

THE COGNITIVE DIMENSION OF PUBLIC POLICY: A SCENARIO TO MEASURE EXPECTATIONS AND POWER RELATIONSHIPS AMONG POLITICAL ACTORS

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Received: April 22nd, 2016

Evaluated: September 5th, 2017

Approved: September 14th, 2017

How to reference this article?

Martinez Coral, P. E. (2017), The Cognitive Dimension of Public Policy: A Scenario to Measure Expectations and Power Relationships Among Political Actors, Bogota: Editorial Politecnico Grancolombiano, Panorama 11(20) pag. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15765/pnrm.v11i20.1004>.

Abstract

The cognitive dimension of public policy is of particular importance in its analysis as it is a clear reference of how social problems and the roles of the State are conceived, of how political actors organize around certain public intervention hypotheses (for or against), of the institutional responses arising to provide visibility or prevent such interpretative approaches, and also to validate the existing alignment between the public opinion's expectations and the governmental agenda. This article intends to compare the cognitive matrix that has driven the beliefs and representation systems regarding security and public order policy in Colombia throughout the two previous presidential terms of office.

Key Words

Public policies, cognitive dimension, public order, political analysis.

Introduction

Security, coexistence, justice, rule of law, trust in the State's institutions, power relationships, weight and counterweight systems between public branches and efficiency of the political representation system are just some of the examples of the scope of the decisions framed within the security and public order policy. Consequently, this scope of State action in Colombia is a suitable reference to analyze the implications of the proximity or estrangement of the predominant beliefs and values system in the Colombian political system with that of the public opinion's.

The approach of this analysis is based on a comparison of theoretical perspectives representing the political school of thought that ponders the cognitive dimension of public policy in its design and implementation, under the concrete conditions of polarization experienced by the country in terms of security and public order policy.

Developing this descriptive method, and after presenting the corresponding theoretical basis, the article presents a detailed result of the validation on the estrangement between the public opinion's preferences and the governmental agenda, using the following guiding criteria: the balance of the elections at national level in the last decade, the citizens' perception on their position in the ideological spectrum, the public opinion's perception on the implementation of the peace agreement executed between the National Government and FARC EP – Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, and the perception's behavior regarding the rule of law in the country in the last decade. The document concludes with a reflection about the need to conduct an in-depth democratic process based on the alignment of public action's expectations and instruments.

I. Theoretical Notions on the Cognitive Dimension of Public Policy

Two interpretative perspectives stand out in the theoretical approach on public policy's cognitive dimensions. The first emphasizes on the transformation of the political community's beliefs and value system, driven by discourse and language's symbolic power. The second resorts to objective elements in the political system that explain how power relationships and institutions intervene in changes in beliefs and values that affect public policy.

According to Edelman (1998), in theory, governments act rationally based on its citizenship's preferences and political opinions, seeking to satisfy public concerns. However, governments shape public demands and beliefs with the use of language that aggravates the fears and anxieties of the citizenship, shifting the meaning of the roles of the State. Beliefs and feelings regarding social issues are an integral part of a similar cognitive structure, thus reinforcing each other. So, despite the fact

that beliefs and feelings may have a mythical nature, the political language used to deal with public concerns is intended to tackle the public opinion's cognitive and emotional needs.

Muller (2000), on the other hand, states that public policy is not just a reflection of the State's action (understood as the products or output of public intervention), but that it also represents an expression of its corresponding regulation scope, meaning, of the State's is-ought. In his development of this proposition, the author suggests that the cognitive focus of public policy is not opposed to understanding the role played by the political actors' interest, nor power rationales, to the extent that the processes to position a reference in terms of a specific public concern, far from being conducted in the ideological debate or deliberative consensus framework, consist in a (sometimes violent) imposition of a vision of the world that is driven by specific action systems that are configured in virtue of the mobilization of advocacy coalitions.

Sabatier and Weibler (2009) explain how political actors are affected by the restrictions and opportunities of a given political sub-system, turning it into adversaries or collaborators of those who hold power; this behavior is influenced by references of beliefs and values. So, an adversary political sub-system is characterized by the configuration of competitive coalitions determined by the polarization of beliefs, minimum coordination costs, and policy design that determine a clear differentiation between winners and losers. On the other hand, a collaborative political sub-system is made up by coalitions united by converging beliefs, shared access in decision-making processes, and a formulation of policies that ensures common gains and institutions that stem from consensus.

From a wider perspective, Palier and Surel (2005) elucidate the evolution of public policy is an answer to the interaction between strategic behavior, institutional rationale and cognitive and regulation dynamics, in a time-history context in which one of the three variables tends to stimulate the drive or stagnation of the others. The first demands understanding the interests, preferences and capacities of the actors that affect public action through conflict or cooperation relationships that satisfy cost-benefit estimates. Institutional rationale refers to the training and consolidation processes of regulations and practices that hinder the possibilities of action of public actors. Lastly, cognitive and regulation dynamics are those that correspond to the intellectual content of public policy, which is expressed through problem diagnosis, target values and objective, public action regulations, as well as instruments and images used in the representation systems. Likewise, ideas face the challenge of becoming a majority to access power, which is accomplished using political rhetoric, a tool that aggregates and mobilizes interests.

Fischer (1998) reflects on a complementary element to the previous approaches, stating that public policy's cognitive content confronts the capacity of the State's action to transform how the political community thinks. In this respect, and as a rejection to the technocratic tradition introduced to political sciences by positivism schools of thought, the author suggests that the greatest challenge for political analysis is to ease the reflection of citizens regarding their own interest and their own decision-making, instead of identifying how public policy offers precise answers to specific problems.

With this proposition in mind, the notable polarization environment in Colombia in terms of the approaches to security and public order policy in the two previous presidential terms of office, encourages researching the citizenship's political

appreciations and preferences, since due to the historical circumstances, one vision of this problem may have been imposed instead of the other, a fact that demands an in-depth consideration of the relationship between the State and the society, and of the notion of democracy to which the debate on suitable instruments of State action adheres to.

II. Analysis of the Colombian Case Regarding Security and Public Order Policy

The problem of security and public order has been at the core of Colombia's political agenda for decades. Historically, and in the context of the country's armed conflict, the insurgency received political treatment by the government of the moment, keeping the doors open for a negotiated termination of the conflict, as it was confirmed by the National Constitutional Assembly in 1991. Until the presidency of Alvaro Uribe Velez in 2002, whose mandate formulated a new paradigm in terms of security and public order, justified by a contemporary concept of democracy, which makes its rules incompatible with the threats coming from the criminals (Gaviria, 2005). Consequently, the public opinion witnessed a significant breakdown in the discourse level, as well as important reforms in security policy and adaptation of instruments enshrined in the legal precept in order to address the public order problem.

On the other hand, in the presidency of Juan Manuel Santos, the country experienced a drastic setback regarding the conception of the nature of public order problems following a restoration of the traditional thesis of the existence of an internal armed conflict; his presidency was exposed to an intense polarization phenomenon after the execution and ratification of the peace agreement with

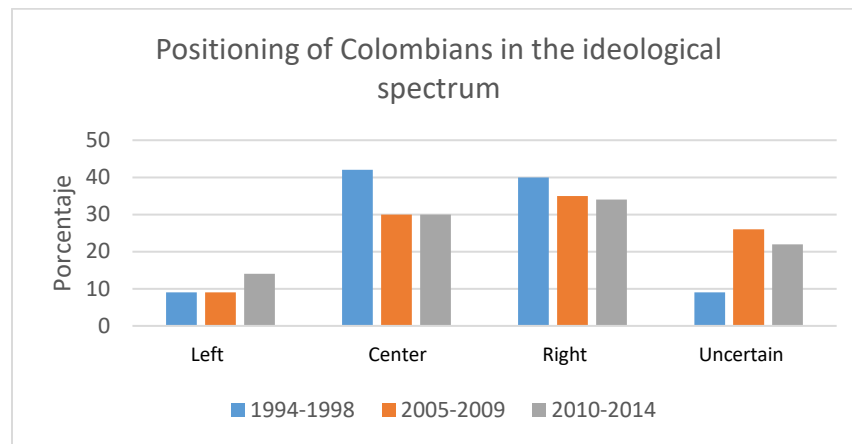
FARC. The results of the plebiscite of October 2nd, 2016, intended to validate the “Final Agreement to End the Armed Conflict and Build a Stable and Lasting Peace” with the Colombian people, reflected said polarization with a minor difference between the NO and YES vote, with 50.21% vs. 49.78%, respectively (RNEC, 2016 a).

If the supposition of the importance of security and public order as part of the differentiating elements in the country’s political movements and parties (in terms of their ideological principles and/or programmatic content) is accepted, the results of the national election might serve as guiding and structuring criterion to interpret the preferences of the public opinion in this matter. A thorough revision of the results of each election indicates that the left has had an inferior position in the last 15 years. In the presidential election of 2002, the left (represented by the candidate of the coalition of the social and political front) had 6.1% of the votes; from previous elections, the left has been represented by the Polo Democrático party, and although its numbers improved in 2006 with 22% of the votes, in 2010 it went back to 9.13%, and in 2014 it increased to 15.2%. From the inception of the Polo Democrático, the share of the left in the Senate of the Republic has been a minority. In 2006, it had 9.52% of the votes, in 2010 the result was very similar with 9.13%, in 2014 it had 3.78% (RNEC, 2016 b).

In turn, the World Values Survey, compiled by a global network of social scientists based in Stockholm, Sweden, offers a complementary reference in terms of the public opinion’s positioning in the ideological spectrum, which confirms that the right has had a predominant role in the country. Although the statistics are not complete for the country, it is possible to observe that in terms of magnitude, the right is followed by the center; and despite a minor increase recorded in the last

period of the measurement (2010-2014), the left continues to be limited; a significant 22% of the sample lacks ideological identity in the same period (WVS, 2016).

Graph 1



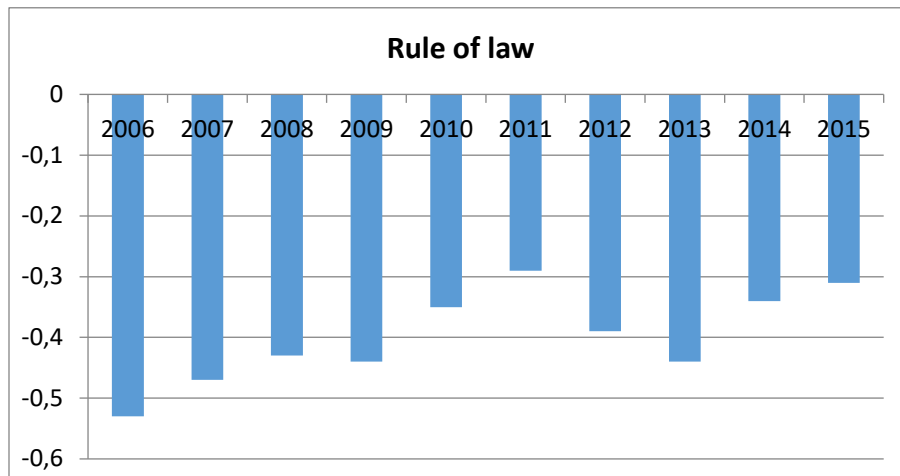
Source: compiled by the author based on historical WVS.

However, citizens' ideological identity is just another element of approach to their preferences, which is why it must be confronted with concrete perspectives in terms of the implementation of the peace agreement, since it is an unequivocal reference to probe attitudes, values and perceptions of the citizenship about security and public order. In that regard, the study of Barometro de las Americas (2016) shows that a large percentage of the citizens identifies the guerrilla movements as main aggressors among the country's armed actors; it adds that in the last 12 years, citizens have supported a negotiated termination of the public order problem, with its lowest level being 54.6% in 2011 and 67.4% in 2016.

Nevertheless, the study reveals that despite said support, skepticism and in-depth questioning of the peace agreement reflect opposite attitudes. 81.4% of the respondents think it is unlikely or very unlikely that FARC give up the illegal business of drug dealing; and citizen support to the agreement, which was over 50% in 2104, fell to 41% in 2016. Also, 7 out of 10 Colombians disagree with the government guaranteeing political participation to FARC after the demobilization has concluded; 80% disagree with impunity and would like the perpetrators of crimes to serve sentence in jail and for more than 8 years; the attitudes towards the reincorporation of former guerrilla members to civilian life largely differ from what is expected in the peace negotiations (49.7% of the respondents would not accept a former guerrilla members as neighbor; 67.1% believe former guerrilla members are “very dangerous”, and 54% consider former guerrilla members to be “very violent”).

Likewise, in the last decade, the citizenship’s perception regarding the trust placed on regulations and is willing to abide by them, the quality of compliance with the contract system, property rights, effectiveness of the security forces, justice administration and rates of criminality and violence, calculated through the Rule of Law Index (World Bank, 2017), suggest that the State’s frailty to ensure minimal conditions of the rule of law has been constant. However, in order of magnitude and considering the range of the measurement is of -2.5 (negative perception) and 2.5 (favorable perception), a relevant deterioration is observed from 2011.

Graph 2



Source: compiled by the author based on the World Bank's historical governance records.

Therefore, a synthesis of the citizenship's preferences in terms of the security and public order problem suggests that the rejection of violence (associated to the State's military confrontation) cannot be interpreted as an acceptance of the traditional approach of the armed conflict theses and the resulting agreed solution. This ambiguity is in fact, an enabling factor that allows the political elite imposing its vision on the government's agenda, generating difficulties in the implementation of a continuous and sustainable policy that provides answers to the complex challenged faced by the country in this matter.

III. Final Reflection

Despite offering antagonistic versions about the security and public order problem in Colombia, both proposals that have outlined the design and implementation of the government's agenda consist of the same political representation of the bond between the State and society, in which each one is conceived as an independent

sphere. In the first case, the State, in all its legality and legitimacy, acts to restore order and guarantee the exercise of the citizenships' most basic liberties, seeking the security required to enforce them. In the second case, the State (in the same terms) appropriates the power to decide the configuration of public order that is more suitable for the general interest, managing the trade-offs demanded by its interlocutor to accept a reincorporation to civilian life.

The first vision ignores the fact that the persisting symbiosis between political parties and armed actors (which coerces the elections results in peripheral areas of the country) is mediated by a dense network of social relationships and constitutes a renunciation of the monopoly of the force by the State, not necessarily a usurpation of it (Acemoglu *et al.*, 2009). The second vision neglects the fact that the real likelihood of any reconfiguration process of the public order is dependent on the social dynamics in which the reinsertion processes are defined, on the changes of *modus operandi* in the organized crime's activities in which armed groups are involved, on claims for justice by victims of violence and on the redistribution of public budget among the stakeholders that must compete for shares allocated to fund the extensive content of the post-conflict's agenda.

Now, both proposals structure their political discourse based on a normative lecture of democracy, although they differ in the content attributed to the is-ought. The first proposal, which denies the armed conflict and acknowledges an overall violence problem, privileges the substantive traits of the rule of law and the formal proceedings of political deliberation that render the *de facto* actions without justification; to the extent that the second proposal emphasizes concertation as one of the primary roles of state institutions and some material components of the social state governed by the rule of law inherent to the parts of the negotiated

agreement. These alternatives fail to include a specific approach of the public opinion's political participation as a fundamental aspect of democracy.

In sum, a dissociation between the State and society in the analysis of the public order problem and evading the role of citizens' participation to overcome it, indicate that the cognitive dimension of both alternatives appeals to a light simplification of reality, and that its political effect is to marginalize the citizenship from its representation. Consequently, and understanding the importance of the topics that converge in the public order analysis, debate spaces must be explored with the aim of making it a reference to empower the public opinion and to give back its condition of political subject. This also requires the citizenship to embrace a diagnosis of this situation, to clearly identify its preferences and to project them as part of the aspirations over the democratic system. Only then, the Colombian political system will be able to align expectations and State action instruments.

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