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Goeding F-31 in David Marsh (ed.), Comparing Policy  
2 Networks, Open University Press, 1998

## Policy networks: myth, metaphor and reality

**Guy Peters**

The concept of policy networks has gained a large number of adherents and occupied a great deal of space in the academic journals over the past decade. This pattern of thinking about politics has made a substantial contribution to the literature on interest groups (Jordan and Richardson 1987; Jordan 1990a), intergovernmental relations (Rhodes 1988), public policy making (Wilkes and Wright 1987; Richardson *et al.* 1992; Smith 1993) and on implementation (Hjern and Porter 1980; Hanf and Toonen 1985). The idea of networks as a means of conceptualizing the relationship between state and society is now pervasive in the European literature, and becoming more so in the North American literature.

There is now, however, a need to examine just what that contribution is, and whether the network approach has yet to achieve the theoretical utility that its advocates appear to assume. In particular, are 'networks' better understood only as a metaphor (see Dowding 1995) or are they also a more substantive means of explaining the dynamics of political interactions and policy making? Do networks exist in any meaningful sense, or are they mere constructs imposed by researchers for their own intellectual convenience?<sup>1</sup> Further, is the model generally applicable or is its utility confined to western European countries and less useful in other industrialized democracies such as the United States and Japan?<sup>2</sup>

The literature on networks has been developed primarily in Europe, although there certainly have been several important contributions from North America (Heclo 1978; Atkinson and Coleman 1989; Sabatier 1989). Indeed, Marsh and Rhodes (1992: 5-8) argue that the American literature served as a

foundation for this body of research. The concept of networks actually grew out of the more restricted concepts of interest group politics in the United States, e.g. the famous or infamous 'iron triangles'. The American literature alerted researchers to the structural elements of relationships between state and society and therefore served as a precursor of attention to concepts such as corporatism, networks and communities.<sup>3</sup>

This chapter will address the issue of whether the network approach to policy and politics is as applicable to the somewhat peculiar case of American politics as it is in west European democracies. In particular, it might be argued that the traditions of iron triangles and contested access of interest groups to policy making which have characterized American politics have not been altered sufficiently to make networks descriptive of the reality of American politics. Access may be less contested and restricted than in the past, but interest groups still have less legitimacy in the political process than they enjoy in most European democracies.

In addition to the question of the applicability to the political setting of the United States, there are also several more general questions concerning the approach and its capacity to enhance our explanatory power for public policy. It is clear that in more than a few circumstances there are something like 'networks' existing in a policy area, at least in the existence of a number of groups. The problem is that after those networks are described it is not clear that the knowledge of their existence enhances the ability to predict policy outcomes. Is there sufficient information about the effects of different structures of networks on policy to make adequate predictions? Further, is the conceptualization and knowledge base about how the components of networks interact among themselves adequate to make those predictions? We will argue that, somewhat paradoxically, some of the more important emerging approaches for understanding the effects of networks on policy are derived from the American literature, despite the strength of network analysis in European political science.

The remainder of this chapter will be divided into three sections. The first section will discuss some general theoretical and methodological questions arising in the network literature. The second section will be an appreciation of the network literature from an American perspective, with special attention to the question of whether changes in the politics of the United States can better be described as the creation of networks or as 'hyper-pluralism' (Rauch 1992; see Peters 1994). Both available descriptions assume the involvement of a large number of groups in the policy process, although that involvement would be in significantly different ways. Finally, we will look at several possible ways of addressing the difficult theoretical issues in this literature, and especially those which arise from some of the limited American contributions.

### ***General problems with the network conceptualization***

Despite its appeal as a description of some important realities in contemporary political systems, there are also some important questions about using the

concept of 'networks'. Several of these questions are definitional, while others are concerned with the capacity of this conceptualization to provide dynamic explanations of policy choices. Most basically, it is not clear if the implicit causal analysis contained within the network approach to policy can be falsified. When there are policy outcomes of whatever sort, they can always be attributed *ex post* to the actions and interactions of the network. While that may well be true, it does not advance the process of explaining and predicting the outcomes unless the nature of the effects can be predicted *ex ante*.

To be effective as an explanation for policy choices the network conceptualization must be able to answer two questions. The first is: how are conflicting policy views resolved within a network? For the 'community' end of the continuum there will be little conflict, almost by definition. For the issue network end of that continuum there is (again by definition) more disagreement and greater conflict and, hence, the need to develop a more common view from the several alternatives within the network. It is not clear that there is an answer to that question coming from the existing literature. The various ideas co-existing loosely within the network must be reduced to a single perspective if the network *qua* network can be said to have an influence.

The second question which must be answered if this conceptualization is to be effective is how issues arising *across* communities, and even across networks, are resolved. There is some tendency in the network literature to focus on a single issue area, or relationships existing with a single government organization (see, for example, the topical chapters in Marsh and Rhodes 1992). The real world of government is generally more complex than that, but even within a single issue area there are often policy conflicts. Therefore, there must be some means of resolving conflicts over policy, often stemming from fundamentally different conceptualizations of the issues involved (Schön and Rein 1994).<sup>4</sup> If, as has been argued, policy coordination and coherence are becoming increasingly significant questions for government, then focusing so heavily on individual policy areas may be counterproductive. In fact, it is particularly counterproductive given that one area in which network analysis should be particularly useful is in the analysis of interorganizational coordination (Chisholm 1989) and perhaps even in the development of mechanisms for enhanced coordination.

In fairness, some of the same critiques could be made with respect to several other models of the relationship between state and society, perhaps especially the pluralist conception (Truman 1971) which has been dominant in the United States for so long. The pluralist conception actually uses some of the same basic ideas as does the network vision of the relationships between state and society. In particular, pluralism as well as network models assumes a number of groups all attempting to influence government in a relatively unstructured manner. Further, both pluralism and the network idea assume that there is a competition for influence over policy, with government itself setting the rules of the game. Finally, the presumed openness of both systems of influence means that no group can expect to win on every decision.

### **Definitional questions**

Before proceeding, we must ask the question of how we can identify a network when it appears in our political universe. What factors differentiate a network or community from other aggregations of groups and organizations? This is one manifestation of the general analytic problem which Sartori (1991: 248–9) calls ‘degreeism’, in which continua are translated into categorical and definitional variables. So, if networks are defined as having properties such as being ‘open’, in reality they occupy points along the continuum of ‘openness’, with a consequent need to identify the points at which the aggregations become networks, rather than the more closed communities. Further, can we differentiate networks from even more loose and open structures that may link government and society? There do not appear to be criteria extant to make those choices in an unambiguous manner.

These problems of defining networks can be extended to differentiating them from alternative structures of interest groups. For example, issue networks are supposed to be ‘open’ while policy communities are argued to be more ‘closed’. Again, it is necessary to define at what point along the continuum of openness one should draw the line that separates the one type of structure from the other. It is by no means clear that the existing discussions of these definitional questions provide adequate guidance to a researcher who might want to engage in research that would separate one system of relationships from another. As Atkinson and Coleman (1989: 50) state: ‘Determining just what constitutes centralization and differentiation is difficult in the abstract and is rendered only slightly more tractable by comparing nations.’ The comparative element mentioned actually may confound the definitional questions given that perceived centralization in one system may be perceived as being decentralized in others.

There is no shortage of attempts to classify networks and their characteristics. For example van Waarden (1992) classifies networks along seven dimensions. Jordan and Schubert (1992) provide an enumeration of a large variety of types of networks, and Marsh and Rhodes (1992) also detail a number of alternative conceptions of these structures. These are important efforts at cladistics (McKelvey 1982), or as Dowding calls them the ‘lepidopterist’ approach to networks, but they do not appear to address adequately some of the fundamental theoretical questions already raised. These classifications are all useful descriptively but have not been related systematically to the behaviour of the networks, or of the networks to which they are connected.

These are more than merely definitional questions. If this corpus of social theory is to be able to make meaningful statements about the differential impacts of different types of interest group structures then researchers need to be able to separate one from another. The assumption is that the many differences noted between communities and issue networks in the formal descriptions of the concepts should have significant impacts on policy choices. If, however, the criteria by which these concepts are to be differentiated are not inter-subjectively transmissible then the body of theory may not be able to advance.

Some of the sociological examinations of networks have made strides in providing those more usable criteria for differentiation. For example, there is a substantial literature (Galaskiewicz and Wasserman 1993; Wasserman and Faust 1994) attempting to measure concepts such as openness, centrality and the patterns of interaction among groups in networks. Unfortunately, this set of measurement techniques has only rarely been included in most of the political science discussion of networks and therefore we have yet to be able to specify adequately patterns of influence and their probable effects on policy choices within the networks that can be identified so readily.

### **Dynamics and explanations**

Another fundamental problem in the network literature is the question of the dynamic that motivates the actors and moves the system. The primary motivation of actors (largely groups) within the network appears to be self-interest, with bargaining strategies determined by the interests of the individual member organizations. These multiple and conflicting strategies may determine the interaction of the organizations, but it is not clear that their interactions provide sufficient information to predict outcomes (Marin 1990). For example, there are several possible contents central to the interactions and exchanges in governmental networks – political power, money, ideas, etc. – and different actors may be dominant in terms of one but not all.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, it may matter what is being traded, just as much as it matters who is doing the trading, and perhaps even more.

The point here is that, if *networks* are to explain policy outcomes, or intergovernmental relations, or whatever, then the characteristics of the networks themselves rather than the behaviour of individual organizations should be the primary explanatory element. If network is useful as a concept then there should be some collective explanatory feature, not just a derivative of the individual components. As it is, in few if any of the available network conceptualizations do the networks have sufficient articulation and elaboration to be used as explanatory factors. Indeed, there is a tendency in the literature for networks to be the dependent variable for other systemic changes, rather than an important explanatory factor. Again, as Dowding (1995: 136–7) points out, networks at present appear more useful at the metaphorical level than at the level of models capable of explaining outcomes in a systematic manner. The only hypothesis available is the fundamental one – networks matter – but that alone is almost certainly insufficient as the starting point for a serious theoretical investigation.

Associated with the problem of the dynamics of the system is the absence of more explicit linkage between network models and models of the policy process. With some exceptions the network literature appears to assume that such a connection exists, whether at the stage of formulation or at the stage of policy implementation, or perhaps throughout the process.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, a more specific statement of that linkage may be necessary for the more dynamic

relationships between networks and policy that we argue are crucial for greater utility for this approach. For example, there should be a very clear linkage between networks and agenda setting (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Kingdon 1994). The nature of networks should have a great deal to say about the opening and closing of policy 'windows' as well as about how issues are constructed in order to make them more suitable for institutional agendas. Unfortunately, that linkage is rarely made explicitly by network theorists.

A similar set of relationships between networks and the formal institutions of government should exist for policy formulation. This stage of the conventional process model tends to be less clearly explicated than several of the other stages, but one way to think about this stage is through the growing literature on policy instruments (Linder and Peters 1989; Schneider and Ingram 1993). Just as networks may reflect collective preferences about the definitions of policy problems that can influence the final outcome of the process, so too may they manifest those actor preferences in attempts to influence the choices made about the instruments used to address the problems. For example, a network dominated by economic professionals may be more receptive to tax-based instruments than are networks dominated by legal experts.

### **Summary**

The above questions should by no means be taken as a complete rejection of the concept of networks as an approach to political analysis. There can be little doubt that policy-making systems are segmented and that the specialized relationships that exist between the actors within individual segments are important for understanding the decisions made (Jordan 1990b). Indeed, this metaphor has been a useful one in alerting scholars to some very important and rapidly changing characteristics in the socio-economic environment of the public sector. Still, to make the contribution that its advocates would like, theoretical meat must be added to these strong metaphorical bones. That meat must provide a dynamic for change within the policies presumably influenced by the network. Further, it must differentiate among different types of networks in a more useful way than the current distinction between communities and networks. Several of the approaches mentioned below appear to have the potential of meeting those criteria, although none has yet to do so in a satisfying manner.

### ***Networks and American politics***

Interest group politics in the United States have traditionally been described using the iron triangle metaphor (Freeman 1965; Ripley and Franklin 1984). This description implied the existence of three powerful actors – congressional committee, administrative agency, and producer-oriented interest group – that could control a policy area and limit access by other actors. American government could thus be seen as a series of 'sub-governments' with the few centralizing forces in the system, e.g. the presidency, attempting to exert control

and produce greater policy coherence (Rose 1980; Peters 1996). This highly disaggregated government also could be argued to be capable of producing numerous contradictory and redundant programmes simply because each 'triangle' wanted to control the action in what it considered its own policy domain, or 'turf'.

The strength of the iron triangles actually may have been exaggerated for some time, but it now appears that they have become somewhat rusty. The three powerful actors defining the triangles are no longer able to restrict access to the policy process in the way they once could, and many more groups are now playing the game of political influence. Charles Jones (1979) has argued that the iron triangles were becoming 'big, sloppy hexagons'. Similarly, Hugh Hecllo (1978) argued that the triangles were being replaced by more loosely structured 'issue networks', obviously indicating that the network metaphor did appear appropriate to at least one prominent political scientist. The concepts of 'networks' and 'communities' have appeared in other political science writings in the United States, although certainly not with the frequency that the ideas have appeared in Western Europe.

Sociologists in the United States appear to have been somewhat more interested in the network approach than have political scientists, with several of the major works using this approach (Knoke and Laumann 1987) coming from the discipline of sociology. Similarly, much of the conceptual and methodological development of network analysis has been centred in sociology rather than political science. Does this say anything about the perspective of political science in the United States, or is it more of a commentary on the realities of political life, with our sociologist colleagues fundamentally misreading the nature of politics in their desire to employ the tools of their trade in a new domain?

Another way of looking at the proliferation of interest group activity in the United States is to think of it as 'hyper-pluralism'. In this conceptualization there is the expansion of the number of organizations involved in influencing government, but the rules by which they are involved in the policy process are those which have governed pluralism. The network characterization appears to imply that the interest groups have acquired more assured access to the political system. Further, some versions of the network conceptualization imply the involvement of other government organizations, along with interest groups from the private sector, in influencing policy in each issue area. In these ways the network characterization approaches that of 'corporate pluralism' (Rokkan 1966) with the rules of access like corporatism but with a much less restrictive definition of the universe of organizations included in the system of influence.

A hyper-pluralist conception, on the other hand, implies more a set of relationships between groups and the public sector that looks like pluralism writ large, with almost any group which wishes involved. The fundamental question concerns the main direction of bargaining within the panoply of organizations and their involvement with the public sector. One option is a series of bilateral relationships between government departments and the lobbying organizations. This pattern is not dissimilar to the relationships identified



within the 'iron triangles' or in pluralistic models of government but differs to the extent that it involves more groups. In particular there are a range of consumer groups and 'public interest groups' that have been created and now are able to exert some influence over policy (McFarland 1984; Rothenberg 1992). These groups will, however, exert this influence sequentially, rather than as a part of a proper network of groups. This pattern of sequential access appears descriptive of several major policy debates in American politics even after the end of the presumed dominance of iron triangles. For example, the tax reform passed in the late 1980s involved a large number of interest groups (Birnbbaum and Murray 1987), but they could hardly be said to be working in the structured manner implied by networks. The more recent experience with health care reform also involved a huge number of interest groups (Seelye 1994; Baumgartner and Talbert 1995) with again little or no aggregation of views within the networks. It may be, however, that network conceptualizations are more effective for understanding day-to-day policy making, while the old pattern of restricted group access reasserts itself when major decisions must be made in the United States.

The alternative is a more complex, multilateral, bargaining relationship in which the various interest groups interact among themselves, as well as directly with government. This bargaining relationship may result in issues being processed among the groups prior to any significant interaction with the relevant public sector organization. This bargaining permits taking into account a wide range of opinion while then presenting the relevant organization in government with to some degree a pre-processed decision. This bargaining is all the more effective given that there may be a number of other government organizations involved, so that some of the coordination problems often encountered in the sectorized iron triangle or even corporate model may be minimized (Griffiths 1995; Peters 1995).

The differences between pluralist and network configurations can be seen from the perspective of interest aggregation, to use the term made familiar by Almond and Powell (1965). In the pluralist model of interest group interactions, there is little or no aggregation within the interest group universe. All groups attempt to place their views before government directly and uncompromised and to find some official organization that will be receptive to their demands. On the other hand, groups in a network may be expected to engage in a certain amount of mutual bargaining and aggregation of views.

Even here, however, the definitional questions raised above intrude on the analysis. If we are thinking about the loose network configuration of interest groups then there is little to make us expect any significant 'pre-processing' of issues before the negotiations with government. If, on the other hand, the community conceptualization is more appropriate (or at least more commonly utilized) then there will be more preliminary processing or indeed the processing will have been to some degree performed simply through the selectivity of the membership of the community. There are several significant barriers to the effective use of network conceptualization of political influence

in the United States. In the first place, despite academic protestations, iron triangles do appear to survive in American government, and that government is still perhaps more sectorized than many or most European governments (but see Muller 1985). Some analysts have argued that, even if the system of influence appears more open, it is still dominated by a narrow elite surrounding each organization (Heinz and Laumann 1990). This elite dominance may not be the definitive conception of the iron triangle, but neither is it the open participative system of influence envisaged in much of the network literature.

In addition, the continuing absence of legitimacy for interest group influence in politics in the United States makes the development of legitimate network or corporatist patterns of interest intermediation difficult. Although the interest group system may have become broader than in the past, acquiring access still appears to be a principal political task for groups. Furthermore, although more groups may be able to gain access they still may have access one at a time, rather than as part of a collective structure that presses a more unified perspective on government.

### *Beyond metaphor: saving the model?*

As mentioned at the outset of this chapter, we believe that there are some available means of providing greater dynamism and predictive capacity to the network approach to policy making. While there may be others, we will focus on three ideas that emerge from the American literature. This is not out of chauvinism or simply to meet the requests of the editor. Rather, these approaches do appear to address some of the deficiencies in this body of theory that have already been outlined. These three ideas are those of Sabatier (1988) and Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier (1993) about policy learning; the epistemic community approach to policy making (Haas 1990; Adler and Haas 1992); and some components of the agenda-setting literature. The epistemic community research has been developed in the field of international relations but also appears to be readily applicable, if not more applicable, to domestic policy making.

Sabatier argued that in many or most policy areas there would be multiple and conflicting views of the issues and their solutions and that politics would arise between the advocates of these different conceptions. This view is not necessarily different from the general perspectives of the network literature. What does differentiate it is the specification of the manner in which the conflicts would be resolved. The groups involved in the conflict are conceived as having core ideas about the policy and to have more specific ideas derived from those basic ideas. These derivative ideas are more negotiable than are the core values, and groups can also learn from each other as a means of resolving real or potential conflicts.

The fundamental virtue of the Sabatier approach is that it is concerned explicitly with policy change and, therefore, unlike much of network analysis, is also directly concerned with understanding a dynamic process. What matters in the 'advocacy coalition' model is how the different contending policy

communities interact with one another to produce a change in the existing policy regimen. It is clear that the several contending groups will bargain and that they will utilize their ideas and knowledge as the basis for those negotiations. That collection of ideas and scientific knowledge will serve as the basis of policy advocacy, which in turn is the *primum mobile* of the entire model.

What is less clear, however, is how the conflicts will be resolved; the assumption is in part through synthesis (the learning aspect of the model) and in part through the triumph of better policy ideas over inferior ideas. These methods are different from the simple application of political power to produce winners which might be expected in a pluralist conception. Likewise, conflicts might be resolved through bargaining and market-like mechanisms. If all these models are possible then we might expect different types of conclusions to the scenario depending upon which method of resolution is dominant so that outcomes here are less predictable than is desirable.

The other obvious weakness of the Sabatier approach as a means of meeting the objections already raised to the network literature is that there is little differentiation of types of networks or communities. In the Sabatier analysis, as well as for most other models, all networks appear to be effectively the same. Thus, there is no real capacity to predict that learning will be more likely to occur in one type of network structure or another.<sup>7</sup> Again, if the discipline is to develop any usable theory about how networks influence policy, we will need to be able to say how and what factors affect the relative capacity of the structures to exert influence.

The concept of epistemic communities as propounded by Haas (1990), Adler and Haas (1992) and others has some of the same virtues as the Sabatier conception of networks and their role in generating policy change. First, the epistemic community approach assumes the existence of multiple and competing communities all attempting to affect policy through their ideas. This assumption is not very different from the Sabatier model, but emphasizes even more the importance of the *content* of the community's thinking as the means of defining the community. While the emphasis on content and especially scientific content is useful for defining the participants, it also highlights difficulties in resolving differences among competing communities in this approach. This difficulty is enhanced by the role of professionals in these networks and their 'trained incapacity' to see problems other than through the lens provided by their training.

Second, by inference this model is arguing that there are different types of networks, with the epistemic community being a particular structural form depending upon knowledge. It thus addresses one of the important weaknesses of the network approach. Even then, however, the answer provided is far from satisfying. While it is clear that epistemic communities are a distinctive form of network, their structural conditions are more adequately defined than their behavioural features. While Sabatier assumes that policy learning will serve as the means of reconciling differences among groups, there is no such mechanism clearly articulated in the epistemic community model. This weakness may

be, at least in part, a function of its intellectual roots in international relations. Conflict is much more a matter of course in that body of literature while in domestic policy making there is a perceived need to reconcile competing positions so that governance can be provided to the society.

Third, some of the emerging body of literature on agenda setting offers an opportunity to provide a dynamic element to the study of networks and their linkage to public policy. As noted above, little of the network literature makes the linkage to agenda setting or formulation. On the other hand, the agenda-setting literature does not make that linkage directly either, although it is concerned with how groups and government organizations interact in making policy. Just as agenda setting may be implicit in the network approach, the existence of networks (or something of the sort) appears implicit in the agenda literature.

The potential for this linkage can be seen most clearly in the Baumgartner and Jones (1993) ideas of 'punctuated equilibria' and their ideas about how groups attempt to alter the pattern of influence in the process. The fundamental idea is that agendas in a policy area are relatively stable unless there is some event or political change that upsets the equilibrium. When such an upset of an equilibrium does occur there is the opportunity for a significant realignment of policy priorities. The actors in the process are not, however, necessarily inert and may attempt to generate the crucial changes in the environment of policy rather than simply waiting for them to occur naturally.

Finally, the existing sociological literature on networks offers some promise in how to address the influence of different types of networks on policy. One of the clearest efforts in this direction is the Laumann and Knoke (1987) study of networks in policy making in the United States. This analysis examines the role of networks in three different policy areas and looks at the characteristics of networks in each. This study comes as close as any available in applying the methodology coming from sociological studies of networks to the public sector (see also Knoke 1990). As discussed above, these methodologies permit the identification of crucial variables in networks which in turn will affect their role in making policy.

### ***Summary***

It is difficult to deny the strength of the network approach to political science and policy. A number of scholars have demonstrated the existence of these structures and detailed their interactions with state organizations. The existence of these collections of interest groups is undeniable, but what remains less certain is how to understand them and their interactions with the state. Further, it is not clear how best to understand the relationships among the organizations that comprise the structures. It can be argued, in fact, that the component organizations remain at least as important in understanding the outcomes of the deliberations as are the collections of organizations, despite their interactions.

American politics remains more unstructured than that found in most European countries. There are a multitude of groups all seeking individual dominance in the policy area, rather than working cooperatively within network structures. The iron triangles of the past may now be more open to external actors but public organizations still pick and choose among the various groups seeking to influence policy and to some extent can impose their own values on groups, rather than *vice versa*. The fact that the network metaphor does not work particularly well in the United States does not negate its utility elsewhere. But, just as theories based on the American experience should not be taken as general, neither should those which do not fit the American experience well.

### **Notes**

- 1 A subsidiary question is whether networks have been in existence for some years awaiting the development of the concepts to describe them or whether they are a more recent phenomenon.
- 2 If true this may be only just, given that so much theory developed in the United States is not applicable outside that one system but is thought by many American scholars to be generic.
- 3 The dominance of pluralist thinking in American political science may have served as an incentive to find other approaches more suitable to European politics and society.
- 4 This is the basic logic of the Sabatier contribution to this literature to be discussed below.
- 5 This is in some ways similar to the assumption in pluralism that no one group will be able to win in all settings.
- 6 The 'stages' model (Jones 1982), despite its well-documented weaknesses (Sabatier 1991) remains a useful heuristic for examining the process through which policy is made.
- 7 This is true despite the existence of a large body of literature on organizational learning that should have some applicability.