Valence, Policy Ideas and the Rise of Sustainability

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Abstract

This article introduces to policy studies the concept of valence, which we define as the emotional quality of an idea that makes it more or less attractive. We argue that valence explains why some ideas are more successful than others, sometimes gaining paradigmatic status. A policy idea is attractive when its valence matches the mood of a target population. Skilled policy entrepreneurs use ideas with high valence to frame policy issues and generate support for their policy proposals. The utility of the concept of valence is illustrated with the case of sustainability, an idea that has expanded from the realm of environmental policy to dominate discussions in such diverse policy areas as pension reform, public finance, labor markets and energy security. As the valence of sustainability has increased, policy entrepreneurs have used the idea to reframe problems in these various policy areas and promote reforms.
Introduction

Sustainability has grown to be a dominant theme in many policy discourses. Originally a term used in the area of environmental policy, particularly related to issues of climate change and renewable energy, the term now is being used more frequently in many other policy areas, such as pension reform, public finance, labor markets, and energy policy. The spread of the idea of sustainability across a number of key policy areas is a notable development, becoming as pervasive as the concept of globalization. Indeed, just as globalization dominated policy discourses during the past quarter of a century, sustainability is an idea that defines an emerging policy paradigm, one likely to guide an increasing number of policy decisions for the foreseeable future. The concept of sustainability suggests a growing concern for the long term consequences of decisions, and it implies a growing dissatisfaction with current practices. This is especially true for the way sustainability has proliferated in contemporary policy debates. Focusing on the sustainability of pensions, employment, or energy resources signals a concern that policies in these areas, as currently constituted, may not continue to provide the benefits we now enjoy; that, if nothing is done, we may not be comfortable in retirement, people may not be able to find jobs, or energy may become too expensive, scarce, or dangerous.

Why is the idea of sustainability gaining such prominence? This simple question points to one of the most important challenges for the study of policy ideas. Since the ideational turn (Blyth 1997) in policy studies, scholars have sought to explain how ideas influence policy making (for recent overviews of this research, see Béland and Cox 2011; Jacobs, 2009; Mehta 2011). As a result we know a lot more about the impact of ideas on policy development. Surprisingly, however, we still know very little about why some ideas acquire paradigmatic status (Hall 1993) while other seemingly good ideas fail to gain traction. Or, more precisely, we
know how some ideas influence policy, but we know little about the ideas themselves that makes one more attractive than another. We need a richer conceptual vocabulary to understand a wider variety of contexts in which ideas work.

The growth of sustainability into an increasingly influential policy idea provides a good opportunity to examine this problem. Sustainability is not a new idea. Rather, it is an idea that has been in circulation for a long time. It gained prominence in the 1980s as part of a concern to promote good environmental husbandry. Though sustainability had numerous important advocates, for many years it remained relatively restricted to discussions of environmental policy and climate change. Only in recent years has this idea broken out to populate debates across a number of distinct policy areas. What has changed? Has the idea been redefined, or have the circumstances changed in ways that now favor sustainability? By examining the transformation of sustainability from a limited policy domain to paradigmatic status in several policy areas, we can identify the factors that have made the idea attractive. Moreover, we can trace the process by which an idea gains in attractiveness and subsequently influences policy change.

The central concern of this study is the change in the attractiveness of an idea, in this case the idea of sustainability. The attractiveness of an idea is a quality we call its valence.\(^1\) We define valence as an emotional quality of an idea that can be either positive or negative in its character, or high or low in its intensity. We suggest that ideas with a high, positive valence generate a strong attractiveness, and therefore are likely to have a greater potential to influence policy change. By contrast, ideas with a negative valence are repulsive, and are likely to generate opposition to the policy proposals associated with them. We argue that valence affects the status of an idea in a policy debate and can confer authority on those who invoke it. Valence, therefore, could be crucial for understanding the power of an idea to influence policy decisions. Moreover,
valence would help students of public policy distinguish between those ideas that have an impact and those that do not.

Though valence may be an important quality of an idea, it need not be a static quality. Ideas can gain or lose attractiveness over time, resulting in a change in their influence on policy decisions. To conceptualize the dynamic character of valence, we outline four factors that can change the valence of a policy idea. The first is a time factor. Many ideas have a natural life-cycle. When they are new, ideas are fresh and vaguely defined. At this stage in their life cycle, they are subject to a great deal of definitional scrutiny. As the idea becomes more familiar, and assuming it remains attractive, people begin to explore its applicability to policy problems. Increased scrutiny leads to a discernment of the ways the idea helps or hinders policy objectives. Over time the newness fades from an idea, which can have a number of consequences. The idea can go out of fashion, either as a result of changing circumstances that make the idea less useful to the new circumstances, or as a result of dissatisfaction with the results of the idea in practice.

Related to this, the second factor concerns the timeliness of an idea. The notion of a policy window is common to studies of public policy, referring to a point in time when the opportunity is ripe for enacting a certain type of policy solution (Keeler 1993; Kingdon, 1995). As these windows open and close, they create opportunities for ideas whose valence fits the particular situation of the policy window. When windows open, policy actors embrace the ideas that fit the window and use them to frame their proposals for reform. When the windows close, policy makers might look for new ideas.

A third factor relates to the intensity of the idea’s attraction. We suggest that ideas operating at a higher level of abstraction typically generate higher valence. This means that abstract ideas, such as freedom or dignity, tend to evoke intense emotions and incline people to
respond strongly to the policies associated with these emotions. At lower levels of abstraction, policy ideas are more focused in their applicability, and their appeal will be based on calculations of their suitability for the problem at hand. In other words, at lower levels of abstraction, we assert that reasons more than emotions will sway how people respond to the ideas.

Finally, policy entrepreneurs play a strong part in defining and legitimating ideas. The skill of a policy entrepreneur is measured in part by his or her ability to detect and manipulate the valence of ideas. Skilled entrepreneurs have an intuitive sense for which ideas fit a newly opened policy window. They are adept at using the ideas to reframe the policy challenges and have rhetorical skills that help them to alter the intensity of an idea’s valence. Recasting the ideas in abstract terms, for example, allows them to increase the emotional intensity of the debate. Thus, our argument posits valence as a quality of a policy idea, and explains how agency and context combine to make some ideas more attractive, and ultimately more influential than others.

The next section of the paper elaborates the concept of valence and provides theoretical justification for the four factors that comprise our argument. Then, we employ the argument to analyze the emergence of sustainability as an influential policy idea across a number of distinct policy areas. We do this in two parts. First, we identify how sustainability has emerged as an increasingly dominant policy idea in contemporary societies. Then, we explain why. We argue that policy entrepreneurs eager to gain acceptance for the idea pitched it at more abstract and emotional levels. Simultaneously, increasing levels of concern about the long term consequences of policy decisions opened a policy window for sustainability, an opening that widened after 2008 in the wake of the global economic crisis. As a result of the financial crisis, uncertainty over the future direction of global economic growth overcame enthusiasm about the positive
effects of globalization. Into this environment of angst and anxiety, sustainability provided comfort for those seeking assurance that all will be set right.

The Valence of an Idea

Valence originated as a term in chemistry to denote the charge of an electron that attracts atoms to one another. Valence is a term not often used in public policy discussions, though it is common to a number of fields of social science research. A brief review of these fields demonstrates the similar ways the idea of valence is conceived, and offers some suggestions for how it might apply to policy studies. In electoral studies the term “valence issues” is used to distinguish issues that all voters support from “position issues,” where the preferences of candidates and voters preferences diverge, often on ideological grounds (Stokes 1963: 373). Position issues are so named because they often can be plotted on a left-right continuum, much like political ideologies, where clear distinctions exist on such issues as the balance between individual freedom and political order, the role of the state in the economy, or whether the locus of responsibility for the social welfare of citizens resides with the collectivity or the individual. Valence issues, by contrast, are those issues where most voters form the same assessment of an issue, viewing it either as desirable or undesirable. When confronted with valence issues, voters distinguish among candidates (or political parties) based on their assessments of which candidate or party is most capable of addressing the issue, rather than on the party’s position on the issue.

In the electoral studies literature, valence also has been used to identify character traits of a candidate that make that person more appealing to voters, such as honesty, competence, or charisma (Serra 2010; Adams and Merrill 2009). Indeed, there is even evidence that voters around the world have a similar sense of candidate valence. Lawson, Lenz, Baker and Myles
(2010) showed photos of political candidates from Brazil and Mexico to voters in the United States, India, and Mexico and asked them to choose the person they thought would make a better elected official. In the United States and India, participants chose the same candidate about 75 percent of the time and agreed with Mexican participants about 80 percent of the time. Moreover, the candidates selected by the voters for their valence corresponded with the actual winners in each election. Common to both uses of the idea of valence in political science is a sense that valence refers to an attractiveness or appeal that is widely shared among voters.

In addition to electoral studies, valence is also a vigorous concept in the fields of cognitive and social psychology, where valence is a scalar value, measuring the attractiveness or aversiveness of an emotion, and is distinguished by intensity. Emotions that create intense, pleasurable sensations such as joy, rest at one end of the continuum, demonstrating high, positive valence. Moving across the continuum, pleasant emotions of lower intensity have a low, positive valence. In the middle of the continuum, emotions that foster indifference have a valence of zero. The other side of the continuum identifies painful emotions, which have a negative valence, and distinguishes them along the continuum according to their intensity, as indicated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Continuum of Emotional Valence**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative, High</th>
<th>Negative, Low</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Positive, Low</th>
<th>Positive, High</th>
</tr>
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Psychologists further distinguish the valence of emotions by their source; whether the valence is based on a subjective perception (an emotion) or a physical state of arousal (Barrett 1998: 580; Feldman 1995; Zelenski and Larsen 2000). Yet regardless of the source, what psychologists find interesting about valence is the effect it has on behavior. Valence often causes people to act
before they have had an opportunity to think about their actions. The more intense the valence of an emotion, the stronger its influence on behavior (Lazarus 1999). For example, the thought, “I see a tiger,” would trigger both the emotion of fear (high, negative valence) and a high state of arousal. A decision to flee usually follows. Indeed, there is some suggestion that being guided by one’s emotions in such emergency situations is a functionally adaptive response. When confronted with a tiger, taking the time to stop and ponder alternate courses of action might lead to death, whereas acting on an emotion might actually save one’s life. Decisions, and consequently actions, are strongly mediated by subjective perceptions, or valence, and these often lead to better choices than rational thought (Elster 1998).

This understanding of the effect of valence on decision making is central to how the concept has been used in economics, particularly in a science known as prospect theory (Tversky and Kahneman, 1992). Here, valence resembles its usage in psychology in so far as the activities that are attractive have positive valence while aversive activities have negative valence. Daniel Kahneman (2003) develops this notion by noting that most decisions that involve pursuing pleasure or avoiding pain are made quickly, and often preclude an opportunity for rational deliberation. To account for this type of pre-rational decision making, Kahneman (2003) draws a distinction between decisions and actions based on intuition and those that derive from calculated reflection. Valence, he argues, has the strongest effect on intuitive decisions. When people act intuitively, or on impulse, valences will have a strong effect on the choices they make, often circumventing rational calculations and prompting individuals to make decisions on impulse rather than considered judgment. This claim offers a serious challenge to rational choice interpretations of behavior, not least because Kahneman (2003) asserts that these types of
reflexive decisions are more prevalent than common rational choice theory would allow (see also Green and Shapiro 1994).

An important implication of valence, one that guides the influence of the concept in the field of marketing, is that the way an issue is framed can trigger these intuitive or reflexive actions, circumventing rational calculation, and causing people to make decisions based on their emotions. Examinations of this in consumer behavior, for example, have shown that perceptions of the quality of ground beef “depend on whether the beef is labeled as ‘75% lean’ or ‘25% fat’” (Levin, Schneider and Gaeth 1998: 159). And it is not only consumers who take these shortcuts in decision making. Studies of managers identify valence as a factor in a manager’s decision making. As Mital, Ross and Tsiros (2002: 455) suggest, “(t)he same stimulus, such as market share, may be framed positively (e.g., 35% achieved) or negatively (65% not achieved).” Because managers are strongly motivated to take action to avoid losses, the framing of the options creates preference for one choice over another. The basic point is that valence framing has a strong effect on the choices people make because framing takes advantage of the valence of different emotions and leads people to make some types of decisions over others. Moreover, valence is not simply a shortcut employed by the less-informed lay person. It also influences the decisions made by people who possess expert knowledge. In the case cited above, these experts are corporate managers. One could hypothesize that similar framing effects would affect how policy entrepreneurs make decisions, and how they frame issues to make certain courses of action more appealing than others.

Thus valence is a widely recognized concept in the social sciences that has a fairly consistent definition as a measure of the attractiveness or aversiveness of a stimulus. Also, valence is recognized to have a strong effect on decision making. Stimuli that are high in valence
have a stronger effect on decision making, and the result is often that high valence stimuli will encourage people to react quickly, making snap decisions based on intuition or emotion. Indeed, these initial snap judgments often determine the way rational calculations are undertaken.

Valence and Policy Change

We suggest that these uses of the concept of valence in other fields of the social sciences offer useful ways to employ the concept in policy studies. Scholars who study the role of ideas in policy often argue that ideas are pre-rational influences on policy preferences, guiding people to prefer some policy options over others (Blyth 2011; Hay 2011). Valence is a concept that describes how such pre-rational processes stem from emotional triggers. Indeed, the notion of material interests might well be just another idea we have, one associated with the pleasurable emotions produced by accumulating things. Scholars of valence adopt a similar ontological perspective, and valence is a concept they use to describe how decision making arises from emotional triggers. Thus, if policy ideas have valence, they would have a strong connection to people’s emotional states, or moods, and valence would be a useful way to conceptualize the relationship between moods and policy ideas.

The emotional state of an individual might predispose him or her towards ideas with a corresponding valence. Moreover, to the extent that a group of individuals, say an epistemic community (Haas, 1992), or an electorate can be said to have an emotional state, valence will determine which ideas are embraced or rejected by the group. Indeed, this is an already well-established principle within the literature on consumer behavior. Advertisers are sensitive to the moods that make a product more or less attractive to a customer. Moreover, advertisers know that the valence of a consumer’s mood matters. Some advertising strategies depict the product as
one that will bring cheer to a negative mood, or intensify a good mood (Holbrook and Batra 1987). In addition, marketing strategies are based on the knowledge that moods influence purchasing decisions. This is why marketers use music, scents and colors to set specific moods for the consumer entering the shop (Gardner 1985). If consumer decisions were based solely on a rational calculation of the utility of a product, such mood setting devices would waste the shopkeepers’ resources. In short, research into consumer behavior also tell us that emotions, and the valence of emotions, affects how we evaluate and embrace things.

Ideas are not material things, but in this respect they are analogous to consumer goods. We assume that certain types of ideas are important to certain groups of individuals. Ideologies (Berman 2011 Freeden, 1996), zeitgeists (Mehta 2011) and paradigms (Hall 1993; Skogstad, 2011; for a critique see Carstensen, 2011), for example, describe ideas that are well documented by scholars of public policy to have a strong effect on policy decisions and policy change. Our suggestion is that the concept of valence helps us to identify the quality that makes these types of ideas so “sticky.” To the extent that they appeal to emotional states, certain ideas dominate our thoughts. Valence is a concept that identifies the emotional quality of these ideas and explains why some are more attractive, meaning that they come to be adopted as the dominant ideas. We know that ideas move wax and wane, sometimes catching our attention, and at other times seeming quaint and outdated. In the literature on policy paradigms, the standard explanation for this ebb and flow of ideas focuses on the power of key decision makers to influence the utilization of the idea. We know that policy makers tend to hold onto discredited paradigms, and valence might explain the prevalence of ideas that do not work. Likewise, it could also explain the failure of relevant ideas to gain traction in a policy discussion. An idea that was relevant, from the perspective of offering a reasonable and effective solution to a policy
problem, might fail to be embraced because its valence did not match the mood of the decision maker or group. We can formulate this as a hypothesis:

_Hypothesis 1: the emotional state of a decision maker or group will make them more attracted to ideas with a corresponding valence._

This hypothesis could be tested using the same methods scholars use to examine valence and consumer behavior. Micro-level studies of individual valence show that consumers who have a negative mood are influenced by advertising that suggests a product will improve one’s mood, while advertising geared towards consumers in a positive mood seeks to impart a sense that the product will intensify a positive mood consumers who mood is already positive (Brenner, Rottenstreich, Sood and Bilgin 2007). A study that offered subjects alternative policy ideas could determine if similar valence effects obtain for public policy. Two target groups could be presented a scenario that set a mood, positive for the first group and negative for the second group. Then they could be presented with a policy idea. Such experimental methods are common to valence studies in consumer behavior and social psychological. They could be readily applied to the study of policy ideas.

A second way in which valence can be helpful is in explaining why some ideas are attractive at some points in time, but not at others. Scholars of public policy often refer to such opportunities to enact a particular type of change as a “policy window,” or a point in time when circumstances are conducive to adopting a certain course of action (Keeler 1993; Kingdon 1995). A consensus in the literature on policy windows holds that the magnitude of the contextual trigger has a direct effect on how wide the window to reform opens (Keeler 1993). In other words, disasters or large electoral landslides open the reform windows wider. Valence allows us to conceptualize this because the stronger the magnitude of the event, the more intense the
emotional response will be. In highly charged emotional environments, crowds can be swayed more by emotions than by reason. Likewise, when pressured to respond quickly to a crisis, policy makers lack the time for careful deliberation and might make decisions based largely on emotion. Such circumstances allow for reforms that are unthinkable under normal circumstances. This implies that something about the policy window allows for abnormal change. Action is demanded immediately and emotions are more quickly engaged. For example, in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States, the American Congress passed the “Patriot Act,” a piece of legislation that suspended many civil rights and allowed for intrusions into personal privacy in ways that seem unthinkable under normal circumstances. From a valence perspective, one could argue that the mood of a population fearful of further attacks helped federal politicians secure the passage of this act, and legislate neoconservative ideas that previously lacked support (see for example Domke, et. al. 2006). To use another example, In Germany the left-wing government led to Gerhard Schroeder decided to phase out nuclear power. A few years later, a new right-wing government led by Angela Merkel abruptly reversed that decision. However, in the emotionally charged discussions following the melt-down of a nuclear reactor in Fukushima, Japan, Angela Merkel’s government decided a schedule to end all nuclear power generation in the country. The Fukushima disaster charged the debates with a strong emotional intensity, opening a policy window that had seemed closed previously (Jahn and Korolczuk 2012). This relationship between valence and policy windows we can formulate as a hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 2: Policy windows are times of dramatic change in emotion, allowing policy ideas with a corresponding valence to have an unprecedented opportunity for success.*
As the example of the American Patriot Act shows, a change in the sense of security held by the American public and American decision makers allowed them to consider policy changes that would have been unimaginable in other circumstances. Prior to the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, ideas to restrict civil liberties held a negative valence. In the wake of the terrorist attacks, the suggestion that these ideas would enhance security gave them an attractive valence. Testing this hypothesis in a controlled environment would be difficult, but might be done with historical data. For example, the crisis of the Euro currency has recently led to discussions of political and fiscal integration in Europe that were rejected at the time the Euro was adopted, and which continued to be resisted at the onset of the crisis. An ample body of historical evidence exists to examine the emotional quality of the idea of fiscal union, and how this idea was perceived by decision makers (for example, Jabko 2006; Parsons 2003). The material interests that led people to reject fiscal union have not changed today. Fiscal union still encroaches on national sovereignty and will force stronger economies to relinquish favorable borrowing terms. Rather, what is changing is the uncertainty over the consequences of failing to pursue fiscal integration. No one knows if fiscal integration will fix the crisis, but the certainty that monetary union alone will not work led to a daily increase in the attractiveness of ideas for fiscal integration.

A third way to think about the attractiveness of policy ideas is to consider how different types of policies might have an effect on the emotional reactions they generate. One way to think about this is to distinguish the different levels of abstraction at which ideas operate (Mehta 2011). For example, at a low level of abstraction are specialized ideas that provide labels for specific policy instruments. Such instruments are often technical and comprehension of them is relatively straightforward, at least for experts and policymakers. As such they are likely to have
low or no intensity. At a slightly higher level of abstraction are ideas that suggest a number of specific instruments and which begin to evoke deeper normative principles. For example, “flexicurity” is a cluster concept for improving employment by combining more flexible labor market regulations with more open rules for participating in social security programs. Such conceptions evoke perceptions of work-life balance that are pleasurable and create a positive feeling. In fact, the idea of flexicurity is a very creative expression of how an idea can be framed to create fairly strong valence across groups with such different political interests as working women and employers (Cox 1998). From this perspective, more abstract cluster concepts like “flexicurity” have greater valence in part because they mean different things to different constituencies, allowing people from distinct political stripes to identify with them (on this issue see Palier, 2005). At a further level of abstraction, broad ideational clusters can have the status of policy paradigms; sets of causal beliefs that suggest a particular way of understanding a policy challenge, but which can suggest numerous, sometimes contradictory measures to address the challenge. Keynesianism, neo-monetarism, and New Public Management are examples of such sets of ideas (Hall 1993; Hood 1995). Once their political and ideological underpinnings are known, these ideas invoke more intense emotional reactions and have higher valence. Finally, policy ideas can stem from abstract normative issues such as social justice, freedom, political order, and security. Often the policy ideas that evince the strongest emotional reactions are those that are located at very high levels of abstraction, because they tap into a core level of an individual’s identity.

The reason valence increases at higher levels of abstraction is because, at these levels, ideas evoke more fundamental levels of a person’s identity (Hall 2005). Peter Hall has suggested that unlike preference formation that results from rational deliberation, preferences that emanate
from basic questions of identity are more intense and cause people to adopt positions that
preclude rational consideration. This means that their actions are more like the behavior triggered
by attractive or aversive stimuli, not like the behavior we assume to result from rational
processes of preference formation. This is largely why political ideologies like conservatism and
liberalism can lead to fierce political debates, as ideologies constitute distinct and changing
articulations of such normative issues related to the identity of political actors (on ideologies see
Berman, 2011; Freeden 1996). Moreover, Hall (2005) argues that different ideas can tap into
different aspects of one’s identity, leading to decisions that are still consistent with our interests.
We could say that a shift in mood explains our willingness to be persuaded by an appeal to one
aspect of our identity over another. To put the issue in valence terms, policy ideas with high
valence are more likely to invoke aspects of a person’s identity, more deeply engaging their
emotions and therefore are going to prompt reactions that have a more direct influence on
behavior. And, the ideas that do this most strongly are abstract ideas. We could image a scale
that would distinguish types of policy ideas as having greater valence the more abstract they
become, as indicated in Figure 2.

**Figure Two -- Valence Scale of Policy Ideas**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High, Positive</th>
<th>Low, Positive</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Low Negative</th>
<th>High Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract ideals,</td>
<td>Cluster concepts,</td>
<td>Policy instruments, e.g. tax</td>
<td>Negatively-charged ideas,</td>
<td>Broad threats and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e.g. freedom,</td>
<td>e.g. flexicurity</td>
<td>regulations, e.g.</td>
<td>e.g. dependency</td>
<td>types of hubris, e.g.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>justice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>genocide</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This, too, lends itself to formulation as a hypothesis:
Hypothesis 3: at higher levels of abstraction, the intensity of the valence of a policy idea increases, consequently, emotions will have a stronger influence over the formulation of policy preferences when more abstract ideas are invoked.

An interesting test of this hypothesis has already been carried out with supportive results. In a study of the policy ideas used by Finnish politicians to frame public support for reforms to social assistance, scholars found that framing efforts became more successful when they stopped using facts and specific information, and instead simplified the issue and appealed to moral sentiments (Anonymous forthcoming). This study found that increased public support, however, did not lead to policy reform if key decision makers continued to resist change. Further studies might look at the effects of specific or abstract ideas in framing the preferences of key decision makers.

Finally, we suggest that valence offers insight into the nature of policy frames. We know that policy preferences are subject to manipulation by framing. Inspired by the pioneering work of Martin Rein and Donald Schön (Rein 1983; Rein and Schön 1995), numerous studies of policy framing have shown how policy makers take advantage of windows of opportunity by framing ideas in ways that generate stronger political support. When framing policy issues, policy entrepreneurs often invoke ideas that evoke positive feelings to build support for a particular policy option, and they tend to downplay less desirable aspects of the policy option. Surprisingly, within the literature on policy framing, there is no discussion of valence similar to the way scholars in the field of management understand the effect of valence on framing. Students of policy framing recognize the important of actors for framing issues, and they recognize the that the mood of the target population makes them more or less susceptible to framing, but they have not focused on the way the valence of the ideas used by policy makers
link their framing efforts to the outcome. Often the ideas that are used to construct the frames are abstract ideas, or those with higher valence. Even if they are canards, such issues can be successful. For example, Bryan Jones and Frank Baumgartner (2005: vii) recount the efforts of U.S. Senator James Inhofe (Oklahoma) to frame climate change as a hoax. Despite the inaccuracy of Senator Inhofe’s position, his steadfast adherence to it has gained him admiration in some conservative political circles. In defending this position, Senator Inhofe used rhetoric that was often visceral, hyperbolic and shrill, but it also proved quite effective because it encouraged people to make reflexive judgments, filter out conflicting information, and thereby foreclose careful thought about the relations between scientific knowledge and policy outcomes.

Indeed, manipulating valence might also be an effective mechanism for building or shoring up one’s authority. It may well be the case that charismatic authority, in Max Weber’s formulation of this authority type (for example: Gerth and Mills 1958: 245-252), derives from the ability to successfully manipulate and associate oneself with high valence issues. At least, the concept of valence offers a way of understanding charismatic appeal. The important point about this attribute of policy entrepreneurs is that framing skills are intuitive. They involve an ability to sense which ideas have the appropriate valence and how best to frame them. Thus, valence could help us to move beyond simply examining the location of an authority figure to assess their influence (Campbell 2004: 76-77). Where authorities are located within the institutional and organizational environment is important, but it is also important what skills they have. This permits us to formulate our last hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 4**: Policy entrepreneurs manipulate the valence of policy ideas when framing policy options, and successful entrepreneurs invoke ideas at high levels of valence.
Thus by focusing on the valence of an idea, we can explore questions about ideational change in a broader way. Valence gives us a way to understand how ideas can be more than instruments used by rational actors to advance their preferences. It can thereby overcome the criticism of ideational research that ideas are just another instrument used by rational actors to promote their interests. Subjective perceptions, or emotions, can have a large impact on the attractiveness of an idea before anyone considers its usefulness in a preference function. An idea can be attractive or repulsive before people contemplate its utility.

Also, understanding the valence of an idea can be a useful tool for policy entrepreneurs as they strive to advance their policy preferences. There is a strong relationship between the way students of valence issues and policy analysts understand the effects of framing. Policy frames elaborate different options, highlight different norms and values, and evoke different emotional reactions, just as do the framing effects of marketing practices or the presentations of political candidates. Finally, valence allows us to explain why some ideas ring resonant during times of change and uncertainty while others do not.

The Valence of Sustainability

To provide an examination of the efficacy of the concept of valence, we turn attention to sustainability, an idea that has come to dominate discussions in many policy areas. Sustainability emerged in the 1980s and became the catchword for a movement to promote sustainable development. The World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), an organization established by the United Nations, issued a major report, called *Our Common Future* (1987), which defined sustainable development as: “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It
contains within it two key concepts: the concept of 'needs', in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs” (WCED 1987: 43). In the words of Andrés Edwards (2005: 3), the “Sustainability Revolution” that sprang from this “presents an alternative that supports economic viability and healthy ecosystems by modifying consumption patterns and implementing a more equitable social framework”.

In the 1990s, advocates of environmental policy forged sustainable development into a “policy frame” for environmental decision making in many countries around the world, especially the developed world (Meadowcroft 2000) and in the European Union (Lenschow and Zito 1998). As described by Andrea Lenshow and Anthony Zito (1998), this policy frame had two core characteristics. First, it made a specific linkage between environmental and economic concerns that sees the two as mutually dependent upon each other. In this regard, it moved beyond the earlier frame invoked by the original environmental movement, which saw economic development and environmental preservation as objectives in conflict with one other. By framing sustainability as an idea compatible with economic growth, the idea acquired a positive valence. The origin of sustainability, therefore, was inspired by a desire to create an idea that would have more positive valence, specifically by making environmental concerns compatible with economic growth. The early advocates of this new idea were also policy entrepreneurs, seeking to introduce the idea into policy discussions.

During the past decade, the idea of sustainability has quickly expanded beyond the field of environmental policy and has caught on in a number of policy areas, introduced by policy entrepreneurs who adapted the idea to the particular challenges of their policy domains. What
links these cases of “borrowing” of the policy idea is that the policy domain is characterized by increasing concerns over the long term consequences of recent trends. Policy entrepreneurs latch onto the idea of sustainability, and use the term to justify taking a long term horizon of problems in their own policy fields. Doing so allows them to capitalize on the positive valence of sustainability. In the realm of social policy, for example, experts have been concerned for a number of years about the consequences of an ageing work force for the long term stability of pension systems (Jacobs 2008). Though concerns about this trend are not new, recently the term sustainability has been invoked to provide a focus that resonates with the broader public (Barr 2002; Chalmers and Lodge 2006). As the issue of sustainability affects pensions, it points up the dilemma between long term and short term horizons that often confront policy makers. Many of the challenges faced by policy makers in placing public pensions on a sound financial basis stem from a history of short term decisions. Unfunded pensions systems were created in the first place by policy makers who faced a dilemma between their desires to provide benefits for a current generation of pensioners. To do this they created pay-as-you-go schemes that collected the funds they needed from people currently in the workforce. In exchange, they provided workers with guarantees of future benefits that would be funded by the next generation of workers.

Privatizing pensions (Orenstein 2010) or raising the age of retirement (Bélard and Marier, 2006) are among the many efforts reformers have tried to shore up pension schemes. What has become striking is the increasing use of sustainability as a descriptor to label these efforts (e.g., Blake and Mayhew 2006; Lindbeck 2006). When applied in the realm of pensions, the idea of sustainability acquires broader meaning. The term helps to reframe the challenge in a positive light. Rather than understanding reform as a necessary sacrifice to avoid future calamity, sustainability suggests that a reform path exists that will not lead to the dismantling of popular
social programs. In policy discussions, the idea of sacrifice has a negative valence, which makes it politically sensitive. By contrast, the notion that sustainable pensions might preserve a benefit for future generations invokes a positive valence, making reform more palatable.

Public finance is another policy area where the idea of sustainability has become prominent, especially since the 2008 global financial crisis. Virtually every industrialized democracy is now faced with severe pressures to reduce levels of public debt and place public finances on sound footing. At the outset of the financial crisis, as many countries were planning fiscal stimulus programs to pump spending into their economies, the United Nations Environment Program encouraged them to use the opportunity to initiate a “Global Green New Deal” (UNEP 2008). This advocacy exercise encouraged government leaders to frame the crisis as a historic opportunity to develop recovery plans that would set their economies on paths of sustainable growth. In Spain for example, the law to address the economic crisis was called the “Sustainable Economy Law” (Mallet 2009), and included a number of measures to promote renewable energy.

The record of Green measures in the stimulus programs has been mixed. Early reports have praised South Korea for devoting the largest amount of its stimulus budget to green initiatives, and to allocating those funds quickly. For most countries, the amount of funding on green measures was modest, and Canada defied its traditional reputation as a green leader for devoting a relatively small percentage of funds to green activities (Julliet 2010). Nonetheless, measures designed to introduce sustainable practices indicates an effort to employ an idea with a popular valence in a new area of policy.

Another of the interesting developments in the debate over re-regulating financial markets is the invocation of normative principles borrowed from the field of environmental
policy, such as the precautionary principle (Cotty and Epstein 2009). The precautionary principle originated in Germany, where the *Vorsorgeprinzip*, as it is called there, was enshrined in the 1974 Clean Air Act. It constitutes one of the five guiding principles of German environmental protection legislation. The concept has been influential in the development of EU legislation (Kelemen 2010), and has become a guiding theme for issues of environmental sustainability. The “precautionary principle” states that “(w)here there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation.” (1992 United Nations Rio Declaration, cited in Clarke, 2005: 179) Moreover, advocates of the precautionary principle argue that the proponents of a new good or activity bear the burden of proof in demonstrating it is safe (O’Riordan and Jordan 1995). In addition to formalizing the concern with environmental protection, the precautionary principle places a priority on research and scientific knowledge. As such, it affords authority to those whose technical expertise speaks to the harmfulness or safety of an action. It is an abstract idea whose positive valence evokes a path that will avoid future pain.

In the area of financial regulation, Cotty and Epstein (2009) argue that the precautionary principle would provide useful guidance to regulators to require proof that a new financial instrument is safe before banks and investment houses are allowed to sell it. This spread of terminology from the sustainability paradigm to policy fields that do not focus on environmental issues is another example of how policy experts within an epistemic community borrow ideas that are perceived to have a positive valence and employ them to address concerns in their own policy domain. In the context of the anxiety provoked by the financial crisis, the precautionary
principle is an attractive idea because it invokes a sense of security for a future that in the near
term seems rather insecure.

Industrial adjustment is another policy issue where sustainability has generated positive
valence for policy entrepreneurs who seek to facilitate the transformation from manufacturing to
service economies. While a natural part of the “creative destruction” that characterizes economic
growth, the transformation from a manufacturing to high-tech or service economies nonetheless
generates anxiety and concern among those who fear their jobs will be lost. Many countries used
sustainability language to frame the transition as new initiatives to create “green jobs,” or jobs
with higher technical skills, in economies that are more service–oriented. In the United States,
President Barak Obama framed his employment policy as a green jobs initiative. Even more
vigorous use of sustainability as a framing idea for employment program is evident in the
European Union. In January 2010, the new President of the European Union, Herman van
Rompuy announced a summit to discuss a new strategy called *EU 2020*, which was designed “to
make the EU [European Union] a smarter, greener social market.” (EU 2020) The idea behind
*EU 2020* was to encourage the growth of new jobs in technology sectors, and specifically to
focus on the development of green technologies, such as renewable energy. In fact, the plan was
basically a recasting of the “Lisbon Strategy;” a ten year old initiative to promote employment
growth that had proven a miserable failure. Much ink has been spilled explaining why the Lisbon
strategy was unsuccessful (Kok 2004: Beggs 2007). From this perspective, the basic problem of
the Lisbon strategy was that its advocates framed the plan by invoking ideas that have a negative
valence, or as necessary pain; the pain of restructuring, the pain of expanding costs for
unemployment benefits if nothing was done, and the pain of not complying with directives issues
by the European Commission.
EU 2020 attempted to reframe EU policy objectives, invoking ideas that have a more positive valence. However, the onset of the crisis in Greek public finances in 2010, and the threat this posed to the Euro, forced EU leaders to delay the full implementation of the ambitious EU 2020 agenda. But even in the middle of a recession, many European leaders consider the long term stability of public finances and the growth of environmentally friendly technologies as part of a larger program of sustainable development. The valence of the idea provides a powerful incentive to keep talking about the goals, even though it is no longer a central policy priority, at least for the time being.

Finally, energy security is a policy area where a discourse about sustainability has gained prominence and where the valence of new policy ideas has fostered the creation of surprising political coalitions. Since the 1973 and 1979 oil shocks, energy security was a policy area focused on securing supplies of oil for industrialized countries, while alternative and renewable energies were the concerns of environmental movements and scientific experimenters. Broad trends are bringing both policy fields closer together. As this happens, sustainability is proving to be a focus that unites and integrates diversity of supply with energy security. The devastating effects of greenhouse gas emissions are demonstrating the limitations of energy regimes based on fossil fuels. At the same time, projected declines in the availability of fossil fuel reserves, either due to human conflict in regions where they those reserves exist, or due to technological limitations of accessing those reserves in increasingly remote locations, have led to more concerted efforts to identify and develop alternative sources of energy. Notable in this regard are the efforts by major global oil companies to fund cutting edge research into hydrogen, wind and solar technologies.
Much of the development of alternative energies is driven by economics; local communities are fueling their fleet vehicles with cheaper, locally sourced fuels, or small scale entrepreneurs in sunny regions are exploiting the new market opportunities made available by rising oil and gas prices. Yet, as they do so, sustainability helps to frame these new activities in a positive light. An alternative frame might suggest that the convenience and abundance of cheap oil is no longer viable, but this would not be as powerful a behavioral motivation. Sustainability helps frame these adjustments as a series of steps toward a positive future (Li 2005).

The emergence of sustainability in energy security not only links different policy areas, but in doing so also creates unusual political coalitions. Thus it is odd to see Texas oil tycoon, T. Boone Pickens (CNN 2008), for example, advocating for wind energy alongside long time advocates of renewable energy. These coalitions allow groups that once stood in opposition to one another to join forces and enhance their power. The interactions that result from scientists, energy entrepreneurs and global energy companies constitute important avenues of social learning (Hall, 1993), disseminating the ideas of sustainability and clean energy and enhancing its broader influence in the public mind.

In sum, sustainability is an increasingly popular idea that gives shape to a new policy paradigm. The idea is not new, but its valence has made it more attractive as economic change has created a mood of uncertainty and anxiety. Indeed, the idea has spread across a number of policy areas as a result of skilled policy entrepreneurs employing the idea to reframe policy challenges in a number of policy areas unrelated to environmental affairs.

Conclusion
This discussion of the proliferation of sustainability is not a full empirical test of the concept of valence, but it makes the case that this concept can help us understand why some ideas are politically successful while others are not. The basic form of this argument is that ideas have valence that makes them attractive or aversive. The attractiveness or aversiveness of policy ideas helps to shape or block a path for policy change. When they are attractive, or have positive valence, ideas create powerful emotional dispositions for some types of policy options and preclude consideration of others. Policy entrepreneurs, or the people who advocate for, and carry out policy change, are effective when they understand and appreciate the valence of policy ideas. Skilled policy entrepreneurs have an innate ability to detect public moods and the valence of policy ideas. They then are able to frame policy options by matching these ideas and moods. In applying this argument to sustainability, we showed how a growing uncertainty about economic conditions created a public mood more sympathetic to the valence of sustainability than globalization. Uncertainty creates anxiety about the future. But sustainability, which evokes an image of a future where careful planning can preserve cherished benefits that seem under threat from globalization, offers a valence more suitable to this new anxious mood.

Applying the concept of valence to policy ideas also addresses some challenges that continue to plague ideational research. One of the biggest shortcomings of ideational research is a selection bias. To show that ideas matter, many scholars have identified successful ideas and traced their influence in policy making (e.g., Albrekt and Andersen 2009). This approach tells us that ideas matter, but it leaves us wondering why some ideas, even good ones, are not successful. Nor does it allow us to understand how ideas matter unless we can observe a policy change. If ideas are constitutive of identity and preferences, including policy preferences, then we need a conceptual vocabulary that allows us to capture the pervasive influence of ideas. Valence helps
us do this. In the absence of observable policy change, valence can help us understand the enduring status of some policy ideas. Rather than assuming that the absence of policy change reflects an equilibrium, valence can help us understand how some ideas can create positive feedback, reinforcing an existing policy, even in the face of changes in the policy environment. Shifts in mood, or valence, are necessary to make people perceive policy change as necessary, desirable or possible.

Most importantly, the notion of valence lends itself to rigorous methods of empirical analysis. One could imagine an entire research agenda devoted to identifying the valence of different policy ideas. The methods used by social psychologists or scholars of consumer behavior to determine the valence of different emotions could be employed to identify the valence of policy ideas. Focus groups or surveys could reconstruct the valence a policy idea has for a given population. Furthermore, such studies could seek to identify valence differences between different populations, such as between policy elites and lay people. Such studies could build on our understanding of how policy elites process information (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). Finally, cross national studies could be employed to determine whether valence is mitigated by political culture. We should expect that this is the case. Words carry slightly different meanings in different cultural and linguistic environments. The translation of policy ideas alone should affect their valence in a different language. Scholars recognize that translations are not perfect and place slightly different emphases on the meanings of words. In a social science of policy ideas, valence could help us understand the role of language in constructing policy challenges.

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**Notes**

1 Credit for coining this term goes to Peter Hall who suggested it to the authors.

2 Some policy instruments or programs manage to become widely popular, generating their own strong association with broad ideas that have positive valance like security or solidarity (for instance, “Social Security” in the United States: Béland, 2005).

3 The other four principles are *Verursacherprinzip* (polluter pays), *Kooperation* (consensus), *Wirtschaftliche Vertretbarkeit* (proportionality in cost and benefits) and *Gemeinlast Prinzip* (common burden principle) (Boehmer-Christiansen 1994: 33).