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Abstract

Policy entrepreneurs and policy networks: A new approach

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Principal Topic

In recent years governments have become increasingly reliant on networks of informants to provide policy advice. While interest in these sets of relationships amongst policy actors, commonly termed “policy networks” (Considine 1994:104), has risen dramatically over recent years (Börzel 1998), much work still needs to be done theoretically and methodologically in order to demonstrate their utility and significance to policy processes (Considine 1994:127; Milward and Provan 1998: 389; Weible and Sabatier 2005). Policy entrepreneurs are those individual actors in policy networks who are “willing to invest resources of various kinds in hopes of a future return in the form of the policies they favour” (Kingdon, 1984: 151). Hazlehurst (2001) has argued that policy networks are an important and little understood element of Australian political processes, and could enable efficient problem definition and solving if they could be understood.

There are two main approaches to policy networks: quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative approaches to policy networks examine relationships between policy entrepreneurs, most often utilising social network analysis (eg. Milward and Provan (1998)). Numerous researchers have criticised quantitative social network approaches to policy network analysis as this approach has failed to demonstrate that networks and network structure affect the outcomes of a policy process (Börzel 1998; Daugjberg & Marsh 1998; Milward & Provan 1998: 266; Peterson 2003).

Qualitative approaches, on the other hand, tend to focus on the content of interaction between policy entrepreneurs (who are termed policy actors), most often collecting data via interviews and documents (eg. R.A.W. Rhodes 1999). Qualitative approaches to policy networks have been criticized as they lack a coherent undergirding empirically based theory and fail to demonstrate that a network actually exists (Börzel 1998; Peterson 2003; Weible and Sabatier 2005). Thus qualitative approaches to policy network can show influence by individual actors on policy process, but have failed to demonstrate actual networks; while quantitative approaches have demonstrated the existence of a policy network, but have not been able to demonstrate the influence of these networks on policy outcomes (Peterson 2003). Mixed methods studies have been suggested as a way forward for policy network studies that can demonstrate both the existence of a policy network and the influence of this network on policy (Bogason and Toonen 1998; Börzel 1998; Dowding 2001; Thompson & Pforr 2005).

Methodology/Key Propositions

Key research questions that need to be answered in the area of policy networks are:

- How do networks of policy entrepreneurs influence policy?

The overarching method to answer this question will be an exploratory case study. Case studies provide for in-depth analysis of a particular issue or technology as it impacts an organisation or industry, and can provide strong recommendations for improvements in theory, technology or policy (Yin 2003a). A case study is “a method for learning about a complex instance, based on a comprehensive understanding of that instance obtained by extensive descriptions and analysis of that instance taken as a whole and in its context” (U.S. General Accounting Office 1990, cited in

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Mertens 2005:237). Case studies in the area of policy have been called for as a way of advancing public policy practice (Osborne & Brown 2005).

Yin (2003b) argues that case studies can include multiple sources of evidence, as this enables triangulation of data sources. By utilising both qualitative and quantitative elements to the research process, a ‘conversation’ is envisaged “one method enables the other to be more effective, and, together both methods provide a fuller understanding of the research problem” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2006: 317). If Trow (1957, cited in Bryman 1984, p. 76) is correct in asserting that “the problem under investigation properly dictates the methods of investigation” then a mixed methods design would be appropriate for this case study. This is due to the fact that the paper is seeking to ascertain both network functioning as well as impact on the policy process and both qualitative and quantitative methods are necessary:

- Quantitative methods (document analysis and social network analysis)
- Qualitative methods (interviews, observations, document analysis, and reflective journal)

The multi-method design of this paper will enable triangulation of data and method in order to answer the research question (Yin 2003b).

Results and Implications

This paper proposes a new methodology for the analysis of policy networks that utilizes both qualitative and quantitative methods. As a case study, it has been able to demonstrate the utility of a mixed methods design for the study of policy networks. Additionally, it has been able to demonstrate the existence of the network and the impact of this network on policy.

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