The concept of a sectoral policy style

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Introduction

Policy styles are the ways in which governments make and implement policy (Richardson 1982). Many studies analyse the extent to which national governments across the world have different policy styles that reflect their formal political institutions (Howlett and Tosun 2019). However, styles can also vary markedly within political systems. Indeed, a focus on the role of policymaking in different sectors helps us think about the non-uniform extent to which styles vary across systems.

A focus on sectors begins by raising the possibility that national styles may be less radically different than they appear because all policymakers face the same basic problem: the need to address their own bounded rationality within a complex policymaking environment over which they have limited understanding and even less control (Cairney et al. 2019a). As such, the same basic pressures may help produce some convergence in styles when governments in many political systems try to make policymaking more manageable by breaking it down into sectors and subsectors. To do so, elected policymakers must assign high levels of responsibility to unelected bureaucrats who, in turn, form relationships with participants such as interest groups who trade information and advice for access and influence. The result may be a collection of policy styles in sectors that seem distant from the styles we associate with policymaking at the macropolitical level. Or, at least, we may find that (a) variations in policy styles across sector and subsector can be as important as (b) variation by formal political system.

This chapter explores this focus on sectoral styles in five main ways. First, to show how a focus on sectoral styles relates initially to classic work on policy communities in the UK and Western Europe, but also has wider international implications. Second, to establish how to study sectoral policy styles systematically and identify the extent to which there are general patterns of sectoral policymaking across the world. It combines key concepts to produce a framework for comparison. A focus on bounded rationality helps us identify the logic of policy sectors and subsectors: elected policymakers have to ignore almost all decisions taken in their name, and they delegate the processing of policy to bureaucrats and specialists in many sectors spread across government. A focus on the constituent parts of policymaking environments then helps us compare policy styles across sectors. Policy processes contain a large number of policymakers...
and influencers spread across many levels and types of government, often described as multiple venues or ‘centres’ (Cairney et al. 2019a). Each venue has its own institutions, networks, ideas, and ways to respond to distinctive socioeconomic factors and events. Therefore, a key role for policy studies is to understand how these dynamics vary across policy sectors.

Third, to establish what it means to identify sectoral policy styles. How do we define a discrete field of study such as a sector or a subsector within a political system? For example, a focus on national styles relates to physical borders between countries that appear to be well defined until we acknowledge the ways in which people socially construct political boundaries. Further, a focus on multi-level governance shows us that policy styles are actually a collection of styles of many levels of government responsible for different policy instruments. A sectoral focus expands this analytical problem by highlighting the competition to frame each sector and assign primary responsibility whenever policymaking is spread across levels of government.

Fourth, to establish how policy theories can help us understand sectoral dynamics. Can we apply the same theories to different sectors? Many policy theories served initially to analyse processes in one country, and a common question is: do these theories travel well across many different countries? The same question applies to cross-sectoral travel, since many theories also began as case studies of specific sectors. Therefore, it is just as important to establish their international and cross-sectoral application.

Finally, to explore the extent to which (a) the logic of sectoral policy styles undermines (b) the pursuit of intersectoral policymaking. Some of the most important policy problems – such as public health, climate change, and inequalities – require cooperation across multiple sectors. However, their lack of coherence demonstrates a truism in policy studies: these functional requirements provide a poor guide to actual practices.

The classic story of sectoral policy styles

Classic studies of ‘policy communities’ suggest that a focus on sectoral policy styles provides one way to manage expectations about major differences in national styles. Part of the reason that many countries do not live up to their national reputations is that they are subject to the same basic logic of sectoral policymaking.

Initially, Richardson and Jordan (1979) analysed the importance of ‘policy communities’ to a very specific concern in the UK: the worry in the 1970s that alternating parties of government were damaging UK politics. At the time, a common story was that a new government entered office every four years, with power alternating between Labour and Conservative and with a tendency to reinforce an adversarial and majoritarian tradition. Allegedly, the result would be a constant turnover, in which one party would impose a reversal of the policy of the other.

In that context, Richardson and Jordan (1979) found that the UK did not live up to its reputation: most policies were not reversed in this way, and its ‘majoritarian’ top-down image was misleading. Rather, regardless of the party of government, most policy was processed out of the public spotlight and at a relatively low level of government, by ‘policy communities’ of civil servants and interest groups who maintained relatively long-term and stable relationships built on a common understanding of specialist policy problems. Although published four decades ago, this debate and argument has a timeless quality, since we can still find in current debates (such as on Brexit) the same kinds of contrast between the well-known image of centralist, majoritarian, top-down, and impositional Westminster politics and more accurate (but less well-known) academic studies of ‘decentred’ policymaking (Cairney 2020a, Box 8.2, 2020b).
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This academic approach has also extended to many more countries and types of study. In making their initial argument, Richardson and Jordan (1979) drew heavily on US studies of the ‘community power debate’, interest group and government relations, and policy ‘subsystems’ to suggest they were describing the UK brand of an international product. Then, Richardson’s (1982) edited comparison of policy styles found that the UK shared many features of Western European ‘consensus’ democracies (Jordan and Richardson 1982), while early work in Western Europe suggested that policy communities were pervasive and responsible for processing the bulk of public policy out of the spotlight. Kriesi et al.’s (2006, p. 345) study of key sectors in seven Western European countries reinforces the argument that the British policy style does not live up to its majoritarian image (compare with Richardson 2018), and that many other European systems are more top-down than their formal institutions would suggest. The main theme of these, and many other, accounts is that a focus on formal institutions and national character traits is incomplete without taking into account the role of policy subsystems (summarised by Jordan and Cairney 2013; Cairney 2019; see also Larsen et al. 2006; Atkinson and Coleman 1989; Bovens et al. 2001; John 1998, pp. 42–44; Freeman 1985; Barzelay and Gallego 2010, p. 298). While national styles may be important, their variation is tempered markedly by the same logic of sectoral policymaking.

Clearly, the national context still matters to policymaking within sectors, so we would still expect policy styles to vary at this level of analysis. However, without continuous empirical study of policymaking in each sector, it is difficult to tell if the effect will be high or low. Indeed, if we begin by comparing policy styles in specific sectors (or subsectors), rather than focusing primarily on national politics, we find that the impact of the formal institutions of each political system is often remarkably subtle (Cairney et al. 2018, p. 137). Further, there is often good reason to expect that (a) variations in policy styles across sector and subsector can be as important as (b) variation by formal political system (Cairney 2019).

The general logic of sectoral policy styles

At first, this discussion of policy communities may seem specific to historic and Europe-centred studies of policymaking. However, this section shows how to relate specific experiences to a more general and abstract logic with a more universal feel. The policy communities story, emphasising the pervasiveness of policymaking in sectors, is one variant of a more general focus on the limits to policymaking. Policymakers must respond to two general limits:

1  Bounded rationality (Simon 1957, 1976), which requires them to ignore most policy-relevant information in the absence of comprehensive cognition. Policymakers combine cognition and emotion to pay attention to some issues and delegate responsibility for the rest (Cairney and Kwiatkowski 2017).

2  Policymaking complexity, which requires them to share policymaking responsibility in the absence of complete centralisation. Policymakers operate within a complex policymaking environment over which they have limited knowledge and even less control. Their policymaking environment consists of many actors spread across many policymaking venues, each with their own institutions, networks, ways of seeing the world, and ways of responding to socioeconomic factors and events.

A focus on sectoral styles allows us to assess the extent to which these general dynamics change in relation to the nature of the sector as much as the nature of the political system. For example,
consider the concepts that we use to sum up the idea of a complex policymaking environment and the ways in which they help us emphasise sectoral dynamics:

1. **Actors.** Policymaking organisations tend to specialise along sectoral (such as health, education, crime) and subsectoral (primary, secondary, and tertiary health and education) lines.

2. **Institutions.** Those organisations often produce formal and informal rules to reflect the nature of the policy problem or the actors most involved (Ostrom 2007).

3. **Networks.** Policy influencers also tend to specialise, and they form relationships with specialist policymakers. Indeed, some groups can enjoy privileged access in some sectors but feel excluded in others.

4. **Ideas.** This specialisation reflects and reinforces the maintenance of different ways of thinking about policymaking. For example, health and public health departments often use the language of ‘evidence-based’ policymaking in comparison to evidence-based medicine, while treasury and economic sectors are more likely to refer to concepts such as value for money (Cairney 2016).

5. **Socioeconomic factors.** Social, economic, technological, and demographic drivers of policy often have distinctive dimensions in different sectors. Some are driven by social attitudes and behaviour, such as healthy and unhealthy behaviour. Some are more or less driven by technological changes, such as the rise of the motor car in transport or pharmacology in mental health. Some are driven more by natural and environmental factors, such as climate change or natural disasters.

Cairney (2019, 2020a) summarises the ways in which we can relate these inevitable limits to a general logic of sectoral policymaking:

- The size and scope of the state is so large that it is always in danger of becoming unmanageable. The same can be said of the crowded environment in which huge numbers of actors seek policy influence. Consequently, to all intents and purposes, policymakers manage complexity by breaking the state’s component parts into policy sectors and subsectors, with power spread across many parts of government.

- Elected policymakers can only pay attention to a tiny proportion of issues for which they are responsible. So, they pay attention to a small number and ignore the rest. In effect, they delegate policymaking responsibility to other actors such as bureaucrats, often at low levels of government.

- At this level of government and specialisation, bureaucrats rely on specialist organisations for information and advice. Those organisations trade that information/advice and other resources for access to, and influence within, the government (other resources may relate to whom groups represent – such as a large, paying membership, an important profession, or a high-status donor or corporation).

- Most public policy is conducted primarily through small and specialist policy communities that process issues at a level of government not particularly visible to the public and with minimal senior policymaker involvement.

- This description of policy communities suggests that senior elected politicians are less important than people think, their impact on policy is questionable, and elections and changes of national government may not provide the changes in policy that many expect.

Clearly, not all variants of the policy communities’ story are applicable to all political systems or even relevant to systems that do not maintain regular free-and-fair elections. Still, key aspects
have a ‘universal’ feel: at a high level of abstraction, many insights can apply to all political systems at all times, and we can use this initial high-level viewpoint to identify and debate the importance of variations across systems and time. Think of this analytical approach as two sides of the same coin. On one side are abstract universal concepts such as bounded rationality and policymaking complexity, which contribute to sectoral policymaking. On the other side are the specific ways in which they relate to each political system and how policymakers respond to these limits (Cairney et al. 2019a).

**Identifying sectors and sectoral boundaries**

How do we define a discrete field of study such as a national political system or a sector within that system? A focus on national styles is often based on physical borders between countries that appear to be well defined until we acknowledge the ways in which people socially construct political and organisational boundaries (O’Flynn 2014, 2016). A sectoral focus magnifies this analytical problem three-fold.

First, it prompts us to focus on how people frame sectors and the issues that could become the responsibility of different sectors. Studies of agenda setting show that there is no natural way to define a policy issue as a policy problem and therefore no way to identify a natural jurisdiction in a single type of government or sector (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, pp. 32–33). Indeed, the example of tobacco policy shows that it can remain the responsibility of one sector for decades, only to be taken over by another (Cairney et al. 2012). The explanation comes largely from the power to define tobacco as a policy problem: from an economic problem to be solved with subsidy and trade agreements to a global pandemic or urgent public health problem to be solved by measures such as regulation and taxation. This framing matters in defining which sector is most relevant and which actors take primary responsibility to set the parameters of the policy agenda, gather and prioritise some evidence over others, maintain networks that include some participants and exclude others (tobacco companies are formally excluded at the WHO level and by any signatory to the Framework Convention for Tobacco Control), and interpret the implications of changes to social and economic conditions (Mamudu et al. 2015). Dudley and Richardson (1996) describe this dynamic in relation to ‘adversarial policy communities’: policy communities form in different sectors (or in different parts of the same sector), and policy change can be dramatic when one community exploits external events and unusually high policymaker attention outside of the dominant policy community to suddenly regain the upper hand.

Second, a focus on multi-level governance (MLG) shows us that policy styles are actually a collection of styles of many levels of government responsible for different policy instruments. The intersection between levels and sectors and government raises the possibility of different governments assigning the problem to different sectors, who then cooperate or compete to produce a collection of policy instruments that contribute to ‘policy’. For example, Cairney et al. (2019b) describe the MLG of energy policy in relation to issues such as climate change, poverty, competition, and business. In such fields, the distribution of responsibilities is difficult to track, and the overall effect of the ‘policy mix’ is difficult to predict (Spyridaki and Flamos 2014, p. 1091).

Third, policy communities are usually better described as operating at a subsectoral level, since they relate to specific issues such as the use of hormones in animal farming (Dunlop 2017) rather than (say) agricultural or rural policy as a whole (Jordan and Halpin 2006). This insight contributed to unresolved debates about the relationship between sectoral and subsectoral politics. Richardson and Jordan (1979) did not specify the exact size and nature of policy
communities, and Jordan (2005, p. 318) later described them in relation to their ‘blurred edges’ and the analogy of a village bonfire in which one could only predict to some extent who would be there. In comparison, Marsh and Rhodes’ (1992) studies have a sectoral-level emphasis. Jordan et al. (1994, p. 524) reject a primary focus on policy communities at the sectoral level, arguing that the pervasiveness of internally fragmented bureaucracies necessitates viewing communities at the subsectoral level, while Cavanagh et al. (1995) argue that the overall policy agenda or context for subsectoral networks is likely to be constrained by decisions which are taken at the sectoral level. In other words, subsectoral networks follow the rules of the game set out by sectoral networks. Maloney (1996) likens the relationship between activity in subsectors and sectors as akin to Putnam’s (1988) two-level game, in which key players within sectoral-level networks may follow strategies representing the views of the subsector that they represent: “responding to, and to a degree articulating, the interests of their ‘home’ constituencies of groups. Each player, therefore, has particular obligations (often statutory) and objectives, and can mobilise the support of its own network of groups and organisations” (Maloney 1996, p. 964).

The overall result is a widespread agreement that policy styles are likely to vary across sectors (and subsectors) but reduced agreement on how to conceptualise those dynamics or assign boundaries between them. The study of policy communities and networks comes with the heavy baggage of terminological confusion, and that confusion relates partly to semantics and partly to differences in empirical and theoretical focus (see Cairney 2020a, p. 152 on key terms).

Policy theories and sectoral styles

Many policy theories served initially to analyse processes in one country, and a common question is: do these theories travel well across many different countries (Cairney 2020a, pp. 241–245)? The same question applies to cross-sectoral travel, since many theories also began as case studies of specific sectors.

It is common to expect policy theories to begin in specific regions of the world. Some of the highest profile – generally EU or US origin – theories tell a similar story of sectoral policymaking in different ways. For example, studies of ‘multi-level governance’ (MLG) connect strongly to the same focus on bounded rationality, in which

No single actor has all knowledge and information required to solve complex, dynamic and diversified problems, no actor has sufficient overview to make the application of needed instruments effective, no single actor has sufficient action potential to dominate unilaterally in a particular governing model.

(Kooiman 1993, p. 4)

Further, studies of MLG and related approaches – on polycentric governance and complexity theory – combine this focus on bounded rationality and policymaking complexity to highlight ‘multi-centric policymaking’ and the absence of single central control in political systems (Cairney et al. 2019a). These studies demonstrate that the division of policymaking responsibilities across many levels and type of government is often a normative political choice but always a practical necessity (2019a, pp. 8–9). As a result, although these arrangements vary by political system, there is the same logic to process policy in multiple, often specialist, venues across political systems.

Similarly, US-origin theories situate analysis within subsystems or networks organised along sectoral lines. For the advocacy coalition framework (ACF), the aim is to understand a complex policy process, containing many actors and levels of government, in which coalitions of
like-minded people form to turn their beliefs into policy and generally operate within subsystems devoted to specific policy sectors (Sabatier and Weible 2007, pp. 192–196, Jenkins-Smith et al. 2018). For punctuated equilibrium theory (PET, and early work in particular), the aim is to explain a tendency for policy change in political systems to be mostly minor but sometimes profound. A key explanation is a tendency for attention to be disproportionate to policy problems. In other words, the macropolitical agenda can only process a small number of issues, leaving the rest to be processed in subsystems characterised by limited external attention and for involvement to relate to expertise and interests that relate to specific sectors (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; compare with Baumgartner et al. 2018).

However, the general applicability of these theories and approaches remains an open question. Most ‘mainstream’ policy theories began with a focus on the US before their widespread application to Europe and growing – but still limited – application across the globe, while interpretive approaches are more likely to warn against the assumption that we can generalise so readily across diverse cases (Durnová and Weible 2020).

This point is similarly applicable to general conclusions on sectoral policy dynamics and styles. The ACF began as a study of environmental and conservation policy, and the domain of ‘environment and energy’ remains by far the biggest object of ACF study (43% of 161 applications identified by Pierce et al. 2017, p. 22). Multiple streams analysis began as a US federal study of health and transportation, and health (28% of 311 applications) remains the most studied domain (Kingdon 1984; Jones et al. 2016). Social construction and policy design (SCPD) began as US studies of sectors such as social security, and ‘social welfare’ still accounts for 32% of 111 applications (Schneider and Ingram 1993; Pierce et al. 2014, p. 10). The main exception is PET, which focused initially on case studies (environmental issues, nuclear power, tobacco) in the US before the Comparative Agendas Project demonstrated similar patterns of policymaking in multiple countries and most policy sectors (Baumgartner et al. 2018).

The bleak prospects for intersectoral policymaking

The logic of policy communities and sectoral policy styles presents a huge obstacle to intersectoral policymaking. Some of the most important policy problems – such as public health, climate change, and inequalities – require cooperation across multiple sectors. However, this obvious necessity contributes more to the apparent incoherence of policymaking than progress towards a ‘joined up’ approach (Jordan and Halpin 2006; May et al. 2006; Cairney et al. 2020).

A key example is ‘health in all policies’ (HIAP), which describes a four-step normative argument:

1  We need to focus on the ‘social determinants’ of health to promote health equity (or reduce unfair health inequalities). Social determinants are defined by the WHO (2020) as “the unfair and avoidable differences in health status . . . shaped by the distribution of money, power and resources [and] the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age”.

2  Major policy measures – to redistribute income, improve public services, reduce discrimination, and improve social, economic, and physical environments – are not in the gift of the health sector.

3  An effective policymaking response requires collaboration across all sectors of government and with key stakeholders and citizens outside of government (Corburn et al. 2014).

4  Long-term success requires high levels of political support for HIAP action (de Leeuw and Peters 2014).
Advocates of HIAP try to identify the strategies that can support intersectoral action, such as a ‘win-win’ approach that demonstrates to non-health sectors that there can be a ‘shared vision across sectors’ (Guglielmin et al. 2018, p. 291) and ‘cross-cultural understanding and mutual respect’ (Kickbusch et al. 2014, pp. 187–192; Molnar et al. 2016, pp. 1, 8–12). However, most studies describe their lack of success. For example, intersectoral approaches can have unintended consequences, such as when the contributions of other sectors ‘corrupt’ a social determinants approach by focusing on more individualist approaches (Holt et al. 2017, pp. 881–822; Van Eyk et al. 2017, pp. 16–20). Or, more generally, there is vague political buy-in to intersectoral action, but it does not happen or does not contribute to its purpose (health equity).

To some extent, this problem relates to a tendency in HIAP studies to focus on ‘programme logic’ to predict the process and outcomes of intersectoral action, rather than on actual studies of joined-up government (Carey et al. 2014, p. 9). However, it also relates to the necessarily political nature of such initiatives, in which there is competition across sectors to define problems, choose solutions, and control the resources to deliver outputs (de Leeuw and Clavier 2011). Consequently, multiple literatures (and reviews of the literature) are devoted to the lack of intersectoral action or joined-up government but without a clear sense that there is a solution to the logic of sectoral action.

Ironically, Tosun and Lang (2017) identify the same tendency towards a lack of integration in the study of sectoral integration! They show that the focus on ‘policy integration’ (to create interdependencies and use policy instruments to foster integration) is not specific to one scholarly agenda. Rather, each approach tends to have its own descriptions, partly because they relate to the agendas of practitioners in specific sectors. As a result, there is a lot of potential for cross-sectoral learning but an ironically low tendency to do so, partly because it is difficult to identify and translate the idiosyncratic concepts. Relevant terms include:

1 Government-centred approaches, including comprehensive planning (to connect many policies relevant to the same region); policy coherence (initially used by the OECD then the EU on ‘synergies between aid and non-aid’ policies and now on the Sustainable Development Goals); joined-up government (to overcome silos associated with new public management or subsystems and use many parts of government to focus on issues like social inclusion); and whole of government (many public sector agencies generating shared goals, or inter-agency collaboration).

2 Governance-centred concepts like horizontal governance (policy coordination in many agencies without the need for hierarchy); holistic governance (modifying governance structures to foster connections); policy integration (to foster the awareness of spillover effects when developing policy); policy mainstreaming (akin to integration); and boundary-spanning policy regime (when actors gravitate towards organisations and policies on a dedicated topic) (2017, pp. 556–561).

Conclusion

The study of policy communities provides an important way to understand sectoral policy styles. The logic of policy communities relates to bounded rationality and policymaking complexity. Policymakers do not have the ability to pay attention to, understand, or take control of all of their responsibilities. Rather, they pay attention to a few and delegate the rest, prompting most policy to be processed by bureaucrats at a relatively low level of government, who cooperate routinely with policy specialists such as interest groups. This cooperation is sectoral and subsectoral and reflects a tendency for policy actors to specialise and pay disproportionate
attention to a small number of issues. Although initially a UK and Western European story, this approach highlights more universal drivers towards sectoral policymaking. Bounded rationality is inevitable, and policymakers must ignore and delegate responsibility for most issues. Policy-making complexity contributes to a tendency for multi-centric policymaking, in which many authoritative venues have their own agendas, rules, networks, and ways to interpret and respond to socioeconomic factors and events.

While sectors and subsectors are pervasive, they are also difficult to define, identify, and study systematically. There is no natural jurisdiction for policy issues, and a competition to frame issues in different ways can prompt a shift of responsibility to another sector. Multi-level governance can contribute to the processing of the same issue in different sectors at different levels of government. Sectoral labels such as ‘health’ or ‘environment’ may be convenient to aid study but hide a tendency for political systems to produce a plethora of more specialist arrangements. Further, the extent to which mainstream policy theories can explain all activity in all sectors remains an open question.

Nevertheless, the logic of sectoral policy styles is strong, and it undermines the necessary pursuit of intersectoral policymaking. The need for governments to tackle policy problems in a joined-up way does not guarantee its ability to do so. Further, the ability of academics to make sense of these dynamics is also limited, since they try to do so in very different ways and often without regard to the insights of each other. Just as it is commonplace for scholars to focus on specific countries or regions, policy sectors have their own scholars, particularly in fields such as health and public health, education, social and criminal justice, and foreign affairs and international relations. Indeed, this type of specialisation, in which there are well-established disciplines that focus primarily on policy studies in discrete sectors, can be more of a challenge because it takes place outside of political science. A variety of disciplinary approaches produces discipline-specific assumptions and questions that are difficult to transpose across sectors. If so, the material problem of sectoral dynamics runs parallel to an intellectual problem in which we recognise the need to specialise and to compare and integrate lessons systematically. Our current inability to do so suggests that the systematic study of sectoral policy styles demands far greater attention.

References


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