Multi-Interest Decision-makers: The Multiple and Diverse Interests of Policy Advisory Committee Members

Mary Alice Haddad
Multi-Interest Decision-makers:  
The Multiple and Diverse Interests of Policy Advisory Committee Members  
Working Paper 2015

Mary Alice Haddad  
mahaddad@wesleyan.edu  
Wesleyan University

Abstract:

This short working paper examines six influential environmental policy advisory committees from around the world to test whether members are either: 1) “stakeholders” taking part in a “multi-stakeholder” process through which each actor represents a clear set of hierarchical interests or 2) “multi-interest decision-makers” who are likely to be representing multiple interests simultaneously. The findings suggest that individual policy-makers are more likely to hold multiple rather than single interests in mind when crafting policy. Indeed, it is likely that the diversity of interests and perspectives held by a single person may more important than their institutional role in deciding who is invited to participate in the advisory committee in the first place.

Policy advisory committees included in the study (membership in 2012):

- America’s Climate Choices (National Research Council, USA—22 members),
- CONAMA (National Council of the Environment, Brazil—15 members)
- Advisory Council for the Ministry of Natural Resources and Ecology of the Russian Federation (30 members)
- The EU Advisory Group on Energy and Climate Change (11 members)
- UN Secretary-General’s Advisory Group on Energy and Climate Change (20 members)
- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).
Plausibility Probe: Environmental Policy Advisory Committees

This section offers a brief plausibility probe to investigate whether the network-based model of policymaking is applicable to policymaking outside of the East Asian context that was used to develop the model. For this investigation I coded the biographical background of members of six influential environmental advisory committees. I had three criteria in selecting the committees. 1) They had to be influential—governments were known to rely on the recommendations emerging from the committees. 2) The membership had to be publically available so that I could research the biographies of the members, and others could verify my findings. 3) They came from different parts of the world. The selection task proved to be more difficult than I had initially anticipated because very few committees met the second requirement of publically available membership rosters.

In the end I selected six committees. Three were advisory committees formed at the national level to offer advice about environmental policy to their respective national governments. Three were international bodies formed cross-nationally to offer advice to multiple governments. The 2012 membership lists are available online, and the biographic information about the individuals was collected using online sources. Commonly, the source of the biographical information was a curriculum vita made available online by the individual committee member or a biographical sketch made public by one or more organizations with whom the committee member was affiliated. I coded the network connections of each member using their biographical information. The connections were divided into four sectors: government, corporate, nonprofit, and academic. All connections to organizations or other committees were recorded within the relevant sector. In order not to inflate the results, the connection to the committee of interest was not counted. I also recorded the birth date (when possible) and gender of the members in case those factors turned out to be relevant. Thus, with all of the members’ connections recorded, I was able to measure both the total number of connections as well as how frequently members had connections in multiple sectors.¹

The three national policy advisory committees were: America’s Climate Choices (National Research Council, USA—22 members), CONAMA (National Council of the Environment, Brazil—15 members), and the Advisory Council for the Ministry of Natural Resources and Ecology of the Russian Federation (30 members). The three international policy advisory committees were: the EU Advisory Group on Energy and Climate Change (11 members), the UN Secretary-General’s Advisory Group on Energy and Climate Change (20 members), and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). For all of the groups except the IPCC biographical information for all members of the advisory group were coded. For the IPCC ten percent (42 people) were randomly selected from the total membership. The total dataset contains information for 140 individuals.

¹ The dataset will available on my website shortly. I can make it available to World Politics if desired.
Pluralist-based models assume that members of these advisory committees are invited to be part of the process in order to represent a particular interest or institution or offer technical expertise. This assumption is common whether the scholarship is investigating advocates’ efforts to influence the policy agenda;\(^2\) alternative specification,\(^3\) policy entrepreneurship,\(^4\) or implementation and compliance.\(^5\)

If this assumption is true and committee members are selected for their institutional role or their ability to represent a single “stake” or interest, then an ideal member would be someone who has a single institutional affiliation. Corporate actors would clearly represent the interests of business, and advocacy actors would represent nonprofit organizations. Academic actors are brought on for their technical expertise, so they also should have limited connections that lie primarily in the academic realm. Even relaxing the ideal assumptions and allowing committee members to have multiple connections, those connections should be primarily located within a single sector. For example, a businessman might have multiple corporate connections, but he should not be involved in the NGO sector because that might lead to a conflict of interest and would make it more difficult for him to represent the interests of business.

Thus, there should not be many members who have network connections across sectors even if they have multiple connections within a single sector. Pluralist-based models would also expect committee members to have relatively few connections to government, since they would serving the role of an “outside expert” to consult on particular policy questions not because they know people in government or because of prior experience with other policy advisory committees.

In contrast, the network-based model would expect policy advisory committee members to be invited to join the committee precisely because of their diverse connections to multiple sectors. This model would expect advisory committee members to have numerous connections and for those connections to cross sectors. It would expect to find businessmen who serve on the boards of NGOs, academics who consult with business, NGO professionals who are involved in industry, etc. All members would be expected to have numerous and diverse connections to government, since it would be through connections formed on other advisory committees that they would have been identified as a valuable contributor to the policymaking process in the first place.

Preliminary evidence strongly supports the network-based model of policymaking. The vast majority of members of the policy advisory committees included in the study had numerous connections to other organizations. Of the 140 people in the dataset, only 13 people (9 percent) had a single connection to only one organization outside the advisory committee. The average number of connections was 8, and more than a third (34%) had connections to ten or more different organizations/groups.

Perhaps even more compelling than the total number of connections was the frequency of cross-sectoral relations. Nearly 90 percent of members had links to more than one sector, with 61 percent having connections that spanned across three or more

\(^2\) (Baumgartner, 1993; Burstein, 1991; Miller, 2002)
\(^3\) (Eisner, 2006)
\(^4\) (Berry & Arons, 2003; Bosso, 2005; Bryce, 2005; Fischer, 2000; John, 1994; Mertha, 2008; Pralle, 2010; Teets, 2012)
\(^5\) (Gunningham, Kagan, & Thornton, 2003)
sectors. The propensity for multi-sector connections did vary by advisory group. In four of the six advisory groups sixty percent or more of the members had connections to three or more sectors. Only two advisory groups had members where fewer than half of the membership had connections to three or more sectors, although the proportions were still higher than would be expected by the pluralist-based models (27 percent of CONAMA (Brazil) members and 37 percent of members of the Advisory Council for the Ministry of Natural Resources and Ecology of the Russian Federation had connections that spanned three or more groups).  

When examining member connections to government, preliminary evidence also supports the assumptions of the network-based model of policymaking: most advisory committee members were regular advisors of governments. It does not appear that the individuals invited to be part of the advisory process are selected because they represent an important stakeholder for a particular policy issue or that they are actually “outside experts”; only 16 percent of committee members had no prior connection to government. In contrast, the evidence suggests that people serving on the committees are invited because they are known to be useful advisors due to their experience on other panels and their connections to those recommending committee members. Fully two thirds of the members had two or more connections to government in addition to the current advisory group, and more than one third had five or more connections.

---

Figure 3: Percent of Members Connecting to 3+ Sectors

When examining member connections to government, preliminary evidence also supports the assumptions of the network-based model of policymaking: most advisory committee members were regular advisors of governments. It does not appear that the individuals invited to be part of the advisory process are selected because they represent an important stakeholder for a particular policy issue or that they are actually “outside experts”; only 16 percent of committee members had no prior connection to government. In contrast, the evidence suggests that people serving on the committees are invited because they are known to be useful advisors due to their experience on other panels and their connections to those recommending committee members. Fully two thirds of the members had two or more connections to government in addition to the current advisory group, and more than one third had five or more connections.

---

Please note that biographical information for members on these two committees was more difficult to acquire than for members of the other committees because there was less information available online about the individuals. Therefore, these figures likely underrepresent the actual frequency of cross-sectoral connections in these committees.
This plausibility probe cannot be considered to be a conclusive test of the model since it included just a few committees and was based only on publically available biographies of committee members rather than an in depth understanding of the mechanics of individual policy advisory groups along the lines of Frank Schwartz’s study of policy advisory committees in Japan,7 Maria Guatalupe Moog Rodrigues’s study of advocacy networks in Brazil,8 or the extensive work on US Congressional committees.9 However, it does offer preliminary evidence suggesting that the core assumptions of the network-based model of policy making are plausible outside of East Asia and worthy of further investigation.

A next step will be to test whether the model is also accurate in predicting outcomes. There are three outcomes that the model should be able to help predict: rigidity of policy, ease of implementation, and overall effectiveness. The network-based model predicts that policies developed by policymakers and advisors who have multiple connections to diverse networks will be flexible, allowing for adjustments to the policy to be made relatively easily using informal processes after the initial policy has been established. In contrast, it would expect that policies developed by actors representing particular stakeholders would be rigid and resistant to modification after the policy goes into force. Similarly, the network-based model expects that policies developed by actors who have multiple connections to diverse networks of stakeholders will do a better job at incorporating the concerns of clients and implementing authorities into their policies in the first place. Their policies should experience more efficient implementations than policies developed by actors lacking diverse network connections.

Finally, the network-based model posits that policy advisory committees whose members have numerous, diverse, multi-sector connections will make better policy than committees are configured differently. When members can draw on diverse experiences

---

7 (Schwartz, 1998)  
8 (Rodrigues, 2003)  
9 (Adler & Lapinski, 1997; Frisch & Kelly, 2004; Stewart, 2012)
and are connected to multiple networks simultaneously, they should be less likely to support policies that are harmful to anyone in their networks and more likely to be creative in their construction of positive solutions. To borrow language from economics, these kinds of committees should be more likely to generate Pareto improving policies since they are less likely to cause harm and more likely to do good than other types of committees.

**Conclusion: Implications of the Network-based Model of Policymaking**

The network-based model of policymaking has several implications for the way that policy scholars examine policy actors, institutions, and the policymaking process as well as generating expectations about outcomes. The network-based model challenges researchers to examine a wider diversity of actors who may be involved in influencing policy. Rather than focusing only on the actors whose institutional affiliations would identify them as active “stakeholders,” scholars should include all actors in a network matrix that are seeking to influence the policy process, including academics, journalists, artists, etc. No actor should be assumed to be serving purely a technical role or a role that is entirely in service to another; all actors should be assumed to be political actors in their own right.

Furthermore, this study suggests that we should reconceptualize the role of policy actors. Rather than trying to identify an actor’s most salient interests and trying to score a competition among divergent interests, we should be examining the multitude of interests and perspectives that any given actor brings to the table and how those interests are combined to create policy. This perspective will draw scholars’ attention to marginal interests that may have low-level salience for multiple actors across different networks. This approach may help explain the unexpected policy outcomes that emerge when policies are crafted to support minor interests that no actor was willing to fight for but that many actors were willing to support.

The network-based model also conceptualizes a new role for institutions in the policymaking process. It rejects the common analogy of competitive sports. Instead, it adopts computer networks or social networks as its base analogy. Institutions do function to provide “rules of the game,” guiding participants toward behavior that will facilitate the growth rather than the death of the network (“friend” is good, “hacking” is bad). Some of these rules are formal (no child porn), and some of them are informal (don’t spam your friends). Some of the actors are actively trying to expand their influence (e.g., raise their Muckety or Klout scores), and there are big players and small players trying to change the rules of the game (e.g., rewriting privacy laws). However, most actors in the system are not actively engaged in trying to change, break, or maintain rules, rather they are fairly content to operate within the existing system, although they may resist when changes are enacted (or suggested).10 Furthermore, new technology can open up brand

---

new ways for actors to interact with each other and the policymaking process itself (e.g.,
the smartphone revolution).

Most importantly, there are no fixed “teams” and no single “referee.” Individuals
and groups are connected to each other in complex ways. Actors might be working
together on one policy issue but working against each other on another. There are
numerous ways that actors can engage with each other outside the channels provided by
the institution. In this conceptualization, the primary function of institutions is to create
opportunities for actors to connect with one another, to encourage the creation of multiple
nodes, and to facilitate innovation—not constrain behavior. In fact, even if the
institutions do constrain behavior, it is common for actors to find workarounds to those
constraints.\(^{11}\) Additionally, there is no single “referee” who is ultimately responsible for
policing. All actors involved in the network are responsible for employing enforcement
mechanisms, with informal, social, and market methods of enforcement being utilized far
more frequently than formal legal sanctions.\(^ {12}\)

To reiterate, this conceptualization does not deny that institutions create
constraints or that actors compete and have conflicting interests. What this network-
based conceptualization accomplishes is that it moves us away from models that assume
that actors are necessarily in competition with one another by assigning them to particular
teams and assuming that the competitors can be clearly distinguished from teammates or
referees. Instead, the model allows for more dynamic and complex interactions among a
wide variety of actors seeking to influence policy.

Thus far policy scholars have given considerable attention to policy actors, the
institutions where they reside, and the interests they represent. More attention should
now be paid to the networks that these actors form with one another. Scholarship
utilizing the Advocacy Coalition Framework has begun to do this, but more research is
needed concerning cross-subsystem and cross-sector connections, and teasing out the
nature and function of these policy-relevant networks. How do they form? How are they
maintained? Which kinds of networks are most influential? How do networks work to
strengthen/undermine one another in a policy dialog? Do they strengthen or undermine
the policy itself and its implementation? Do decision makers prioritize one type of
network over another? How do policy actors activate their networks for information
gathering? How do policy makers identify the nodes of a network and invite those
people to take part in decisionmaking? How do advocates work to create new networks
that might increase their influence in policymaking?

Placing networks at the center of policy analysis offers a new perspective on the
policymaking process. Rather than a competition between actors on opposing teams
fighting for their interests, policymaking is conceptualized as a negotiation among actors
all of whom have multiple interests that they are promoting. This new conceptualization
allows for competition and conflict as well as a wide range of other forms of interactions
in which different actors work together to craft policies that benefit diverse
constituencies.

\(^{11}\) Chinese avoidance of censorship regulations are one good example (Lagerkvist,
\(^{12}\) (Eisner, 2006; John, 1994; Kraft, Stephan, & Abel, 2011; Prakash & Gugerty, 2010)
Another important implication of this model is that democracy matters less for the policymaking process than would be expected by pluralist models. Relevant actors might include political parties, but they also might not. It is assumed that relevant exchanges among actors are likely to occur in locations and manners that are hidden from public view. It allows for different actors to have different levels of power in the system. It does not require that actors be clearly defined as public, private, or nonprofit sector—it allows for individual actors to hold multiple identities that may cross sectoral or ideological lines. It is likely that policymaking in democratic societies will consist of a broader array of actors who are engaged in larger networks that are more horizontally organized, since democratic societies tend to have larger and more independent civil societies.\textsuperscript{13} However, the model should still work in societies where the networks are fewer, smaller, and more asymmetric. Therefore, although the model still will not apply to societies without sufficient state and societal capacity to implement policies, it should have broader applicability than pluralist-based models that generally assume democratic or democratic-like relationships among actors.

Examining a different dimension of politics, a network-based approach to policy making has the potential to improve our understanding of gender politics. All of the committees in this study had very few women members (CONAMA had the most with 27 percent, the EU Advisory group had the fewest with 9 percent).\textsuperscript{14} Previous approaches to policy making erroneously suggest that women need to gain greater expertise or occupy leadership positions in institutions to gain influence (very few men or women in the sample had CEO-type leadership positions). However, as numerous popular culture recommendations as well as more scholarly research attest, it is not primarily the level of expertise or access to leadership roles that are hindering women’s influence.\textsuperscript{15} Access to influential positions depends not just on who you know but how much time you can devote to serving on multiple committees, boards of directors, and other “extra” (usually unpaid) activities which require commitments beyond an individual’s preexisting professional and family obligations.

As I was coding the biographies of the committee members, I was humbled by the extraordinary level of service that these people are devoting to making the environment I live in a better place. In most cases, I could not imagine how they managed to participate in so many committees, boards, and associations and still hold down a regular job, let alone buy groceries or drop children off at school. More scholarly attention to the role of networks in policymaking may contribute to a better understanding of the abysmally low participation of women in these influential positions and help generate solutions that are more helpful than calls to “lean in ladies!”

\textsuperscript{13} (Anheier, Glasius, & Kaldor, 2001; Berman, 1997; Bermeo & Nord, 2000; Bernhard & Karakoç, 2007; Blaney & Pasha, 1993; Diamond, 1994; Frolic, 1997; Iokibe, 1999; Norton, 1995; Salamon, Anheier, List, Toepfer, & Skolowski, 1999; Teets, 2014; Wiktorowicz, 2000)

\textsuperscript{14} Women made up 10 percent of the UN Advisory group, 13 percent of Russia’s RAN Advisory Council, 21 percent of the IPCC, and 23 percent of America’s Climate Choices.

\textsuperscript{15} (Babcock & Laschever, 2003; Frankel, 2004; Kantor, 2013; Sandberg, 2013),
Finally, for policymakers and advocates, the network-based model suggests a way to craft committees that will be more effective in generating good policy. Rather than seeking representatives from a small set of stakeholder groups who have an interest in the outcome of the policy, those constructing advisory committees should invite individuals with broad experience working with a wide variety of different stakeholders. The ability to understand and work productively with diverse groups should be prioritized over the capacity to represent a particular interest.

In sum, the network-based model of policymaking offers scholars a new method for studying policymaking around the world. It incorporates more actors into its model and allows for a new conceptualization of the role of institutions in constraining and enabling those actors to craft policies for their societies. A network-based model is more descriptively accurate and more analytically applicable to policymaking processes found around the world than current models. It offers a breakthrough in our attempts to understand and analyze policymaking in an increasingly complex world.
References


