Original Article

Theories of the policy process: What is British and what is universal? A polite reply to Marsh and McCaffrie

Paul Cairney[a,*] and Grant Jordan[b]

[a]Division of History and Politics, University of Stirling, Stirling FK9 4LA, UK.
E-mail: p.a.cairney@stir.ac.uk
[b]Department of Politics and International Relation, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen AB24 3QY, UK.
E-mail: g.jordan@abdn.ac.uk

*Corresponding author.

Abstract The 'policy communities' literature has stood the test of time because it describes a 'universal' logic for groups and governments to interact. To deal with complex government, policymakers divide their responsibilities into manageable units, and delegate responsibility for policymaking to bureaucrats, who form relationships with the groups from which they seek information and advice. Governments come and go, and these relationships vary from issue to issue, but the logic of consultation does not change. In this article, we describe this process, situate it within a broader discussion of policy theory, and use these insights to respond to the points made by Marsh and McCaffrie. *British Politics* (2015) **10,** 486–492. doi:10.1057/bp.2015.32; published online 22 June 2015

Introduction

In their reply to our previous article in this journal (Jordan and Cairney, 2013), Marsh and McCaffrie (2015) make several interesting claims: first, that the material we discuss is old and our account is full of self-justification; second, that we are too dismissive of the Marsh/Rhodes literature; third, that we omit reference to the evidence of popular participation; fourth, that we are pluralists; and, fifth, that we do not recognise that some countries have different policy styles. We thank them for raising these issues, to which we would like to offer an ambitious reply.

Of course, we argue that the material we discuss is classic rather than dated, since it has stood the test of time and still informs the modern literature. More importantly, in this reply to the Marsh and McCaffrie critique, we seek to distinguish between

'universal' and territorially specific or time-specific explanations for policy choices and outcomes. In particular, we argue that what makes the 'policy communities' literature stand the test of time is that it describes a 'universal' logic for groups and governments to interact.

Universal and Territorial Explanations: If We are to Take the Literature Seriously, Let's Take it *Really* Seriously

A focus on the relationship between governments and interest groups is just one piece in a larger puzzle. In our article comparing policy community and Lijphart accounts (Jordan and Cairney, 2013), we 'zoomed in' to focus on one aspect of 'complex government' (Cairney, 2015) and, in this short reply, we 'zoom out' again to explain how it fits in to the policy theory literature, which goes beyond national characteristics to identify 'universal' concepts which can be used to explain 'the' policy process.[1] For us, this is more ambitious than simply incorporating the literature on (meta)governance.

We break this discussion down into five key 'causal processes' highlighted by John (2003) and discussed by Cairney and Heikkila (2014), in relation to policy theory, and by Cairney *et al* (2012), in an empirical study. The first of these is actors making choices. Almost all policy theories adopt a broad focus on 'bounded rationality', which can be little more than a truism; people do not have the time, resources and cognitive ability to consider all information, all possibilities, all solutions, or anticipate all consequences of their actions. Consequently, they use informational shortcuts or heuristics to produce what they may perceive to be good-enough decisions (Simon, 1976, p. xxviii). Some studies may focus primarily on the goal-oriented strategies of actors within that context, while others place more emphasis on the use of emotional heuristics (or some mix of 'fast' and 'slow' thinking – Kahneman, 2012). A trend in the literature, in the past three or four decades, is also to reflect on a broad shift from centralised and exclusive policymaking towards a more fragmented system with a large number of policy participants (Jordan, 1981, pp. 96–100). Issues which were once 'quietly managed by a small group of insiders' have now become 'controversial and politicised' (Heclo, 1978, pp. 94–97). This further challenges the ideal-type of 'comprehensive rationality', which there is an all-knowing, sole decision maker at the heart of government. Instead, many people, with limited cognitive capacity, make many resource-constrained choices.

The second is 'institutions', as the rules, norms, practices and relationships that influence individual and collective behaviour. People deal with complexity by developing simple rules. Rules can be formal and widely understood, such as when enshrined in law or a constitution, or informal and only understood in particular organisations. Institutions at one level (for example, constitutional) can shape activity at another (for example, legislation or regulation), establishing the venues where

decisions are made, and the rules that allow particular types of actors or ideas to enter the policy process (Ostrom *et al*, 2014). There are many different institutions within governments and government departments, each providing different incentives, to policymakers or organisations, to seek and engage with particular sources of information and advice.

The third is policy networks, communities or subsystems, as the relationships between actors responsible for policy decisions and the 'pressure participants' (Jordan *et al*, 2004) such as interest groups, or public bodies, with which they consult and negotiate. The nomenclature is less important than the abstract 'universal' logic underpinning their existence. The development of policy communities follows government attempts to deal with complex government. To address the sheer size of their responsibilities, governments divide them into broad sectors (such as health or education) and more specialist subsectors. Senior policymakers delegate responsibility for policymaking to bureaucrats, who seek information and advice from groups. Groups exchange information for access to, and potential influence within, government. Some subsectors may be more exclusive than others, and contain operating procedures that favour particular sources of evidence and some participants over others, but the logic of consultation does not change.

The fourth is the role of ideas – a very broad and often confusing term to describe ways of thinking, and the extent to which ways of thinking – or *beliefs* – are shared within groups, organisations, networks and political systems (Cairney and Weible, 2015). 'Ideas' can relate to persuasion and argument, as resources in the policy process, alongside the use of material and other resources (Majone, 1989). It can refer to the shared language of policy participants, such as in Hall's (1993, p. 279) description of policy paradigms. Or, it can describe a proposed solution to a policy problem (Kingdon, 1984). Shared ideas (knowledge, world views, language) appear to structure political activity when they are almost taken for granted or rarely questioned – as core beliefs, paradigms, hegemony and monopolies of understanding (Cairney and Heikkila, 2014). Or, persuasion can be used to prompt actors to rethink their beliefs or consider new evidence.

The fifth is context and events. Context is a broad category to describe the extent to which a policymaker's environment is in his or her control or how it influences their decisions. It can refer to the often-changing policy conditions that policymakers take into account when identifying problems, such as a political system's geography, demographic profile, economy, mass attitudes and behaviour (Cairney and Heikkila, 2014). It can also refer to a sense of policymaker 'inheritance' – of laws, rules and programmes – when they enter office (Rose, 1990). Events can be routine and anticipated, such as elections which produce limited change or introduce new actors with different ideas. Or, they can be unanticipated incidents, including social or natural crises or major scientific breakthroughs and technological change (Weible, 2014).

On that basis, our argument is that, at this highly abstract level, all political systems may operate in broadly similar ways – or, at least, be open to explanation

using the same concepts. This is the most abstract way in which to challenge the comparative politics approach, which we associated primarily with Lijphart, in which the aim of research is to examine the implications of country-level institutional differences. To put it in a rather artificial way, one literature may assume differences and try to measure their effects, while the other may identify similarities to qualify their effects. One should understand our article in that context. A key aim of policy studies is to identify the kinds of policy processes that can be found in all systems despite their apparent differences. It is not to assert that all policymaking in all countries is the same but, rather, to remind people not to *assume* that it is necessarily different. Our aim was to zoom in to explore one aspect of that process in detail – the existence of policy communities – but with that broader context in mind.

Policy Styles and Governance Revisited

We should bear in mind this universal/ territorial distinction when we analyse differences in national policy-making (or 'meta-governance') styles. We should not simply state, without good explanation, that policy styles differ in places like Denmark and the Untied Kingdom. Otherwise people will just go back to Lijphart for the explanation of policy-making differences. To their credit, Marsh and McAffrie do not just do this. Rather, they seem to link differences in policy style to the idea of different modes of governance – hierarchy, markets, networks, participative – selected by the 'meta-governor'. They then suggest that governments in some countries, like Denmark, might select different meta-governance strategies than governments in others, such as the United Kingdom. So far, so interesting.

   Yet, our first problem with this argument is that, as stated, they are not contradicting our argument even though they argue that they are. The debate is artificial. It would be odd to read, from our article, the argument that all policy styles by all governments are always the same – and that, therefore, the identification of one exception represents the equivalent of Popper's black swan. Rather, our broad framework can be used to put this comparison in context and seek, through careful empirical analysis, a convincing explanation for the differences in each country. The same can be said for studies which compare meta-governance styles within the same country, but in different government departments or specific points in time. So, for example, we may be able to identify relatively conciliatory versus 'top-down' styles by different ministers, or in relation to different policy problems. Or, we could trace an overall shift in UK policymaking from periods of top-down imposition to network-governance to target-driven governance over time (a process tracked by works such as Marsh and Rhodes, 1992; Burch and Holliday, 1996; Bevir and Rhodes, 2003; Richards and Smith, 2004).

   Our second problem is that Marsh and McCaffrie do not subject their Toke and Nielsen (2015) case study to the same critical analysis that they offer us. Our abstract

framework, and explanation for why policy styles may be broadly similar in many countries, reminds scholars not to take these differences in policy style for granted. Rather, they should consider: how much of the alleged difference can be demonstrated in a meaningful way (alleging 'corporatism' is just not good enough); how much of the difference we can link to the goal-oriented strategies of 'meta-governors' (given what we know about the constraints to such intentional action); and, how much we can relate to well-established institutional, ideational or socioeconomic factors in each territory (at a particular point in time).

It is not about Pluralism – It is About Limits to Control (and Accountability)

Our final problem is with regards to the way in which Marsh and McAffrie attribute an ill-defined notion of 'pluralism' to our argument when, in fact, we focus more broadly on the limits to central government control. A key part of our argument is that central governments are not in the position to simply assert their will and select a mode of governance over another. Rather, as we describe above, there are many well-researched and well-described limits to government action which prompt, for example, the development of policy communities. When we describe an inevitable diffusion of power, it is to challenge an enduring but misguided notion – which, in our article, we relate to Lijphart – that power is, and can be, concentrated in the hands of a small number of people at the heart of government. It does not describe pluralism in the sense that power is, or somehow can be, distributed equally. In fact, Marsh and McAffrie's discussion of unequal business power can already be found in Jordan *et al*'s (2004, p. 200) call for better ways to describe policy participation than with reference to 'interest groups'.

A more fruitful discussion, than a rehash of an artificial debate between 'pluralist' and asymmetric power models, is to wonder how to make sense of complex government and what anyone can do about it. For example, some exponents of complexity theory invite governments to consider pragmatic policymaking strategies, including relying less on centrally driven targets, and punitive performance management, in favour of giving local bodies more freedom to adapt to their environment (Geyer, 2012; see also Room, 2015, who uses complexity themes to reconsider established theories of power). Others wonder how policy advocates such as scientists can hope to influence a policy process that is not centrally controlled, or how anyone can be held meaningfully to account if elected policymakers share power with so many unelected public bodies and private organisations, or if they delegate responsibility to them (Cairney, 2015). In other words, there is an inescapable tension between governments seeking pragmatic ways to address their lack of power or to introduce forms of institutional accountability, and their need, in the name of *democratic* accountability, to take responsibility for the outcomes of

government. This kind of discussion seems, to us, to be possible when we identify policy communities, as a symbol of one kind of power diffusion, and reject Lijpart's idea that governments are in control and able to impose policy in a 'majoritarian' way.

To conclude then, our argument is quite simple and the stakes seem clear. By rejecting Lijphart's account, we reject the UK's majoritarian image and invite people to consider how to conceptualise and respond to a different reality. We agree that the reference to governance and/or policy networks may be an important part of that conceptualisation, but not that it should receive preferential treatment, or that a focus on modes of governance is a more important piece of the jigsaw than any other.

Note

1 Of course, in practice, what we call 'universal' is based on the study of a small number of 'Western' countries – including the United States and the United Kingdom – but many concepts can be given this label because they refer to logics of policymaking, or to the limits of cognitive behaviour.

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