

**Understanding gaps between formal rules,
political practice and social reality:
Is formal change real change?**

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Introduction

This is not only for this sphere, but in Armenia, in transitional countries, always there is a gap between legal acts and social reality because you want changes to be taken and you change laws so they can be locomotives for social change. But sometimes social changes, structural, infrastructural, come later, because they cannot just be, they are much more hard to be changed. [...] People are not flexible. They cannot be switched off, getting the new kind.

This is the telling insight from an Armenian state representative that formal rule change often does not produce substantive effects. Similarly, from an outsider perspective, analysts have described policy reform in post-Soviet countries as partial (Hellmann 1998), incomplete (Gel'man and Starodubtsev 2016) or short-lived. What are the reasons for such outcomes? Are the combined forces of Soviet heritage and culture dooming political reform to failure? Or do powerful actors are interested in keeping the status quo in place so that the outcome is not politically inadvertent? Both theses have been discussed in the example of Russia's economic reform in the 1990s.³ And both could make sense for the Armenian insight above.

To describe and explain the incongruities between policies and substantive outcomes that are so common in the post-Soviet space, but also occur in many other developing countries around the world, this paper proposes the concept of gaps between formal rules, political practice and social reality. The paper first outlines the limited portability of public policy models derived from the experience of developed democracies, and argues that to better understand policy making and policy effects in non-democratic regimes, a new analytical perspective is needed. The paper then discusses different conditions under which gaps emerge outside of Western established democracies, and, based on the example of post-Soviet Armenia and Georgia, suggests that gaps appear in different varieties. Next, the paper conceptualizes gaps as context for agency and turns towards NGOs as *gap agents*. Finally, to illustrate the original contribution of the gap concept, the paper discusses gaps in relation to three neighboring concepts: voids, failure and decoupling. The concluding section summarizes the analytical value of the gap concept by discussing its ability to highlight structure and agency, stability and change.

³ For a summary of the different interpretations, see Shleifer & Treisman (2000:1). On cultural explanations for the pace, direction and success of economic reform in the post-Communist space, see also Fish (1998:37). The conclusion by then Russian Prime Minister Chernomyrdin fits well to the view that reform failure was politically inadvertent: "We hoped for the best but it turned out as it always does" (cited by Ledeneva 2006:11).

Limited portability of policy theories: claims for a new analytical perspective

If policies on paper are regularly in discrepancy with substantive outcomes, this has several implications. On the one hand, if the crucial story is told in later stages of the policy process, it means that policy adoption should not be the analytic endpoint. On the other hand, we need to question the worth of policy change. Undoubtedly, the post-Soviet countries as many other developing and non-democratic countries in the world are in the process of various reforms. Yet under what conditions do new policies really change political behavior and social practice? Is policy change real change?⁴ This then becomes a key question.

Prominent models of public policymaking that seek to explain agenda-setting, policy formulation and decision-making have difficulties, to say the least, to describe and explain the various discrepancies between policies on paper and policy outcomes in non-democratic regimes. To name but one example: Bindmann and co-authors (2018) use Kingdon's multiple streams framework to study the contribution of NGOs to child welfare reform in Russia. They find that NGOs *do* influence policy formulation and legislation but then end by recognizing that "the policy change at the level of ideas does not necessarily lead to real institutional change". To reframe: If new policies to improve child welfare are adopted but implementation is uneven, selective or obstructed, then the contribution of NGOs and their ability to act as change agents appears in a completely different light. Another reason why theories of agenda-setting and policy adoption are not easily applicable to non-democratic regimes and developing countries is the setting of donor-guided reform. With the notion of *preferential misfit* (Ademmer and Börzel 2013), Europeanization scholars have shown that where reform efforts are financially rewarded by international donors, issues on the political agenda and adopted policies do not necessarily indicate interest of policy makers to enforce them in practice. In sum, acknowledging the possibility of *symbolic* NGO involvement and *symbolic* support for reform challenges the portability of major models of policymaking that are all derived from experiences of Western democracies (Peters 2015: 64).

Recognition that also in democracies "the policy in action frequently deviates from the policy on paper" (Thomann 2019: 4) has encouraged new research interest for the complex phase of policy implementation in national, supranational and international settings. Migration research

⁴ A similar question has been raised by Streeck and Thelen (2005: 16) when they discuss what evidence of gradual change in democratic systems qualifies as real change. Levitsky and Slater formulated the same question in a working paper in which they explore "when and why formal political rules shape real politics" in non-democratic regimes (2011: 4).

is an excellent example for an undergoing *implementation turn*: a growing body of research centers around discretionary practices of implementing actors in Western consolidated democracies that in many cases give rise to gaps between policy and practice (Eule 2014; Eule, Loher, and Wyss 2018; Zampagni 2016). While theorizing on policy implementation is rightly partial and bound to specific scope conditions (Winter 2006), theoretical accounts for non-democratic regimes are extremely scarce.

Where models of public policy making are of limited utility, can institutional theory help explain gaps between policies on paper and in practice that are so common in the post-Soviet and developing world? I suggest that the writings by historical institutionalists on institutional development and policy effects are a good starting point. At first view, macro level political institutions such as constitutions or electoral rules seem very different from health policy or the regulation of taxes. Yet, there are good reasons to define public policies as institutions. One is that public policies, just as political institutions, “stipulate rules that assign normatively backed rights and responsibilities to actors and provide for their ‘public’, that is, third party enforcement” (Streeck and Thelen 2005: 12). As Pierson rightly claims, “most of the politically generated ‘rules of the game’ that directly help shape the lives of citizens and organizations in modern societies are, in fact, public policies” (2006: 115). Public policies are not always plastic and easily removable as critiques might object. Very often, they are consequential in that they “create incentives that induce substantial investments” (Pierson 2006: 119). The argument here is that new policies often create new players or grant new *terrain* to existing ones. If these players start investing in the respective policy to maintain or enlarge their terrain, it becomes become more and more difficult for policy-makers to leave the chosen path (Falleti 2012, Pierson 1996). Such self-reinforcing effects may eventually give rise to gaps, or in Pierson’s words:

significant divergences between policy preferences and the actual functioning of institutions and policies (Pierson 1996: 131)

Another insight from institutional theory that is applicable for public policies is that because political rules “instantiate power, they are contested” (Thelen 2009: 491). This explains the emergence of what Thelen herself names “gaps between a formal rule and its implementation or longer term effects” (ibid.).

I take these insights into institutional development and policy effects, that are all based on the experience of advanced capitalist democracies, as a starting point to reconsider the notion of

gaps for the study of non-democratic regimes – an empirical context that has largely been ignored in the theoretical debate.

Conditions under which gaps emerge

Based on four in-depth case studies covering the fields of criminal justice and social protection policies in post-Soviet Georgia and Armenia and the literature on institutional weakness and informality (Helmke and Levitsky 2012, Levitsky and Murillo 2012, Levitsky and Slater 2011, Levitsky and Murillo 2009), I argue that gaps in non-democratic regimes are largely shaped by three factors: the strength of the formal institutional environment, the level of policy capacity, and informal institutions.

Policies never function in an institutional vacuum. The first factor to explain the emergence of gaps in non-democratic regimes concerns the ground on which new policies fall. Attention to the institutional environment in which policies are produced and develop does not only mean to understand *which* institutions mediate and structure policymaking (Peters 2015, Hall 1986) but also *under what conditions* and *how* institutions do their structuring job. The prime focus here is on formal, political institutions. Drawing on Levitsky and Murillo (2009), I assume that just as strong institutions shape actor expectations and behavior, so do weak institutions. If institutions (ranging from constitutions and electoral rules to veto points in policy implementation) have repeatedly failed to produce independent effects, actors may also *expect* new policies and institutions to be weak and as a consequence do not seriously invest in them. Weak institutional environments are thus fertile ground for the emergence of gaps between policies on paper and policies in practice that are difficult to remedy, even by reform-minded governments.

The level of policy capacity is a second driving force for gaps in non-democratic regimes. Policy capacity addresses the government's steering capabilities to perform all policy functions including agenda-setting, policy formulation, decision-making and implementation (Wu et al. 2015). Without any normative connotation in the sense of good governance, high levels of policy capacity can not only help governments push through their desired policies, but also enable them to prevent policies from taking full effect, e.g. through varying or selective enforcement (Levitsky and Murillo 2012) and hence trigger gaps.

Informal rules and practices, third, affect gaps in various ways: First, on a very general level, they shape the strength of the (formal) institutional environment in which policymaking happens. This is how institutionalized corruption can trigger societal mistrust, feed

expectations of institutional weakness and reduce law abidance in society. Second, informal rules and practices can affect policy capacity. This is how patronage networks can increase elite cohesion and thus strengthen policy capacity. A system of widespread corruption may undermine government efforts to provide incentives to civil servants and thereby reduce policy capacity. Third, informal institutions may also directly influence gaps. They can do so by substituting or strengthening a policy and hence remedying a gap, or by competing with and eventually corroding a policy and hence amplifying a gap.

The four case studies illustrate that different combinations of these three factors give rise to different varieties of gaps. The Armenian case for instance highlights the devastating effects of a weak institutional environment and low levels of policy capacity in government, eventually leading to what I call *systemic gaps*. More specifically, in the field of criminal justice, my data suggest that if formal institutions endanger short-term personal benefits, implementing actors oppose or simply circumvent these institutions knowing that rule violations will not be sanctioned. In this climate, even reform-minded actors in government were unable or unwilling to oppose these *de facto* veto players in the system and could not prevent gaps from flourishing. In Georgia instead, a united and powerful government under President Saakashvili acted in a strengthened formal institutional environment. Corruption that had derailed policy implementation in the past, was successfully eradicated. Yet, gaps between formal policies and their implementation and longer term effects emerged in fields of low political salience (e.g. social protection for disadvantages groups) and as byproducts of dominant policies such as the zero tolerance policy for crime. The gaps then were consequences of purposive government action in neighboring fields and hence *provoked*.

Gaps as context for agency: turning towards NGOs

Beyond the question of how gaps emerge and what form they take, we also need to study the implications they produce for different actors. Without doubt, governments are central players in situations of gaps and their responses are likely to be linked to the reasons and nature of gaps. Are they able to remedy gaps if these have occurred inadvertently? Or, if gaps mean a loss of control over institutional development, do they entail governance dilemmas for the state? If instead gaps are politically intended, do they actually work to the advantage of governments? If yes, how do governments manage and try to sustain them? These are important questions if we are concerned with the implications of gaps. What about other actors?

Looking at gaps at the macro level (e.g. between electoral rules and the real functioning of elections), their implications for voters and the political opposition are of utmost relevance. Yet, if we want to understand gaps at the level of public policy, NGOs take center stage.⁵ Irrespective of their normative concerns for democracy and of their comparative disadvantage in terms of power asymmetries in non-democratic regimes, NGOs may adopt numerous functions in agenda-setting, decision-making, implementation, monitoring and evaluation and relate to governments in diverse ways.⁶

Conceiving NGOs as important gap agents, three dimensions are relevant: (1) organizational behavior and interests, (2) interaction with other actors, and (3) effects. Let's go through them in turn:

(1) A first important question is how NGOs act within the sort of incoherent and ambivalent context that gaps represent, and what motivates their behavior. It would be mistaken to assume that gaps are only constraining and NGOs not more than passive respondents or repair workers. Instead, gaps may also permit innovative organizational behavior, and create *spaces* that would otherwise be unavailable.⁷ Yet, we should not only expect NGOs to be the positive forces that are interested in resolving malfunctioning institutions, and qua type of organization act as pro-democratic change agents. Instead, we can well think of NGOs that, for various reasons, are interested in maintaining the status quo.

(2) Second, to shed light on NGO practices and strategic choices in the context of gaps, NGOs should not be studied in a vacuum. Drawing on Hasenfeld & Gidron, I claim that the role of an NGO is "largely defined by its relationship to the state" (2005:101). This is specifically true for NGOs in hybrid and authoritarian regimes where, as the literature and the four case studies reveal, NGOs are hardly understood without reference to the state (Lewis 2013). This, however, is not to say that NGOs relate to non-democratic governments in any simplistic way. There is a growing research body

⁵ Hacker and Pierson make a similar argument. They claim that in contemporary politics, "the key struggle is not over gaining office but over reshaping governance" (2014: 643). If the analytical focus moves from elections to policies, organized political action taking the form of social movements and interest groups (instead of voters) take center stage.

⁶ The following is specifically relevant for hybrid regimes where, unlike in closed authoritarian regimes, NGOs are usually allowed to organize and act relatively freely, albeit with subtle limitations (Giersdorf and Croissant 2011; Levitsky and Way 2002). If this is true, we can expect them to challenge the regime based on the empty promises that gaps can represent.

⁷ Such findings would be in line with research on institutional voids and the argument that voids can be „opportunity spaces“ for agency (Mair and Marti 2009).

that sheds light on the intricate, and often times ambivalent relationship that links NGOs to authoritarian governments around the world (Daucé 2014; Foster 2001; Spires 2011; Stern and Hassid 2012).

- (3) Third, if we want to understand the implications of gaps, a final set of questions is order: What are the consequences of organizational behavior in situations of gaps? Do NGOs effectively remedy gaps or mobilize against them? Or are their activities, maybe unintentionally, legitimizing and deepening gaps? The success of change efforts likely depends very much on the context (i.e. sources and nature of gap) in which they are realized.

Combining the three aspects – NGO action and interests, interaction, and effects – leads us to three simplified but still useful scenarios:

NGOs as gap fillers: In the situation of a gap between a policy on paper and in practice, especially social NGOs may act as gap fillers. They can for instance improve the targeting of a policy by providing services to vulnerable groups in society whose needs were so far unmet by state policies. To cushion low enforcement of a policy, NGOs can strengthen substitutive mechanisms such as informal rules of self-help or family care. In many cases, gap filling is likely to realize in a supplementary relationship between governments and NGOs that operate independently (Young 2000: 149). Yet, some activities such as NGO trainings for civil servants that contribute to advances in administrative capacity require partnership. Indeed, in the past 30 years, we have witnessed developments towards increasingly cooperative working relationships between governments and service providing NGOs around the globe including in non-democratic regimes (Brass 2016, Hsu 2010, Lewis 2013). Where NGOs work to fill gaps, their behavior may lead to gap closure: Better implementation may lead to institutional strengthening; more diverse and accessible social services are likely to improve the targeting of a policy. Yet, where gaps are severe (e.g. in weak or failed state) and NGOs have limited resources, their social services might fail to produce tangible effects. Finally, gaps can be (indirectly) functional for social NGOs as they gain legitimacy and funding for their activities in the situation of a gap. In other words, gaps can ensure organizational survival. From this point of view, it is reasonable to expect that NGOs are interested in maintaining the status quo or at least refrain from opposing the gap and calling for systemic changes. The latter idea is largely confirmed by the case study on social protection in Armenia.

NGOs as troublemakers: Gaps can also constitute a resource for NGOs by opening up room for contestation. This is what research on authoritarian and hybrid regimes has highlighted:

Levitsky and Way argue that formally democratic institutions such as elections, courts, or constitutions do not only serve authoritarian rulers to cement their power via their manipulation or circumvention. The ensuing competition and the presence of “arenas of contestation” can also make incumbents sweat (Levitsky and Way 2002, 2010). In other words, quasi-democratic institutions that are endemic in many contemporary authoritarian regimes can inadvertently “encourage ‘troublemaking’ and discourage more moderate forms of participation” (Distelhorst 2015: 4). In this perspective, the advocacy function of NGOs is highlighted, and NGOs likely act in the position of adversaries to governments. Political conflict over gaps can ultimately lead to political concessions and trigger substantive policy change. This argument is made by Distelhorst (2015) who studied successful struggles over malfunctioning transparency provisions in China. Yet, as Giersdorf and Croissant (2011) have shown on the example of Malaysia, contestation can also remain ineffective because NGOs are constrained by the broader institutional settings in which they operate.

NGOs as non-respondents: Intuitively, we would expect that NGOs *react* to a malfunctioning policy. Yet, gaps might not provoke any response from NGOs for various reasons. We can think of organizations that do not recognize gaps, for instance because narrow government policies are badly communicated and hence remain unknown for, say, small regional NGOs. Alternatively, gaps may not be perceived as problematic constellations, and hence not incite any response. Where gaps are severe and systemic, NGOs may not see ways to mitigate them and/or be frustrated by failed strategies to address them in the past. In this scenario, NGOs might happen or choose not to engage with the government over the gap issue. Such “non-engagement” (Najam 2000: 384) may realize in a generally cooperative, supplementary relationship but also adversarial relationship between NGOs and the state. Where NGOs are non-respondents, their behavior can leave gaps unchanged or (maybe unintentionally) lead to their deepening and legitimation. In terms of research strategy, a non-systematic case selection appears suitable to uncover non-responding NGOs, while selecting positive cases (i.e. reacting organizations) only would not permit to identify them.

To summarize the preceding discussion, I argue that gaps are a promising and novel analytical perspective to study the various roles and functions of NGOs, particularly in hybrid regimes (see footnote 5). Without adopting a heroic conception of NGOs, it views them as meaningful actors in the policy process. In doing so, this research perspective permits to see a large variety of organizational interests and strategies, relationships with the state and effects for policy development.

Studying NGOs through the prism of gaps involves a context-sensitive understanding of NGOs. The analytical perspective of gaps permits to uncover the joint influence of political, institutional, and historical factors on the environment in which NGOs operate. The institutional dimension is most obvious since gaps, as I argue, are very much determined by the institutional environment in which policies develop. Yet, in recognizing the possibility that gaps often result from authoritarian governance, the political context is factored in, too. Finally, using the concept of gaps means taking history seriously. Many of the informal institutions that replace or subvert policies are powerful legacies of the Soviet past. In addition, adopting a historical institutionalist perspective, I expect that early institutional choices may have consequences for later ones. This is how paths of institutional weakness may lock in to produce outcomes that governments and NGOs find difficult to remedy. While most scholars studying NGOs in authoritarian regimes would not contradict the necessity to study *agency in context*, my argument goes beyond a one-dimensional understanding of context (typically with a focus on political regime, history *or* institutions) and thereby advances third sector studies in an important respect.

Gaps, voids, failure, decoupling

To increase the analytical clarity of the gap concept and illustrate its original contribution for the study of policymaking in hybrid regimes, I discuss gaps in relation to three neighboring concepts: voids, failure and decoupling.

The concept of **institutional voids** is used by scholars from various disciplines. There is no common definition of voids: some use it to denote a situation of an absence of rules and norms (Hajer 2003). Others define voids as resulting from “the presence of plural, often contending institutional arrangements” (Mair, Marit, and Ventresca 2012: 822). Still others understand voids as emerging from a lack of adequate or legitimate rules and insufficient implementation (Anheier 2014; Puffer and Mc Carthy 2011; Puffer, Mc Carthy, and Boisot 2010). In describing a discrepancy between a rule and its effects, the concept of gaps clearly has proximity to this latter understanding of voids but is different from the two former ones. Scholars using the concept of voids not only have different understandings of what voids are, but they also study very different contexts in which voids occur ranging from transition economies to global politics. As a result, they do not share common assumptions about the determinants or nature of voids or about action orientations in them.

Research on institutional voids in transition economies is more coherent, and has a welcome focus on agency. Yet, three limitations in the literature have recently been highlighted. The concept of gap as proposed in this paper does address all of them: First, although informal institutions are central to the functioning of markets, research on institutional voids has not given sufficient attention to informal institutions as potential sources or correctives of voids (Doh et al. 2017: 297-303). With its sensitivity to the interplay between formal and informal institutions and assuming that informal institutions can influence gaps in various ways, this work can inform future research on institutional voids, too. Second, research about economic activity in institutional voids has been too narrow in focus: Most studies focus on the market responses of firms leaving aside non-market, and more political responses; they emphasize the *constraining* effects of voids and ignore their enabling potential; and they tend to ignore the negative consequences of firm activities in situations of voids (Doh et al. 2017: 298, 302). Focusing on NGOs with their various action orientations and functions, and rejecting normative assumptions about NGOs as pro-democratic change agents that per definition strive to mobilize against malfunctioning institutions this paper starts from a more neutral perspective that allows to see all kinds of effects of organizational behavior facing gap situation.

A second concept that seems to be closely related to gaps is **failure**. Failure and its antipode policy success are widely used concepts in the study of policy implementation. As Peters (2015: 84) explains:

that emphasis on failure may reflect in part the difficulties inherent in implementation, as well as an intellectual perspective that demands perfect implementation. That intellectual perspective was informed in part by a legalistic perspective that assumes perfect compliance with law, even if that law is vague and perhaps unenforceable (Lane, 1983).

Many scholars recognize difficulties with the concept of failure. One reason is that whether we can speak of implementation failure (or success) is so much dependent on the beholder. This point receives specific relevance for donor-guided reform. Indeed, if international organizations rightly speak of failure when third countries do not comply with their standards, gaps between policy on paper and in action may also be functional for domestic elites, and hence not represent failure. Another reason that makes failure a contested concept is that it has multiple dimensions, and that failure in one dimension can mean success in another one. This is how, for instance, policies may not achieve the desired goals (program failure) while they got adopted legitimately (process success) (McConnell 2010). On a more general level, we can assume that the link between program failure and political failure is different in

different types of political regimes. Democratic leaders whose policies perform poorly are likely to lose support and eventually office while in authoritarian regimes, norms of loyalty (De Mesquita et al. 1999) and flawed elections allow political leaders to put less attention to policy performance.⁸ In sum, I argue that the concept of gaps is more neutral than failure, and it has greater analytical utility for the study of non-democratic regimes.

Third, the concept of **decoupling**, firmly embedded in organization theory, bears some resemblance to gaps. With the concept of decoupling, scholars describe two kinds of disconnections: (1) between formal structures and rules on the one hand, and actual practices on the other hand, and (2) between chosen policies and produced outcomes. Importantly, these disconnections are studied *at the level of organizations*; instances of decoupling within hospitals, firms, schools, or non-profit organizations are the focus of scholarly attention. Consequentially, theorizing about decoupling is strongly bound to organizational factors regarding sources (e.g. growing audit culture increases pressure to adjust to environment), agency (e.g. managerial failure), and implications (e.g. managers should react more proactively to external pressures). Some sociologists also understand nation-states as organizations and hence apply the concept of decoupling at this level of analysis.⁹ I view states as being composed of *various* organizations (e.g. government agencies, courts, political parties, military organizations, etc.) that jointly shape policy outcomes. For this reason, I propose to reserve the concept of decoupling for single organizations, and employ the concept of gaps at the level of public policy. Yet, research on decoupling can inform theorizing on gaps and vice versa: For instance, the argument that instances of decoupling can become recoupled help us think of window-dressing institutions, such as human rights provisions in authoritarian regimes, that even if they were adopted for symbolic means can take a life on their own (Bromley and Powell 2012: 11).

⁸ This comparison is for sure schematic, and does not mean that policy performance does not matter in authoritarian regimes. The literature on authoritarian regimes has actually started to extend the analytical focus from stability and change at the regime level to policy performance of authoritarian regimes as well as to the nexus between performance and regime stability (Croissant and Wurster 2013, McGuire 2013, Wurster 2011). This move went hand in hand with an increased scholarly interest in output legitimation as an important source of regime stability (Gerschewski 2013, Kailitz 2013). In addition, also in democracies, poorly performing policies may not damage political success, for instance when they address wicked problems (McConnell 2010: 258).

⁹ Cole (2012) for instance adopts this perspective and describes the concurrence between a country's ratification of human rights treaties and actual repression as decoupling. In a similar vein, Bromley & Powell (2012:12) subsume a number of writings by political scientists under the concept of decoupling. However, the concept is not systematically used in the work of political scientists.

Conclusion

This paper has proposed the concept of gaps to make sense of what proved to be a dominant pattern in the fields of social protection and criminal justice in post-Soviet Armenia and Georgia: discrepancies between principle and behavior, structure and action, formal rules and social reality.

To summarize, I argue that the analytical value of the gap concept results from its ability to highlight structure *and* agency. On the one hand, by recognizing the importance of the institutional context in which policies are adopted and develop, the concept of gaps clearly highlights the constraining force of (even weak) institutions. This argument is in line with recent criticisms of contemporary authoritarianism research: too strong a focus on institutions as exactly and successfully doing what their creators want them to do, i.e. on “institutions as the causal primitives” (Pepinsky 2014, 640) serves to mask the power of institutional constraints. On the other hand, the concept of gaps definitely allows to make agency-based explanations: with its focus on expectations of institutional weakness that can consolidate certain paths and with NGOs as gap agents, gaps are a way to think about individuals and the way they interact with policies and institutions.

Finally, the gap concept is a way to theorize about stability *and* change. It is true that gaps between formal rules, political practice and social reality often cement the status quo. And we can assume especially systemic gaps to be very durable. Hence, the concept is a way to theorize about stability despite a façade of reform. This however, is not to posit the absence of change. Instead, as I have argued, gaps can also open room for contestation which, in turn, can entail substantive changes. In other words, my argument is not that gaps always mean stalemate, but that we need to understand the nature and sources of gaps first to assess the potential success of actor strategies in gap situations. Based on longitudinal research designs, the analysis of gaps could also help developing arguments about temporal sequences of gradual change that have not been part of the original theory (Hacker, Pierson and Thelen 2015; Mahoney and Thelen 2010) despite the prominence of sequential arguments in historical institutionalism (Falleti and Mahoney 2015; Pierson 2004). Under the conceptual cover of a gap, we may observe a process of layering (i.e. new rule added to existing core) followed by conversion (i.e. redeployment of rule for new purpose).

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