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Policy Studies Journal - Decision on Manuscript ID PSJ-17-RIP-01461 message

Policy Studies Journal <onbehalfof+policystudiesjournal+gmail.com@manuscriptcentral.com> Thu, Nov 9, 2017 at 2:14 PM
Reply-To: policystudiesjournal@gmail.com
To: bdesmarais@psu.edu

Dear Dr. Bruce Desmarais,

Please allow me to begin by thanking you for choosing the Policy Studies Journal for your work. There are many public policy journals in the field and your choice of PSJ from among them is appreciated.

Earlier, you submitted to PSJ manuscript # PSJ-17-RIP-0146 entitled: "Text as Policy: Measuring Policy Similarity through Bill Text Reuse." This manuscript was reviewed by three referees. Their reviews were revise and resubmit. You will find their reports at the bottom of this email.

Overall, the referees are quite supportive of the manuscript, however, they raise several issues that require attention. As at least two referees note, the manuscript needs to be geared to an audience that may not be familiar with text based analysis, thus more hand holding is needed, such as tucking the highly technical aspects into an appendix and incorporating a discussion of how to apply this technique (i.e., workflow). In addition, including an application that demonstrates its value is necessary. One of the reviewers suggests a full blown theoretical contribution, but that is not necessary. The manuscript can remain as a methodological contribution, but one that is readily accessible to a broader audience.

Based on the feedback from the referees and my own reading of your manuscript, I have decided to give you an opportunity to undertake revisions for possible publication of this paper in PSJ. Upon resubmission, please include a point-by-point response to the referees' concerns. Please make sure your response to the referees is independent from your response to the editor.

I must stress that while I am offering you an opportunity to revise and resubmit this paper, I am not able to provide any guarantees that I will be able to publish it should you decide to take up my offer and resubmit a revision that deals with the comments in the referee reports.

There are two ways to submit your revised manuscript. You may use the link below to submit your revision online with no need to enter log in details:

*** PLEASE NOTE: This is a two-step process. After clicking on the link, you will be directed to a webpage to confirm. ***

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Alternatively log into <https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/psj> and enter your Author Center. You can use the revision link or you will find your manuscript title listed under "Manuscripts with Decisions." Under "Actions," click on "Create a Revision." Your manuscript number has been appended to denote a revision. Please DO NOT upload your revised manuscripts as a new submission.

You will be unable to make your revisions on the originally submitted version of the manuscript. Instead, revise your manuscript using a word processing program and save it on your computer. Please also highlight the changes to your manuscript within the document by using the track changes mode in MS Word or by using bold or colored text.

Once the revised manuscript is prepared, you can upload it and submit it through your Author Center.

IMPORTANT: Your original files are available to you when you upload your revised manuscript. Please delete any redundant files before completing the submission.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions about my decision, or if you have difficulty reading any of the reviewer comments.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to consider your work.

Sincerely,

Edella Schlager, Editor
Policy Studies Journal
policystudiesjournal@gmail.com

Reviewer(s)' Comments to Author:

Reviewer: 1

Comments to the Author

This paper proposes “conceptualizing policy adoption in terms of a continuum of similarity” and then presents an approach to assessing similarity based on comparing the texts of policy proposals (state bills). The methodology is carefully developed, building on prior research applying the Smith-Waterman algorithm to legislation. This algorithm produces a similarity score based on the longest shared sequence of text (“greatest overlap” or local alignment) between pairs of documents. A central contribution of this paper is that the authors validate their findings in three different ways. The comparison to the National Conference of State Legislatures lists of similar bills is perhaps the most interesting. They pair all NCSL bills and find that the pairs with Smith-Waterman scores above 100 are all cases that NSCL also identifies as similar, while very few dissimilar bills (according to NCSL) receive high scores.

Overall then, this is high quality research that should be of interest to the Policy Studies audience, many of whom are probably not familiar with text analysis research and its potential benefits for policy research. The shortcoming in my view is that there is no innovative example application. Other scholars are already using similar methods and state bills to investigate, for example, the role of interest groups in promoting policy diffusion and the state level variables that impact diffusion. So suggesting that these are potential uses of the method seems well... Can the authors think of any other innovative applications? After all, they now have millions of bill comparisons at their disposal. A final suggestion is that much of the discussion of the method is directed at scholars who are familiar with text reuse methods (rather than the target audience) and is probably best reserved for an appendix (freeing up space for an example application!)

One other thought. They validate with the limited similar bills listed by the NCSL. One possible application might be to explore how many other bills meet that similarity threshold and how they are similar and different in terms of substance, states, sponsors etc to those identified by NCSL

Reviewer: 2

Comments to the Author

This article puts forward an approach to measure policy similarity by looking at overlaps in the texts of legislation. The paper discusses the relevance of the question, explains how the approach works, and validates the output.

I find the article really useful and well done, basically ready to go. I only have a few minor comments:

1. I was unsure to what extent the algorithm used in this paper overlaps with the Smith-Waterman algorithm. The authors make clear the use the same algorithm but with some adjustments. What's part of the original algorithm and what's new was not clear to me. The authors should explain the difference more clearly.
2. I found the paper quite reader friendly but the authors can further improve this aspect, for instance with a section before the conclusion in which the authors lay down very simply and clearly the workflow for someone wanting to use their approach. Relatedly, it's great that the authors make their dataset available, but they should also share their code (ideally, if possible, in the form a package).
3. The conclusion is currently quite short. There is scope for outlining more in detail the added value of the approach and how the data generated by it can be used in policy analysis. There is some discussion of these points in the conclusion, but it can be expanded.

In sum, great paper, really useful, in good shape -- I encourage the authors to further improve the clarity, especially at the end of the paper, to make their approach as accessible as possible to a non-technical audience.

Reviewer: 3

Comments to the Author

PSJ-17-RIP-0146

I have now completed my review of the manuscript "Text as Policy: Measuring Policy Similarity through Bill Text Reuse". This manuscript creates a novel dataset to analyze reutilization of texts in legislative bills. The authors use a novel text analytic approach to generate these measures. While the analytics are very tempting I am greatly disappointed in the paper as it doesn't really provide any substantive use of the method.

As I do my review I want to highlight to the authors two key aspects from the Editorial Policy of this journal, which can be found online, and which are key to my evaluation of this manuscript.

"PSJ seeks papers that make a strong theoretical contribution using transparent empirical analysis to any sub-field of public policy. This includes both manuscripts that offer positive empirical findings on theoretical questions of interest as well as those that report negative or null findings if previous theory or findings lead one to expect positive results"

Methodological Approaches to Policy Research - Papers in this category will focus on the advantages and disadvantages of distinctive methodological approaches to studying and influencing public policy. Such approaches include the use of case studies, large-n statistical analysis, experimental designs and formal analyses as ways to develop and test theories, analyze policy problems and shape policy debates. Papers in this category might emphasize the epistemological, theoretical and empirical strengths and/or weakness of different approaches, and identify exemplary applications. It is expected that these papers will meet rigorous theoretical and/or empirical standards, and that they will be written to be accessible to the broader audience of policy scholars."

As it stands this manuscript doesn't seek to make a theoretical contribution to the field even though the authors have at their disposal a unique dataset which I am sure would allow for several interesting theoretical questions to be asked.

Secondly, while the authors use a novel methodological approach, as they well argue this has already been published in AJPS. As to the technique they don't do an analysis of advantages or disadvantages, but instead do a series of verifications common to the Computer Science Literature.

At this point, I'd like to make clear that while I am disappointed in the resulting paper, I think there is an interesting political science paper hidden under all the jargon and explanations of the Computer Scientists.

So what would I recommend the authors:

- 1) Take out section 3. I don't think it's interesting to political scientists. Leave in an appendix or publish in a CS journal.
- 2) Use the space left by removing section 3 to propose a theoretical mechanism for policy diffusion and text reuse. This can include all the findings that you currently have –and perhaps some others- ideology, policy area, geographic area, etc.
- 3) Reconsider the elements of section 4 moving elements of validity to an appendix or to the CS piece
- 4) Properly present the results of your analysis based on the new theoretical argument.

I am fully aware the authors will be disappointed with this review, however, I honestly don't think that this piece presents either an interesting theoretical puzzle or a novel methodological contribution. I'd happily revise a new version of this manuscript that leaves the CS aspects and brings a more interesting policy and polisci focus to the study of legislative bills.