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Governments, territories, and public policies: Analysis from a multidimensional and multisectoral perspective. Interview with Daniel Béland

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ABSTRACT

In this interview, we talk to Daniel Béland, Director of the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada and Professor in the Department of Political Science McGill University, about several issues that underpin the focus and theoretical and practical mission of the Journal Gestión y Análisis de Políticas Públicas (GAPP). These issues include the reform of institutions and their determinants (such as the role of ideas among different actors), and the impact of federalism (especially fiscal federalism) on the development and change of welfare states and social policies from a comparative point of view. In the following pages, we attempt to shed light on all these issues by reviewing the main topics that have marked Professor Daniel Béland's research agenda over the last 20 years, focusing on his main contributions, both theoretical and empirical.

KEYWORDS

Comparative public policy; social policy; territorial politics; canadian politics; federalism.

INTRODUCTION

Daniel Béland is the Director of the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada and James McGill Professor in the Department of Political Science at McGill University. He holds a PhD in Political Sociology from the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (Paris). Professor Béland has been a visiting scholar at Harvard University, the University of Nagoya, and the National University of Singapore, as well as a visiting professor at the University of Bremen, the University of Helsinki, and the University of Southern Denmark. He has also served as a Fulbright Scholar at The George Washington University and the National Academy of Social Insurance.

Currently, Professor Béland serves as editor of *Policy and Society* and executive editor of the *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis*. In addition to his academic work, he has participated in numerous training sessions for public officials.

The objectives of this interview are to explore and elaborate on the main questions and results of Professor Béland's research programme, which focuses on uncovering explanations for policy stability and change. More specifically, his research programme explores the relationship between ideas and institutions in policy change in two key areas: fiscal federalism and welfare state restructuring. Theoretically, the research

agenda also emphasizes the importance of policy feedback in explaining the dynamics of continuity and change. Empirically, this research agenda now focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on both fiscal federalism and social policy change, in Canada and elsewhere around the world.

In your academic career, you have addressed a wide range of topics, from social policy and public policy analysis to comparative federalism and territorial policies, often employing approaches centered on political sociology and specific countries, such as Canada. On the surface, these topics could be perceived as separate or unconnected. However, there are likely some common concerns or approaches underlying your entire research agenda. Could you share with us the common thread that connects your various projects and research lines over the past 20 years? What fundamental questions do you seek to answer through these diverse lines of work, often from a comparative perspective? What boundaries have you been willing to challenge or cross?

I have published more than 20 books and 200 journal articles so to answer your question, I would first draw a line between my core work and publications derived from collaborators, where I'm not leading or co-leading. If we exclude those, much of my work has been about the politics of stability and change as it relates to the role of ideas and institutions and how they interact. This obsession for both ideas and institutions can be traced back to my time as a PhD student in Paris, when I was exposed to historical institutionalism and the debate over the role of ideas within and beyond it. My PhD supervisor Pierre Rosanvallon is, among other things, a historian of ideas and I have always taken the role of ideas in politics seriously. However, when I attended a seminar on historical institutionalism taught by Stephen Skowronek from Yale University (then a visiting professor at my school), I discovered a different approach grounded in a more Anglo-American understanding of social science research that challenged my existing assumptions about the role of ideas, which I had taken for granted. There was a kind of struggle for me between this rigorous and compelling approach and my interest in the role of ideas, which wasn't central to historical institutionalism at the time. Engaging with historical institutionalism forced me to adopt a more rigorous understanding of the role of ideas in politics and policy that took the role of institutions seriously.

Since then, implicitly or explicitly, most of my core academic work derives from this tension between my focus on the role of ideas and my interest in historical institutional analysis, especially regarding how we explain stability and change over time. This issue I have explored in contexts such as the debate on policy stability and change, or the discussion about the role of federalism and nationalism in policy development.

Although a lot of my work is about one country, starting with the United States and then Canada, much of it is also comparative. Even when studying one country, I try to take a comparative perspective by drawing on existing literature, especially theoretical literature. This approach makes the puzzles I address and the theoretical issues I raise important to people who might not be specifically interested in the country under study.

As for disciplinary boundaries, I have a PhD in political sociology and, since the beginning of my career, I have taught in a sociology department, in a policy school and now in a political science department. I've published in interdisciplinary policy journals, sociology, political science, and geography journals, and well beyond. I enjoy crossing academic boundaries and have collaborated with people from many different disciplines, which has stimulated me and allowed me to tackle empirical questions and address issues from different perspectives. My training in Montreal and in Paris was quite interdisciplinary in nature but I have also learned how to frame my work within disciplinary debates that I am interested in. Overall, I would also say that I have become more of a political scientist over time, even if my "sociological roots" run deep.

We like very much this idea of using one case study as comparative work by comparing what you found with previous research. Confirming, denying or complementing what exists. Could you expand a bit on the relevance of this issue.

I remember when I was a PhD student, I spent time at the University of Chicago and met John Miles, a social policy scholar who became one of my mentors. He told me that if you work on Canada, you have to

make your work comparative in some way to make it appealing to people outside of Canada because most people there don't care about Canada. You can say that about many countries.

Of course, for countries like the United States, Germany, France, or China, which are large and have a long history and are central to the literature, you might not think you need to make that effort. But I think everyone has to make their work meaningful beyond their chosen cases.

This is an issue I faced in France because I spent quite a bit of time there. The French academia can be quite inward-looking in their intellectual tradition, but some scholars, like Bruno Pallier in social policy research, have published a lot about France using a comparative lens and have become well-known worldwide.

If I were a Spanish scholar or someone in Latin America, I would also emphasize this approach. Recently, online, I gave similar advice to Chinese scholars. This approach is not just about where you publish, but how you publish and frame your research to make it accessible to people worldwide while also explaining why your country or policy area is important or at least relevant for broader conversations.

Your extensive body of work stands out for its focus on explaining the role and importance of "ideas" in developing and shaping welfare states and social policies worldwide. You've collaborated with numerous colleagues, generating a school of thought around your research. Given this context, we'd like to ask you: You explored the influence of ideas in social science research in your book Ideas and Politics in Social Science Research[1]*. How has this approach evolved since you published the book? What new perspectives have emerged?*

I don't think that there is one dominant approach to study of the role of ideas in politics and public policy, something that's evident when you look at the 2010 Oxford University Press volume you alluded to. Take the case of the relationship between ideas and interests, which is quite central to the literature, alongside the discussion about the interaction between ideas and institutions that I alluded to earlier. For instance, some of the volume's contributors like Colin Hay claim that interests are subjective preferences while other contributors like Robert Liberman see that interests are distinct from ideas in their institutional and material foundation. In my own work, you can see an evaluation in the way I understand interests that has moved me closer to a constructivist approach that is skeptical of the assumption that interests are purely objective. So, I would say that, implicitly and sometimes explicitly, the debate within the ideational literature is about degrees of constructivism and the nature of interests, something that David Marsh[2] has written about in an article advocating for a "mild" form of constructivism rather than a pure form like the one put forward by Hay and colleagues.

This debate about interests should not hide another controversial issue raised in our 2010 Oxford volume: the claim that there is a consensus about the fact that ideas matter and that the debate is now about how ideas matter. Although Jal Mehta started from this assumption in his contribution to the volume[3] and that I embraced this view at the time, in a recent *Political Science Quarterly* article written with Craig Parsons and Adolfo Garcé, we suggest that, at least in the United States, most political scientists still do not take ideas seriously in their empirical work[4]. In public policy research, many approaches allude to the role of ideas. But in mainstream political science, many people don't pay attention to the role of ideas as a potential explanation for the empirical puzzles they try to address. People might say in theory that ideas matter, but in their empirical work, they often don't consider potential ideational explanations. How do we convince these scholars to consider ideas as a potential explanatory factor in their research? This is a question that we still struggle but I think we can make a strong case for this by drawing of Craig Parsons' book *How to Map Arguments in Political Science*, which makes a measured case of ideational analysis in political science[5].

1 Béland and Cox (2010).
2 Marsh (2009).
3 See algo Jacobs (2009).
4 Parsons *et al.* (2023).
5 Parsons (2007).

Could you provide specific examples that illustrate the critical role of ideas in shaping social policies at the national or regional level, particularly within specific sectors?

In my work with André Lecours on nationalism and social policy[6], we have demonstrated how certain ideas about collective identity and membership have shaped the politics of social policy in multinational countries. Although the word "ideas" is not in the title, our 2008 Oxford University Press about the politics of territorial solidarity is partly about ideas. Yet, like many of my other publications, this book stresses the importance of political institutions and how they interact with specific ideas and the actors who carry them, in this case nationalist movement and parties. Like John L. Campbell[7], I believe that ideas should be studied in close relationship with the actors who formulate and carry them and in the institutional context in which they mobilize. My work with André Lecours on nationalism and social policy is therefore partly about ideas as they interact with other factors in a concrete empirical setting (rather than things that float in the air).

Nationalist ideas are central to the story we tell in our 2008 book about how, at the subnational level, social programs have been used to draw and redraw boundaries of solidarity among people and have been used as a way to mobilize politically within federal or devolved systems. This is one of many examples of my work on the role of ideas, focusing on how nationalist ideas can shape social policy development over time.

Regarding the context of the pandemic and post-pandemic (considered by many as a critical juncture or a window of opportunity for welfare state and social policy reform), you have carried out extensive work, both individually and with renowned academics and researchers, in theoretical production and especially in generating empirical evidence. Concerning this context, which extends to the present day with many crisis response programs still ongoing or being reformulated, we would like to ask you some questions: In your article, "Social Policy in the Face of a Global Pandemic"[8], you analyze social policy responses to the COVID-19 crisis. What lessons do you think we can draw from these responses for future global crises?

I think one lesson we can draw from recent global crises like the COVID-19 pandemic is that institutions remain sticky and that policy actors tend to respond to new emergencies in ways that continue existing policy legacies. At the ideational level, facing a major and sudden emergency, policy actors tend to draw on the ideas they typically turn to during a crisis. In the case of social policy responses to COVID-19, for example, in many countries, Keynesian-style deficit spending was embraced as a solution to the economic crisis triggered by public health measures[9].

This is something we've seen across the advanced industrial world during COVID-19, but the different ways countries responded to the crisis were really path-dependent, following the institutional characteristics they've developed in recent decades as specific welfare regimes.

An important issue that the pandemic raises is the question of duration. The COVID-19 economic crisis didn't last long enough in most advanced industrial countries to have a very deep effect on the institutions comprising the welfare state. The timeframe we use when studying something and the duration of a crisis or potential critical juncture are crucial. If a crisis lasts longer, it leaves more room for potentially path-departing ideas to emerge[10].

As Mark Blyth[11] tells us, crises can call into question the existing assumptions of policy markers about how to reach their objectives. This is only possible, I would argue, when the crisis lasts long enough to

[6] Béland and Lecours (2008).
[7] Campbell (2004).
[8] Béland *et al.* (2021).
[9] Íd.
[10] Béland (2024).
[11] Blyth (2002).

weaken support for existing policy ideas and the institutions, they might be embedded in. In this context, as John L. Campbell[12] argues, the time frame of the analysis is crucial when we study institutional policy stability and change, both during and between crises.

Regarding COVID-19, it might be too early to draw definitive conclusions about the impact of this crisis on social policy. The relatively short duration of the economic crisis probably weakened the odds of path-departing change[13].

We haven't found any references in your most recent research regarding the case of Spain. Do you have any insights or knowledge about social measures implemented in the Spanish federal model (the so-called State of Autonomies)?

Alongside Belgium, Canada and the United Stares, Spain is one of the main empirical cases of the book *Putting Federalism in its Place* that Scott L. Greer, André Lecours, Kenneth A. Dubin and I published in late 2023[14]. This book adopts a configurational approach to show how federalism interacts with other factors to shape social policy development. Spanish readers should find it especially interesting because their country is featured in it so prominently.

Moreover, my co-author André Lecours is, among other things, a specialist of Spain, and we have recently written a book chapter that compares fiscal federalism and regional inequalities in Canada and Spain, with a particular focus on Alberta and Catalonia. We co-authored this chapter with economist Trevor Tombe and our argument is that "Catalan nationalism differs from Alberta regionalism. Partisanship and economic disparities drive regionalism in Alberta whereas Catalan nationalism emphasizes identity, power, and self-determination. Yet, the politics of territorial redistribution often features in both regionalism and nationalism, albeit typically differently: while it drives regionalism, the politics of territorial redistribution complements nationalism"[15].

You discuss the concept of polycrisis *and analyze the development of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit in your article published in* Policy Design and Practice[16]. *How can this concept enhance our understanding of policymaking during complex, interrelated crises? We believe your insights would greatly benefit the Spanish case and align with GAPP journal's mission to connect scientific evidence with political practice across all government levels.*

The concept of *polycrisis* was developed to improve our understanding of global processes that occur simultaneously and create stronger effects because of that. As Lawrence *et al.* (2022, p. 2) claim, "global polycrisis occurs when crises in multiple global systems become causally entangled in ways that significantly degrade humanity's prospects. These interacting crises produce harms greater than the sum of those the crises would produce in isolation, were their host systems not so deeply interconnected." Although this concept is helpful to understand how multiple crises can reinforce each other, for example when destructive economic, public health, environmental forces converge, which is what happened during the COVID-19 pandemic[17].

Yet, although helpful from a theoretical standpoint, it remains to be seen whether it's useful in terms of guiding empirical work about policy responses to concrete crises. In this article, we move the study of the concept of a polycrisis forward by investigating one such design process: the creation of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) program towards the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis. One of the conclusions of our case study is that "much of the existing literature and research findings on emergency and

12 Campbell (2004).
13 Béland (2024).
14 Greer *et al.* (2023).
15 Béland *et al.* (forthcoming).
16 Dinan *et al.* (2024).
17 Íd.

crisis management remains highly relevant here and that the concept of a 'polycrisis' should not be stretched to situations where it does not apply. (…) Ultimately, the case underscores the fact that the lessons from the existing crisis management literature concerning the importance of experiential learning and policy capacity in agile crisis-related policy design processes during an emergency apply even in a polycrisis situation"[18]. The traditional literature on policy learning, for example, can explain what happened without necessarily relying on the concept of polycrisis.

The concept of polycrisis needs to be explored more systematically in empirical research and the existence of polycrisis does not call into question much of the existing scholarship about crisis management in public policy. Right now, it's often discussed at a rather theoretical, abstract level, but when you study crisis management policy, there are some missing connections. We remain a bit skeptical about the utility of the concept for policy analysis, as we suggest in our article using only one case[19]. More people should look into this empirically, especially if the concept of polycrisis becomes more influential among policymakers and not just within the academic realm.

In this last part of the interview, we will focus especially on your scientific production directly related to comparative federalism, territorial governance and healthcare, public health, and ultimately, everything related to health and health policy. Regarding your analysis of federalism and healthcare financing policy in the United States, Mexico, and Canada[20], what similarities and differences would you highlight among these three systems, and how have they influenced responses to the pandemic?

In this work, Gregory Marchildon, Anahely Medrano, and Philip Rocco point to another aspect of my institutionalist orientation. I'm a historical institutionalist interested in the role of ideas, but some of my work focuses more on political and policy institutions, as well as how they develop over time. That's why I've written widely about policy feedback, which is about how policy institutions impact the politics of public policy over time[21].

As a quintessential "focusing event"[22], the COVID-19 crisis has directly impacted the fiscal federalism and health care financing policy agenda in all three countries under consideration. Yet the nature of the problem currently on the fiscal federalism and public health agenda varies greatly from one country to the next. In Canada, the focus is clearly on the flaws of the long-term care system, which is a major challenge in terms of fiscal federalism and the role of the federal government and the provinces and territories[23].

In the United States, the lack of universal coverage is a key issue, with major variation in coverage provision across states. Philip Rocco, Alex Waddan and I analyze this in our book *Obamacare wars*[24], which is about federalism and the politics of health care reform in the United States.

Finally, in Mexico, it is about the broader architecture of fiscal federalism as it affects health care financing and the role of the states. Mexico historically was a much more centralized country than Canada and the United States, but things have changed over time, and there are quite a few tensions within the Mexican system[25].

These different problem definitions reflect largely the existing institutional and policy legacies that are specific to each of these three countries. Again, policy legacies are very important to understand current policy debates. This is part of a broad institutionalist perspective that's reflected in that article about the United States, Mexico, and Canada, but also in much of my work on social policy and health care[26].

18 Íd.
19 Íd.
20 Béland, Marchildon *et al.* (2024).
21 Béland *et al.* (2022).
22 Kingdon (1984).
23 Béland, Marchildon *et al.* (2024).
24 Béland *et al.* (2016).
25 Béland, Marchildon *et al.* (2024).
26 Íd.

Your recent work explores how society and public opinion shape social policies during crises, as seen with the Child Tax Credit in the United States during the pandemic[27]*. This topic has sparked significant polarization in Spain. How can we use these insights to design more resilient social policies for the future? Specifically, how do you think policymakers can leverage public attitudes and societal roles to create more effective crisis response measures?*

In our paper[28] about the temporary Child Tax Credit, we suggest that "compared to older people and people with disabilities, Americans view families as part of the 'undeserving' population. We also show that there is no change in levels of CTC support even among recipients of these benefits." However, an important issue this work raises is the question of time frame. If this program had been in place for a longer period, we might have expected some change in public attitudes stemming from the program and its benefits.

This work, like some of my other work, deals with policy feedback – how existing policies shape the politics of public policy, including public opinion and attitudes. One of the issues raised by this article is about whether temporary policies enacted during a crisis can alter public attitudes through what Jacobs and Weaver call "self-reinforcing feedback effect". In the US and well beyond, there's a large quantitative and qualitative literature about how new social programs can alter the perceptions and even the political behavior of recipients over time. There's certainly much work to be done in Spain about this. There's a large policy feedback literature that started in the United States with the work of people like Paul Pierson, Andrea Louise Campbell, or Suzanne Mettler[29]. Now we see more research about Europe, and I think Spanish scholars would be interested in looking at more of the policy feedback literature and seeing how it might apply to Spain in the field of social policy reform.

Spain has discussed, designed, and sometimes implemented important welfare state reforms addressing poverty, socioeconomic inequalities, long-term care, and housing since the crisis began. In your book Obamacare Wars*, you analyze how federalism and state politics influenced the Affordable Care Act's implementation. What lessons can this experience teach us about the interplay between federalism and large-scale social policy reforms?*

One key lesson from the book *Obamacare Wars* is how the design of federal policies and their financing of substate policies can shape intergovernmental conflicts over social policy reforms. The case of the U.S. Affordable Care Act (ACA) illustrates this clearly.

The design of some key provisions in the ACA actually complicated its implementation across the 50 states. The Obama administration had not anticipated such strong Republican mobilization against the 2010 ACA at the state level. The legislation's design empowered states, especially Republican-controlled ones opposing Obamacare, to not act and allow the federal government to implement parts of the legislation for them[30].

This situation was exacerbated by a 2012 Supreme Court decision that prevented the federal government from strongly punishing states that refused to expand the Medicaid program. These elements –policy design and the role of courts– combined to facilitate opposition to the ACA in the states, particularly those under Republican control[31].

This example highlights the structuring role of institutions, policy legacies, and policy design in the politics of public policy within federal systems like the United States. It also applies to other federal countries like Canada or Spain. When policymakers design legislation or policies in a federal context, they must anticipate how actors at the subnational level will react, which can be challenging.

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27 López-Santana *et al.* (2023).
28 Íd.
29 Pierson (2023); Campbell (2003), and Mettler (2002).
30 Íd.
31 Íd.

The Democrats in early 2010 hadn't anticipated the scope of the Republican backlash against Obamacare, especially at the subnational level. Had they foreseen this, they might have designed the policy differently[32]. This points to the role of ideas, as policymakers started with certain assumptions about how states would collaborate with the federal government. However, these assumptions weren't met on the ground due to the ideological orientation of Republican governors and politicians who viewed Obamacare as something to be weakened at any cost[33].

The ideational and ideological context is crucial as it affects policy design, which in turn influences policy implementation through feedback effects. Ideas, institutions, and policy design are all interconnected. However, it's often difficult for policymakers to anticipate how those implementing the policy will react, whether they're street-level bureaucrats or, in the U.S. case, governors and states more generally.

Overall, Obamacare Wars underscores the importance of considering how federal policies are designed and financed, as well as the role of courts, in shaping intergovernmental conflicts over social policy reforms. It demonstrates the significant impact of institutions on public policy politics, which is a major aspect of the my work, alongside the emphasis on the role of ideas and how they interact with such institutions.

Finally, could you share your current research interests and the projects you are involved in? What forthcoming publications can we expect?

I'm working on different things. With Shannon Dinan and Alex Waddan, I have one book project on the development of unemployment benefits and pension benefits in the United States and Canada over the last century. That book should feature a long-term historical institutionalist perspective. In it, we will take into account transnational processes and foreign influence on domestic policymaking, which is related to the role of ideas.

I'm also doing more research on welfare state financing. I'm writing a short Cambridge Element on the topic with Michal Koreh and Olivier Jacques. That's under contract with Cambridge University Press. We're trying to understand the fiscal side of social policy in a more systematic way through critical engagement with the existing comparative welfare state literature.

I've also been doing work on crises, not just on COVID-19, but going back to the Great Depression, and the Great Recession[34]. More recently, with a team of international colleagues, I've been working on the cost of living crisis and policy responses to inflation[35]. I think that's something I want to work more on moving forward.

In terms of theoretical work, as I mentioned earlier, I'm working with Adolfo Garcé and Craig Parsons on the role of ideas in empirical research. It's a more methodological discussion about the role of ideas in relationship to other forms of explanation in political science.

I have other projects, but these are the main ones I'm focusing on currently. Importantly, most of my work is collaborative in nature and, over the years, I have published with many brilliant colleagues from all over the world. I have a tremendous debt towards these collaborators and I would like to conclude this interview by thanking them all.

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[32] On this issue, see Burgin (2018).

[33] Béland *et al.* (2016).

[34] For example, Béland (2024).

[35] Béland, Cantillon *et al.* (2024).

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