to repeal the universal registry (Heinmiller and Hennigar, 2022). In this way, the gun control coalition was able to

retain control of a veto player in the policy process, and preserve the policy status quo, for the time being.

The situation changed drastically after the 2011 general election, when the Conservatives won a majority government and became the only veto player in the policy process. As members of the gun rights coalition, the Conservatives were fully committed to repealing the universal gun registry, and the gun control coalition had little influence with them. Consequently, the status quo coalition no longer controlled a veto player in the policy process and the universal gun registry was scrapped through the passage of Bill C-19 in early 2012 (Heinmiller and Hennigar, 2022).

Altogether, the case study results are consistent with H2. No major firearms policy changes occurred when a status quo coalition controlled a veto player. The only major policy changes were Bill C-68 in 1995 and Bill C-19 in 2012, and these were preceded by status quo coalitions losing control of veto players in the Canadian legislative process. Minor policy changes occurred in 1977 and 1991 when a status quo coalition controlled a veto player, but these are consistent with H2 as its scope is limited to explaining major policy change.

The case also illustrates the potential of using veto player control as an operationalisation of status quo coalitions in power in a jurisdiction. Veto player control provides an operationalisation that is compatible with the logic of H2 and that sets a clear standard for testing when status quo coalitions are in power. The evidence used in the case study is primarily qualitative, but not necessarily so. Acknowledging the deterministic nature of H2 – and the need to operationalise its causal concepts at the nominal level – also opens possibilities for crisp or fuzzy set analyses in which quantitative or mixed data might be used.

Discussion

This article has explored one of the two causal concepts in H2 – what it means for a status quo coalition to be in power in a jurisdiction. It argues that this causal concept should be treated as a nominal variable given the deterministic ontology of H2. H2 is a SUIN hypothesis in which status quo coalitions are assumed to be either in power (or not) in a jurisdiction. Therefore, establishing a clear threshold for determining when status quo coalitions are in power is crucial to operationalising and testing H2 in a rigorous fashion.

Thus far, such a threshold has yet to emerge in the ACF policy change literature, and this may partly explain why there are relatively few empirical tests of H2 compared to H1, the pathways hypothesis. Most existing studies of H2 claim to support it, but there is still much to be learned about it. This is especially the case given that its causal concepts have lacked rigorous operationalisation, and not much confidence can be placed in the empirical results (un)supporting it.

In response, this article proposes an operationalisation of coalitions in power that is based on their control of veto player(s) in a jurisdiction's policy process. This operationalisation establishes a clear empirical threshold at which an advocacy coalition can be considered in (or out of) power in a jurisdiction and is consistent with existing ACF research which has observed the importance of veto players in effecting or blocking policy change. Clearly operationalising this causal concept should provide more rigorous and consistent tests of it by ACF scholars, facilitating knowledge accumulation on H2 and on ACF policy change theory more generally.

The analytical potential of this operationalisation was illustrated using Canadian firearms policy as a test case. This case employed the operationalisation in nine policy change efforts involving various status quo advocacy coalitions, various political parties in government, and various numbers of veto players in majority and minority parliaments. The findings in these diverse policy change efforts were consistent with H2, something that should not be overlooked. Arguably, however, the more important lesson is the potential generalisability of the proposed operationalisation across political contexts. The veto player concept was designed to facilitate comparison and generalisability across diverse political systems (Tsebelis, 1995), so the proposed operationalisation has the potential to be applied across a great diversity of cases, helping to accumulate knowledge about advocacy coalitions, power and policy change.

It is also possible that the proposed operationalisation will open new avenues of research on causal mechanisms in ACF policy change theory. Operationalising when status quo coalitions are in power provides directions for future research on the intersections of H1 and H2 in major policy change. For instance, it is worth investigating how advocacy coalitions gain or lose control of veto players in each of the policy change pathways, and in each combination of pathways, outlined in H1. This could provide the basis for formulating testable causal mechanisms of policy change, opening a new frontier in ACF policy change research. Much work remains to be done and the operationalisation proposed here offers one step in this direction.

Notes

[1] Sabatier's, 1988 article referred to the hypotheses as Hypothesis 4 and Hypothesis 5 within the ACF, but, since, the ACF bodies of theory on advocacy coalitions, policy–oriented learning, and policy change have been differentiated, the old Hypothesis 5 has been known as Policy Change Hypothesis 1 and the old Hypothesis 4 has been known as Policy Change Hypothesis 2.

[2] H1 specifies the presence of at least one policy pathway as being a necessary condition for major policy change and each of the four policy pathways – or some combination of them – as being sufficient to satisfy this necessary condition.

[3] The distinction between dominant and minority coalitions in a policy subsystem is also problematic for operationalising advocacy coalitions in power because they are relative concepts, whereas whether a coalition is in power in a jurisdiction is an absolute concept. When there are multiple veto players in a jurisdiction, it is possible for minority coalitions to be in power even though they have less power than their dominant counterparts.

[4] Components are groups of actors who are connected to each other but not connected to others, constituting separate parts of a larger network. In more highly connected networks, where components may not exist, blocks can be identified by looking for cut points: these are nodes in a network that, if removed, divide a network into disconnected parts.

[5] The only time Canada has had a coalition government at the federal level was during the emergency of the First World War. Even at the provincial level, coalition governments in minority legislatures are rare.

[6] In 2000, the Reform Party renamed itself the Canadian Alliance in an effort to transform from a western-based regional party to a national party.

[7] Bill C-391 was a private member's bill, but it was sponsored by a Conservative MP at the government's behest.

Conflict of interest
The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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