Policy Networks and Good Governance – A Discussion

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ABSTRACT

Policy network research can be divided, broadly, into two schools of thought: the interest intermediation school (policy networks as an analytical tool) and the governance school (policy networks as a form of governance). Both schools have made significant contributions towards raising our awareness about policy networks through the development of concepts, theories and research methods. While acknowledging these achievements contemporary literature suggests that this research has been mainly descriptive, with few primary empirical studies being undertaken in particular to assess the effectiveness of policy networks. This paper reviews briefly the recent literature on policy networks. The literature review reveals that by combining and adapting the most relevant quantitative and qualitative research methods from previous studies, contributions can be made towards developing better standards for evaluating, and developing, the democratic quality of policy networks as a form of (good) governance.

KEYWORDS

1.   INTRODUCTION

The intellectual roots of policy networks can be traced to the structural changes in socio-political systems that occurred in Western industrialised societies following World War II and contributed to societies becoming increasingly fragmented. Following a progressive expansion of state responsibilities, governments found it difficult to formally implement public policy and deliver public services and so began to share their powers with non-state actors. Atkinson and Coleman (1992: 155-156) refer to these changes as the 'Keynesian legacy' - a general view that governments should begin to share responsibility and roll back their functions through a new commitment to individualism and market forces. Consequently, policymaking began to rely less on the political-administrative machinery with its formal processes (bureaucratic models based on Weber's hierarchy), and more on collaboration drawing on pluralist and corporatist models of government. To try and explain these changes, policy analysts began to develop specific concepts, models and frameworks for analyses (see Rhodes 1986; Coleman and Skogstad 1990; Rhodes 1990; Knoke 1990; Marin and Mayntz 1991; van Warden 1992; Homeshaw 1995; Blom-Hansen 1997; König 1998; Dowding 1998; Börzel 1998; Pappi and Henning 1998; Thatcher 1998; Bogason and Toonen 1998; Knoke 1998; Elliot and Schlaepfer 2001; Toke and Marsh 2003). The generic term 'policy network', or, more commonly, the 'policy network approach', thus emerged and has become one of the most important concepts in policy science.

This paper reviews, specifically, the policy network literature from the *intermediation* and *governance* schools. Broadly, the *intermediation school* adopts a practical approach in the sense that the policy network concept is conceived more as overarching analytical tool that can be applied in the study and implementation of policy making. The *governance school* on the other hand adopts a more theoretical approach to policy networks and attempts to explain how the many existing networks are formed and may form in the future. Reviewing the literature from both schools may thus begin to provide a better understanding about how to link theory and practice in the study of policy networks. In doing so, the paper argues that by combining the most appropriate quantitative and qualitative methods from both schools a more accurate assessment of the democratic quality of policy networks may be achieved.

2.   BACKGROUND ON THE STUDY OF POLICY NETWORKS

Börzel (1997: 2) defines policy networks in general terms "as power relationships between the government and interest groups, in which resources are exchanged". However, the policy network concept in the field of public policy and administration comprises a number of specific approaches. These models emerged from two different schools of thought: the *interest intermediation school* and the *governance school* respectively (see especially Börzel 1998). The 'issue network' and 'policy community' models (see Heclo 1978 and Richardson and Jordan 1979 respectively), for example, were developed by analysts from the interest intermediation school. Heclo's 'issue network' model contributed to improving our knowledge and understanding about why *ad hoc* informal policy networks were established in the United States. Around the same time, the 'policy community' model in the UK contributed to improving our knowledge and understanding about why formal policy networks, which comprised only a few major players from governments and other select bodies, were established. However, both models have one particular feature in common: while affording good descriptions of policymaking processes both models could only partially explain *how* networks were forming or may form in the future (see also above listed authors).

Arguably, then, the descriptive policy network approach that emerged in the US and in the UK should be considered in general terms: as an overarching framework for analysis of public-private interactions, in particular relationships between the state and various interest groups. Therefore, to gain a better understanding of how networks form, or perhaps should form, theoretical approaches in policy network research may also be required. This is because, in reality, policymaking processes - for example the changing relationships between individuals, communities, organisations and governments - can differ quite considerably depending on context and are often hard to predict. A better understanding of these processes is fundamental to any explanation of how networks form.

In Germany, the so-called governance school conceived policy networks less as an overarching framework for analysis but, more specifically, as an alternative form of governance to that of hierarchy and market. Analysts from this school of thought are of the view that because societies have become increasingly differentiated and fragmented over the past 60 years many kinds of policy networks have emerged in response to these changes (see above). The governance school has thus moved beyond broad descriptions of policy networks, regarding them as *specific forms* of interaction between the state and civil society that are based on non-hierarchical forms of coordination (Börzel 1997, 1998). Additionally, it provides a more theoretical approach to policy network research by proposing new or using existing (albeit in some cases ideal) models to help better explain how policy networks form and may continue to form. In other words, the governance school proposes that if policy networks are to function properly, both now and in the future, much deeper levels of understanding are required. The governance school thus contributes to improving our knowledge and understanding of policy networks using a *normative* framework rather than a *descriptive* framework (see Table 1).

Table 1
Two Approaches to the Study of Policy Networks

INTEREST INTERMEDIATION SCHOOL (Policy Networks as an Analytical Toolbox)	GOVERNANCE SCHOOL (Policy Networks as a Form of Governance)
DEFINITION An overarching framework for analysing changes in state/society relations in public policy making.	DEFINITION A particular form of governance, a real change in the structure of polity that reflects changes in state and society relationships.
EXPLANATORY POWER Used to explain all kinds of relations between public and private actors in public policymaking. • Actors form linkages (business-like relationships/mutual interests) to negotiate and implement policies. • Linkages make up the structure of policy networks. • Linkages analysed within this framework. • Policy networks reflect the status and power of particular interests. • Influences the effectiveness of policy making processes and outcomes.	EXPLANATORY POWER A combination of relevant theories (a meta-theoretical approach) is used to explain specific kinds of relations between public and private actors in public policymaking. • Actors form flexible relationships to share resources and collective action in policymaking. • Flexible relationships are part of an ongoing process of making policies. • Acknowledges the difficulty in determining the influence of policy networks on the effectiveness of policymaking processes and outcomes.
PROSPECTS A relatively simple, straightforward model that can effectively describe policy networks as they are. • Descriptive • Practical	PROSPECTS A model that can help describe policy networks as they ought to be. • Prescriptive • Theoretical
PROBLEMS • Static • Cannot help explain <u>how</u> policy networks change. • Cannot systematically link the nature of a policy network with the character and outcome of the policy process.	PROBLEMS • Idealistic • Does not constitute a proper theory and so still has limited explanatory power. • Does not account for resistance to change and other ambiguities and deficiencies.

Adapted from Börzel (1998)

Table 1 provides an overview of the approaches to the study of policy networks taken by both the *intermediation* and *governance* schools. It highlights the advantages and disadvantages of policy network models from both schools of thought, in terms of their capacity to be used as frameworks for analysis. In particular, contrasts are made between a descriptive approach and a normative approach to policy network research. It suggests that the normative approach adopted by the governance school, notwithstanding its shortcomings, considers better the processes of change and the nature of relationships in policymaking and associated networks, as opposed to the intermediation school that focuses more on the structure of networks.

The above systematic overview captures the by now well established understanding of the role and functions of policy networks in governing society. In essence, policy network research acknowledges that the making of political decisions and policies is rather complex, diffuse and non-rational with a plethora of actors participating in often informal arrangements. In this context the ability of government to shape processes of policymaking has weakened, indicating a shift in the distribution of political power and influence. According to Sørensen & Torfing (2004), a new stage of policy network research goes further in addressing, for instance, the question of democratic function and legitimacy of policy networks (e.g. Kickert, Klijn and Koppenjan 1997; Mayntz 1999; Pierre 2000; Schwab and Kübler 2001; Mathur and Skelcher 2004; Nölke 2004). This paper draws on this so-called 'second generation' of policy network research by discussing the democratic quality of policy networks as a form of 'good' governance within a normative framework.

3.   EXPLORING AND EVALUATING THE DEMOCRATIC QUALITY OF POLICY NETWORKS AS A FORM OF GOOD GOVERNANCE

In line with the governance school, the concepts of 'policy networks', 'good governance' and 'democratic quality' - and how they are interrelated - are being explored in the following sub-sections because of their alleged capacity to disperse political powers through cooperative arrangements by engaging civil society in policy and decision making processes (see Section 1). To assess the effectiveness of policy networks, it is important to discuss the meaning of 'governance' and in that context develop a better understanding of the role of policy networks in particular in terms of 'modern', 'better' or 'good' governance.

3.1 Exploring the Theory

The term 'governance', broadly, means all forms of producing and steering social order (see Börzel and Risse 2004). For example, the state does not have a governance monopoly as steering functions can also be taken over by markets, and, indeed, policy networks. When viewed in this light, policy networks may be conceived as being bound, determined and controlled by formal institutions. For the purpose of this study, however, governance is understood more specifically as 'governance without government[1]' (Czempiel and Rosenau 1992; Rhodes 1997), or, a mode of governing that is more in line with the cooperative rather than the interventionist state where state and non-state actors participate in mixed public/private policy networks (Mayntz 2002: 21). A policy network in this context may be then described:

> by its actors, their linkages and by its boundary. It includes a relatively stable set of mainly public and private corporate *actors*. The *linkages* between the actors serve as channels for communication and for the exchange of information, expertise, trust and other policy resources. The *boundary* of a given policy network is not primarily determined by formal institutions but results from a process of mutual recognition dependant on functional relevance and structural embeddedness (Kenis and Schneider 1991: 41-42).

In other words, policy networks cut across formal institutional arrangements and highlight the importance of informal, decentralised processes and relationships in policymaking. A clearer link between governance and policy networks can thus begin to be established for the purpose of this paper: both definitions reflect the diminishing distinction between state and civil society.

But are such policy networks democratic in their making and operations? At first glance, given the increased levels of cooperation and collaboration between public and private actors in the above definitions it could be assumed that policy networks in this context represent more democratic forms of

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[1] Government in this context means top down "management", "control", "authority" etc as opposed to "the state" specifically.

governing. However, in reality, policy networks, even in this context, are just as susceptible to corruption, a lack of transparency and shifting lines of responsibility, for example, as the more traditional forms of governance. Their democratic legitimacy, then, is questionable. For example, policy networks have been characterised by their critics as "an illegitimate form of private interest government that puts sovereign decision making in the hands of strong pressure groups, unaccountable lobbyists and corrupted economic elites" (Sørensen and Torfing 2004: 2). Rhodes (2000), Nölke (2004), Sørensen and Torfing (2004) and others also highlight some problem areas in relation to the democratic performance of policy networks, in particular referring to the questions of accountability, transparency and integration. Policy networks are therefore, at times, regarded as "a serious threat to democracy because they challenge some of the most fundamental organising principles for the traditional institutions of representative democracy" (Sørensen and Torfing 2004: 21).

But on the other hand, can traditional institutions and processes deliver better policy and decision making and implement effectively public policy in complex socio-political systems? Or, is it necessary to question the *status quo* of democratic norms and values to better acknowledge the potential of policy networks in governing society?

To begin to address these issues, this paper explores the democratic character of policy networks and discusses policy networks as an important governance mechanism for cooperative policymaking. The paper argues that diffusion of political power and influence to civil society should engage better the wider community in policy and decision making - that is, not just "government, profit-making firms, and non-profit private organisations to fulfil a policy function" (Linder and Rosenau 2000: 5) but also less prominent individuals and social groups. In so doing, policy networks may gain more democratic legitimacy in the context of the existing political-constitutional framework. Thus, if 'better', in the sense of 'fair[2]' (Boedeltje and Cornips 2004) engagement of the wider community in policy making can be achieved through policy networks, they may be considered a form of 'good governance'.

3.2 From Theory to Practice

In practice, however, community engagement in this context is very difficult to achieve and necessitates, in particular, a comprehensive debate about how policies and decisions are made. The core elements of democracy, 'transparency and accountability', 'access' and 'responsiveness' in political processes suggested by Peterson and O'Toole (2001 in Budowski 2004), may provide the basis for such a debate. For example, these elements could be used as performance indicators for an assessment of the democratic quality of policy networks (see Section 3). However, following Scharpf's (1997, 1999) two dimensional concept of democratic legitimacy, Kenis and Raab (2003: 7-9) suggest that, in democratic constitutions, any discussions about democratic legitimacy will be underpinned, broadly, by two kinds of logic:

1) *Output-oriented Logic of Legitimacy*
     Thinking of democracy as government *for* the people, where political choices are legitimate, "if and because they effectively promote the common welfare of the constituency in question". Thus, in this view, policy networks may have the potential to contribute to effective and efficient outcomes.

2) *Input-oriented Logic of Legitimacy*
     Thinking of democracy as government *by* the people, where political choices are legitimate if they reflect the will of the people. In a differentiated society, multiple political communities are equal in terms of their participation in, and control of, political decisions. In other words, people are able to make compromises to affect political decisions.

Due to the stronger engagement of civil society in policy and decision making in a more cooperative model, the debate about (good) governance in past years has shifted towards input factors (Mayntz 2004). This means that analysts who were once advocates of 'government for the people' are increasingly advocating 'government by the people'. In other words, boundaries between the two kinds of logic, which were once clear, have now become blurred both in academic circles as well as in broader civil society. That there is now less distinction between the two perhaps reinforces the case for thinking about democracy in terms of input legitimacy.

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[2] Understood as equal chance to be heard and to gain access, but also to exercise influence.

Therefore, this paper proposes that any empirical study that explores, and evaluates, the democratic quality of policy networks should do so within a normative framework that is also underpinned by an 'input oriented logic of legitimacy'.

3.3 Evaluation in Practice

In an ideal situation, then, policy networks as a form of good governance will be democratic if *all* members of the network are afforded *equal* opportunities to participate in, and control, political decisions through consensus and compromise. Of course, in reality, this occurs very rarely, if at all. However, when assessing democratic quality, this 'ideal' policy network can serve as a standard against which to contrast and compare the performance of existing policy networks. Table 2 offers a framework to show how this might be implemented in practice.

Table 2
Procedures for Defining and Evaluating Policy Networks
as a Form of (Good) Governance in the Field

1) DEFINITION
Good governance: Putting people back into networks
Begin with the premise/theoretical underpinning that - ideas, beliefs, values, identity and trust not only matter but *form the basis of interaction* between members in policy networks.

2) EVALUATION
From this "first principle", demonstrate empirically, that:
(a) Policy networks exist.
(b) Policy networks make a difference (show how they can enhance or reduce the efficiency and legitimacy of policy making).
(c) Policy networks present opportunities to develop more democratic network structures.

Adapted from Börzel (1998), Rhodes (2002) and Marcussen and Torfing (2003).

Table 2 (Part 1) suggests that any assessment of the democratic quality of policy networks in terms of input legitimacy should adopt the following approach:

(1)   It is first necessary simply to establish the structures (types, roles, function etc) of policy networks through the identification of the policy network community and existing relational constellations (Table 2, Part 2a).
(2)   Complex issues related to policy network dynamics (interrelationships, change, resistance to change etc) can then be explored and evaluated more effectively (Table 2, Part 2b).
(3)   By comparing these findings with the established 'good governance' framework (Table 2, Part 1), recommendations can be made in consultation with the wider community to improve existing network structures to create capacity for better governance. This may contribute towards enhancing community engagement by trying to involve the wider community in policy and decision making processes (Table 2, Part 2c).

In terms of the input legitimacy of policy networks, this last point is particularly important. Provided that the feedback is ongoing and, where possible, a wider range of network members are given opportunities to participate, such a procedure facilitates network structures characterised by greater dispersal of political power and influence.

The following section explores the effectiveness of combining quantitative and qualitative research methods, from both the *interest intermediation* and *governance* schools, to achieve these outcomes.

4.   COMBINING QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE METHODS

Although existing methodologies employed by both schools in the study of policy networks use qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques, few, perhaps, combine them effectively enough for primary empirical studies. That is to say, few studies combine effectively quantitative surveys with extensive interviews, or observations of, members of local policy communities and/or networks in ways that put

people, not theories or models first (see especially Rhodes 2002 and Duke 2002). Despite some rare exceptions, for instance by Provan and Milward (1995) and Powell *et al* (1996), who have combined quantitative and qualitative methods quite effectively in policy network research, the paper puts forward the argument that existing methodologies are only partially effective. It is argued that better combinations of quantitative and qualitative methods are of primary importance if one is to accurately evaluate the democratic quality of policy networks in terms of the ideas presented in the previous sections. However, rather than adopting completely new approaches to achieve these goals - for example, using purely ethnographic research methods (Rhodes 2002), which, by themselves may be quite effective but are often time consuming and expensive – it is suggested here that it may be more prudent to select, combine and adapt quantitative and qualitative methods that are already being used in policy network research.

'Mapping' is a quantitative method that is often used in standardised procedures of policy network research (see for example, Schneider 1988; König 1992; Pappi *et al*. 1995; Pforr 2002). An important first step in mapping is a content analysis. Publicly available information is examined to help reveal the identities of the initial set of actors, usually working within public and private organisations. A content analysis can also help define a specific policy context or environment. A second step is to provide actors with comprehensive lists of identified network members (actors). They are then asked to identify if any relevant players are missing from the list. From this 'snowball' technique, a more appropriate list of policy network actors can be constructed. A standardised questionnaire is then formulated and sent to the identified actors. The questionnaire is based on the concept of 'mutual relevance' and the three levels of analysis that are associated with this concept:

(i) *Influence Reputation* (to identify those stakeholders most influential in policy networks)
(ii) *Cooperation* (working together on a specific policy issue, e.g. meetings, exchange of resources)
(iii) *Information exchange* (more formal ways of exchanging relevant information, e.g. peer reviewed articles, papers, reports, conferences etc)

Based on the data collected, patterns of relationships between actors in the policy networks are analysed and visualised in the form of network diagrams. However, this quantitative mapping may only be partly useful as a method for collecting data for evaluating the democratic quality of policy networks (see Section 2). That is, while mapping may be suitable for collecting data to help establish if a policy network exists (Table 2, Part 2a), it may be less suitable for exploring and evaluating more complex issues (see Table 2, Parts 2b and 2c). Firstly, this is because such questionnaires are often quite basic in terms of the number and types of questions asked. Secondly, many questionnaires are sent and returned by surface and/or email; with the possible exception of a few accompanying phone calls there is thus little contact with respondents. As such, the quality of the data collected might be compromised as valuable information may be lost; the nuances often experienced in communication between people may be missed; misunderstandings can occur; and, people's perceptions are less understood and/or accounted for (see Vigar and Healey 2002 who explore a deliberative approach to policy development).

However, mapping may still be a very useful quantitative method with which to begin evaluating the democratic quality of policy networks in terms of the ideas and procedures presented in Section 2. With some modifications, mapping may facilitate the identification of a wider range of actors (e.g. bridging actors, network elites, more peripheral players) from the outset (see Table 2, Part 2a) who may then be selected for more in-depth structured, semi-structured and/or informal interviews or discussions. Melbeck (1998) proposes that this might be achieved, through mapping, by asking those respondents who have been identified using traditional methods (see above) not only their opinions about particular issues but also whether they have discussed these issues with others, and, if so, with whom. A map of a 'discussion network' could then also be constructed as an addendum to the original policy network map. This, in turn, may lead to the identification and subsequent analysis of underlying issues and processes in policymaking and/or networks that may have otherwise gone unnoticed, as well as provide many interesting "topics for discussion" in readiness for subsequent qualitative surveys (see Table 2, Part 2b). Out of this process, suggestions may arise (from participants as well as researchers) about how to make policy networks more people-inclusive (see Table 2, Part 2c).

Certain qualitative techniques may be employed at this stage that can not only help initiate such discussions but also have the capacity to develop them. For example, the results from short surveys used in quantitative mapping may be presented to groups in the form of basic network diagrams (see Cross, Borgati and Parker 2002; Thurmaier and Wood 2002). This may generate topics for discussion for a

particular network at the time and/or for subsequent meetings. Examples of appropriate topics for discussion that build on the short survey topics might include the core elements of democracy outlined in Section 2 - 'transparency and accountability', 'access' and 'responsiveness' in political processes - to assess the democratic quality of policy networks. The possibility of follow-up meetings to discuss further such issues or in-depth interviews with individuals if preferred may be raised at these meetings. Alternatively, formal in-depth interviews with selected managers using these core elements of cooperative democracy as a basis for discussion may be implemented following the analysis of results from initial quantitative mapping surveys. These interviews may lead to subsequent interviews and/or informal discussions with members of the wider community that may have been overlooked during the initial mapping phase (see Pavlovich 2003). Either way these qualitative techniques, in terms of their suggested potential to better engage the wider community, may lead to more realistic representations, or maps, of policy networks providing a better assessment of their democratic quality.

A better understanding of policy networks, the people involved and the problems they face could thus be gained *from the outset* (Tables 2a and 2b). Meaningful comparisons could then be made between actual policy networks (in a case study or studies) and an ideal typical policy network (i.e. policy networks as a form of *good* governance), assessment criteria for which are suggested in Sections 2 and 3. From this, improvements in the democratic quality of policy networks may be suggested so that 'good governance' begins to 'put people back into networks' (see especially Rhodes 2002; Table 2c).

5. CONCLUSION

By comparing and contrasting two broad approaches to the study of policy networks proposed by the *interest intermediation school* (policy networks as an analytical toolbox) and the *governance school* (policy networks as a form of governance) this paper suggests that, in theory, legitimate democratic policy networks are possible. The analysis shows that such networks (i.e. policy networks as a form of good governance) are legitimate if they can be shown to exist, make a difference in policy making in terms of better engaging civil society and present opportunities to develop more democratic network structures in policy making.

However, to develop policy networks as a form of good governance in practice necessitates a debate about how policies and decisions are made. Core elements of democracy - 'transparency and accountability', 'access' and 'responsiveness' in political processes - are suggested as possible indicators in an assessment of the democratic quality of policy networks. Using appropriate scales, comparisons could be made between the results of a particular case study (investigating an actual policy network) and the core elements of an ideal policy network (policy networks as a form of good governance).

This paper also argues, therefore, that by effectively combining suitable quantitative and qualitative data collection methods in policy network research, both from the interest intermediation *and* governance schools, collection of appropriate data may be better facilitated. Specifically, "mapping" (a largely quantitative methodology) should be modified to provide more opportunities to select a wider range of participants from outside the usual sphere of influence in policy networks. This, in turn, may lead to structured/semi-structured interviews and/or informal discussions (qualitative methodologies) with a wider range of participants. 'Discussion networks' may be then mapped in addition to the standard networks, again so that more effective comparisons can be made between actual policy networks and the ideal policy network. These methods will, however, require further research and a more comprehensive discussion in the future.

Acknowledgement

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