

Afterword on Policy Communities: A Framework for Comparative Research

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Policy making in all modern governments tends to fragment and specialize as a result of two fundamental trends, the expansion in the scope of governmental responsibility, and the increasing complexity of public affairs. While the most expensive and important decisions will usually be handled by chief executives, party leaders and others in the "general arena" of policy-making, the bulk of governmental decision-making is dominated by a limited number of participants within the rather narrow boundaries of a particular "subarena" or "specialized policy arena." It is important for students of public policy making to understand who inhabits the subarenas, how these specialists relate to one another, and how the subarena as a whole fits into the broader policy process.

"Policy community" designates those organizations and individuals in and around government who specialize in a particular policy area. The main, regular members in pluralist systems are bureaucrats and their agencies; individual politicians and their groupings; organized interest groups and their leaders and staff; and "experts," inside government, in universities or other institutions, who research and think about policy. In other types of systems, although the mix might be different, it will include those with policy making or research responsibilities in a particular area; in authoritarian systems, that lack organized interest groups, the members will typically be within the government bureaucracy, party bodies, research institutes and universities. Because of their shared concerns, and the fact that each has resources useful to the others, these members interact regularly, leading to a sense of community and a set of shared understandings about what problems are important and what solutions are attractive and feasible within the policy area. There is rarely total agreement – members often have different interests and different ideas, and sharp conflicts may result. However, the community will develop a norm that disagreement should be kept "in the family": intervention by outsiders who do not share the assumptions of the specialists is

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dangerous, and the impression of cohesion to the outside world is a power asset.

The idea of policy communities developed from the study of American politics, and it is useful to see it on a continuum of related conceptions of specialization and how it has affected the American decision-making system. An early formulation was "subgovernments" or "cozy little triangles" of Congressional subcommittees, a single bureau, and a set of tightly organized interest groups (Freeman 1965). These were seen as defensive groups who monopolized decision making in their policy areas in order to protect "vested interests" and maintain the power of the members to continue scratching each others' backs. By adding experts to the triangle, writers about policy communities reveal their concern with ideas as much as with power, and with policy change more than stability (Walker 1977; Kingdon 1984). Experts (whether outside academics or bureaucrats and politicians behaving like academics) are by nature attuned to solving problems, especially with new ideas (no one admits to having old ideas).

At the other end of this continuum are the fluid "issue networks" seen as coming to dominate American policy-making in recent years. Issue networks tend to disrupt established policy domains by advancing new or cross-cutting issues (Hecl 1978). They are led by experts or by "cause" groups – quite different from "vested interests." Politicians participate as individuals or perhaps through "special committees" rather than in institutionalized subcommittees, and the role of bureaucrats (qua bureaucrats) is rather minor. In contrast, a policy community is more rooted in an established policy domain, and more closely connected with actual decision-making institutions; while oriented toward policy change, it is also responsible for implementing existing policy.

In this article a "policy community" is a group that results from fragmentation and specialization, and whose policies are determined by those most affected by the issue, regardless of whether they want to maintain the status quo or are committed to drastic change. When pressures for change are coming from outside and the policy community is "conservative" and on the defense, it looks more like a cozy little triangle; when an interest in change and new ideas is generated internally, it looks more like an issue network.

VARIATIONS IN POLICY COMMUNITIES

Campbell's article takes up the question of why the internal structure and style of policy communities within a given political system differ. In Japan at least, one major factor appears to be the characteristics of

the bureaucrats, particularly the extent to which they are mission-oriented. Another is that where interest groups are powerful and politicians active – the two usually go together – policy communities tend to look more like cozy triangles; in their absence, there is space for experts and a more intellectual approach to policy-making. In a Leninist system, Halpren argues, the key factor is the attitudes of Party leaders, since their actions determine the internal organization of the policy community and its permeability by innovative experts.

Of course, the preference for conservatism vs. innovation is not the only significant characteristic differentiating policy communities. Baumgartner focuses on conflict within the community, and the likelihood of members (generally the losers in some fight) to violate the “all in the family” norm and invite outsiders to participate. The variations he observes in his two-by-two comparison clearly cannot be explained completely by factors inherent either in a particular country or in a particular policy area. The key is rather the configuration of interest groups in each case, particularly how they relate to broader groups and ideologies.

The dimensions of conservatism vs. innovation and cooperation vs. conflict in a policy community have clear implications for the decision-making process and the substance of public policy. For example, in response to a given social problem, the nature of proposed solutions will differ depending on whether the specialists in the field are already attuned to new ideas, and the amount and nature of any controversy which develops will be strongly affected by preexisting cleavages within the community.

CHANGE OVER TIME

As well as investigating the factors which differentiate one policy community from another, we can ask how a given policy community modifies its character. One possibility is a developmental process, in which an issue network is created around some new concern when activists and experts arouse the interest of some politicians. The resulting pressure leads to a policy change, which becomes institutionalized in a new bureaucratic agency, a stable legislative committee, and a growing clientele. The new policy community starts out with a commitment to further change, and many new ideas are developed, but eventually its problems and solutions become less interesting. Especially when threatened from the outside, the members will become more concerned with protecting what they have gained, and the policy community turns into a cozy triangle. This three-act drama is a fair approximation of how the environmental policy domain has

developed since the 1960s in both the United States and Japan (McKean 1981). It also describes some aspects of migration policy in Yugoslavia, as described by Baskin, although the policy community was never very unified and in the last act it dissolved (with many members gravitating to a new home in the small-business policy community) – another possible outcome.

The process is not unidirectional, however: a moribund cozy triangle or bureaucratically dominated process can turn into an active policy community, invigorated by new ideas from experts. The normal case is perhaps when new problems emerge (or old problems grow more severe), creating demand among policy makers for new ideas and solutions. In China, for example, the Maoist leadership's perception of the inadequacies of the Soviet model led to creation of the economic policy community in the late 1950s; the much more profound sense of economic crisis in the post-Mao period led the new leadership to create a much bigger, more specialized and more innovative, economic policy community. Alternatively, the stimulus can come from the supply side for ideas, such as the impact of the "deregulation" solution on transportation and other American policy domains (Kingdon 1984). Whatever the cause, the effect on the policy community is an expansion of the role of experts in and out of government, and a tendency among the other members to think more analytically and generally behave like experts.

A common picture of American policy communities portrays experts in the bureaucracy and committee staffs, as well as independent academics, coming up with new ideas (or more likely recombinations of old ideas) on a fairly continuous basis; which ideas get on the agenda depends largely on what is available when a "window of opportunity" is opened by forces outside the policy community (Kingdon 1984). The American government may well be unusual in its direct or indirect support of policy analysis for its own sake – that is, in areas where policy change is quite unlikely – but as Halpern observes, even in an authoritarian system, experts are capable of keeping unpopular ideas in the back of their minds for quite some time until leaders are more receptive.

NATIONAL-LEVEL VARIATION

Our discussion thus far has taken the individual policy community as the unit of analysis, but even when there is substantial within-nation variation in characteristics, it is still worth asking whether the "average" or "model" or "ideal-type" policy community differs much from country to country; what determines the overall pattern of policy

communities; and how such patterns as a whole change over time. Analysis of these questions requires dealing with causal factors at the national level or beyond (e.g. authoritarian vs. democratic polities).

With regard to change over time, for example, Hecló (1978) attributes the new fluidity in the overall pattern of American policy communities to increased public activism around single issues, itself largely a product of the proliferation of public programs; Walker (1977) points as well to changes in the composition and internal structure of Congress. Similarly, in China, the new leadership attitude discussed by Halpern was reflected in a general political liberalization and reform of the party and bureaucracy which affected both intellectual activity and the policy process. These changes in turn contributed to the reinvigoration of the economic policy community. And although Baskin's account of a policy community's ups and downs is largely based on causes specific to the migration issue, national shifts in both overall policy priorities and structure (decentralization) had significant impacts as well.

When one seeks to differentiate among nations, the explanations which come first to mind are political culture (particularly as it pertains to political participation and assumptions about hierarchy and conflict), party systems, and state structure. In countries where participation is valued, obviously the interest-group component of most policy communities will be weightier, and the groups themselves (as well as the politicians) might have a more populist character; there would probably also be a greater likelihood of single-issue cause groups and other disruptions of regular decision-making. Hierarchical attitudes would favor bureaucratic members as the direct representatives of the state, while a low toleration for open disputes, as in Japan, probably would not diminish the amount of conflict of interest within (or between) policy communities, but would affect the way conflicts are resolved (long negotiations, use of intermediaries, etc.).

The impact of party systems on policy communities is also fairly straightforward. In the United States, because of its catch-all parties (and congressional norms), the partisan attachment of the political members and partisan control of the government probably has the least influence on the way policy communities operate. In France, both carry a good deal of influence, and the tendency of interest groups to be connected ideologically and organizationally to various parties greatly increases the likelihood of severe conflict, at least in the education policy domain. Japan's dominant-party system has several consequences: the political members of policy communities are usually all conservatives; the locus of policy deliberation tends to be within the majority party organization rather than in the legislative committees as in the United States; and the few policy communities in which

important interest groups are attached to the opposition have a very different shape from the majority.

China and Yugoslavia are led by Communist parties, albeit quite different ones. It is clear that party officials are active in the policy-making – it is not all left to pure bureaucrats – but how? In principle, Communist management is based on dual responsibility: any administrative unit is supervised by both its bureaucratic superior and a party organ (which works through the party cell in the unit). The fact that party secretaries are subject to party discipline and get ahead by favorably impressing their superiors suggests that they will be unreceptive to experts' ideas when these conflict with established party policy. However, the party is also organized along functional lines, and specialization may lead even party figures to develop a concern for the problems of their policy area and sympathy with people they work with every day. Although Halpern's study suggests that party committees are very responsive to the mood of the leaders, and can be used to limit policy community autonomy, this may vary across time, system or policy area; for example, there are indications that specialized party figures in Yugoslavia do speak up for their policy area to the leadership (although they are likely to lose some credibility). In short, a range of interesting questions is raised which cannot be answered with the limited evidence available, but this symposium should at least indicate that the policy communities approach offers an attractive route – probably with more potential than "interest groups" alone – for comparative studies of policy-making that span democratic and authoritarian systems.

Finally, many aspects of state structure will affect the composition and organization of policy communities, and only a few examples can be noted here. As Baskin observes of Yugoslavia, a federal system will tend to fragment the community, leading to more diversity of views and less interaction and cohesion. For China, Halpern observes that tight state controls over universities and research institutes means that the careers of experts entirely depend on government and party, with obvious consequences for the ideas they will propose. The courts and local government in the United States offer better footholds for dissidents than they do in France, as Baumgartner demonstrates, allowing much more conflict within the policy community. And in both France and Great Britain, their parliamentary norms and structures (e.g. the lack of standing committees) constrain backbenchers from much involvement in specialized policy matters; there are fewer direct contacts between bureaucrats and politicians than in other democracies. Policy communities in which the only politicians are ministers (plus in a sense the opposition shadow specialists) will clearly operate

differently from those in the U.S., the extreme case of both legislative power and policy specialization among politicians.

POLICY COMMUNITIES AND THE GENERAL ARENA

This discussion has mainly dealt with internal characteristics of policy communities – innovation, conflict, active and inactive members – without much attention to how they relate to their environment. One interesting topic here is relationships among policy communities: how much overlap; effects of interdependency and cross-cutting issues; the intensity of “jurisdictional” conflict and how it is handled; and so forth. The fact that the migration policy community in Yugoslavia overlapped with both the national security and small-business policy communities is a major factor in the explanation of its difficulties in achieving a coherent viewpoint. But still more central to our concern is the fundamental question posed by governmental fragmentation and specialization: how do the parts relate to the whole? Specifically, what determines how much *autonomy* and how much *influence* specialized policy communities will enjoy?

Autonomy is the extent to which a policy community resists penetration, so that its agenda and actions are self-determined rather than imposed from above. Autonomy varies depending on the strength of both the policy community itself – largely a matter of the internal factors discussed above, particularly whether internal conflicts provide opportunities for outsiders to intervene – and the will and power resources of general-arena actors (the chief executive, political party leaders, the cabinet, perhaps “peak” interest groups or the mass media). The latter in turn varies with policy area and over time, but is also the product of relatively enduring national-level factors.

Certainly the main distinction here is between authoritarian and democratic systems. Halpren shows that policy communities in a one-party state can have enough autonomy to make an examination of how they work worthwhile, but her analysis implies that it is generally rather easy for the top leadership to dominate specialized agendas, or at least to decide how many and what sort of new ideas will be allowed to develop. The post-Mao economic policy community may be an extreme example of the possibilities for autonomy in China (leaving aside special cases like the military): the fact that the leadership had become so convinced that existing policy was inadequate became in effect a substantial power resource for experts. In Yugoslavia, a softer authoritarian regime, academic experts at least can often say what they think, although no one may listen. In democracies, the range of variation in the authority of the central leadership over policy

communities is very broad, but even at its strongest (France?) it is unlikely to equal the strength of the weaker one-party states (Yugoslavia?).

Among democratic systems, France and Japan are both often cited as "strong states," but this notion pertains more to state-society relations than to the extent of centralization within the decision-making system. On this dimension, France (and Great Britain) appear relatively centralized, but Japan is at the opposite pole: the rather passive role of most prime ministers, the difficulties of the Liberal Democratic Party in aggregating (rather than articulating) interests, and the strength of individual ministries (with weak coordinating agencies) have led to a very fragmented decision-making system with high policy community autonomy (especially in the high-growth era). The United States appears as an interesting in-between case, on the one hand extraordinarily fragmented, but on the other with a president whose resources are enormous – both in ideas and expertise (the White House establishment) and political power (mainly via mobilizing the public). American policy communities can probably ignore the preferences of the chief executive and other general arena actors on a day to day basis more than their counterparts in other nations, but they are also more likely to be suddenly confronted by a president trying to take over.

If autonomy is a question of general arena actors playing in a specialized arena game, influence refers to policy communities playing in the general arena. Can they advance their proposals onto the overall government agenda, and then effectively support them to enactment? These are important questions, because if one counted up the number of important new policies or policy changes enacted by any modern government, it is likely that a large portion would have originated in a policy community, or at least would have been heavily influenced by specialists' ideas and pressure. Since influence is also a matter of power balance, many of the factors that determine autonomy also apply, but defensive and offensive strategies are different. A "cozy little triangle" trying to hold onto its own can often rely on monopolizing information, manipulating procedures, delaying decisions, simple stubbornness and other means of passive resistance, while a policy community trying to push its own problem-priorities and preferred solutions must be more aggressive. Depending on its resources and the political environment, it might rely on bureaucratic politics, intellectual persuasion by experts, political coalition building, mobilization of its own interest groups, and public relations campaigns. The latter two are clearly less attractive in more top-down political systems; a key strategy there, as Halpern's article implies, may be finding "patrons" within the top leadership.

CONCLUSION

Here, as in the previous discussion of internal structures and processes, we can offer no more than a once-over-lightly treatment of the significant characteristics of policy communities and their roles, along with some suggestions about causal factors. Our goal has been to convince scholars of comparative public policy making that the policy-communities approach is both interesting and illuminating. Despite the wide range of variation in the countries covered in this symposium and beyond, three generalizations seem essentially correct to us, and should be acceptable at least as hypotheses to others:

- 1 Policy communities are crucial to most policy decisions in all modern governments; how specialists relate to each other and to generalist actors will have a significant impact on policy outcomes. Therefore, neither societal interests (in pluralist systems) nor leaders' preferences (in authoritarian systems) are sufficient to explain policy outcomes.
- 2 All policy communities can be described in similar terms – sense of identity, norms like “keep it in the family,” roles of the main members and the exchange-relationships and tensions among them, autonomy and influence, and so forth.
- 3 Variations in these characteristics are everywhere caused by the same sorts of factors, whether those pertain to policy area, era, or (as emphasized here) nation or political system.

In short, we are persuaded of the learning value of examining policy communities in quite disparate contexts – even across democratic and authoritarian systems – and how well this approach integrates the separate concerns of how interest groups, party systems, bureaucratic organization and leadership styles affect policy making. It is because so much decision making in modern government takes place in and around policy communities that understanding their characteristics and dynamics is imperative in the field of comparative public policy making.

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