

## My contribution to Making Sense of (and Through) Policy Theory

Paul Cairney, University of Stirling, UK [p.a.cairney@stir.ac.uk](mailto:p.a.cairney@stir.ac.uk)

In my first undergraduate year (1990), Jeremy Richardson presented an image of politics (generally written in partnership with [Grant Jordan](#)) – [that I still use frequently to this day](#):

- 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 sub-sectors, 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 who 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 government may not provide the changes in policy that many expect.
- Initially, [Jordan and Richardson](#) were addressing the worry in the 1970s that alternating parties of government were damaging UK politics. We can still find the same kinds of contrast between the popular image of centralist, majoritarian Westminster politics and [academic studies of policymaking](#).
- [Jordan and Richardson](#) also described the influence of US studies of interest groups and subsystems, to suggest they were describing the UK brand of an international product.

Since then, I have been interested in the extent to which key aspects of such arguments are 'universal' (abstract enough to apply to all systems/ times) or specific to systems and eras. Tanya Heikkila, Matt Wood, and I have just described [multi-centric policymaking](#), which:

1. can be abstract enough to apply universally, since so much of policy studies is based on exploring the implications of bounded rationality and complexity, but
2. academics make sense of these concepts in very different ways, partly to reflect their preferred approaches, and partly to describe the different ways in which policy actors deal with bounded rationality and complexity in specific contexts.

My main contribution to this discussion is a picture that looks like a turtle. I use it to describe policymaking to non-specialists and [reflect on this description](#) with other specialists.



It projects the sense that people combine (say) cognition and emotion to make choices, and they do so within a complex policymaking environment consisting of many actors spread across many venues, each with their own rules, networks, ways of seeing the world, and ways of responding to socio-economic factors and events. The centre of the picture does not describe a centre of government, and the lines between each factor do not imply causation.

For me, these concepts represent my attempt – while going solo in [Understanding Public Policy](#) and describing ‘[evidence based policymaking](#)’ or as co-author with [Tanya Heikkila](#) or [Chris Weible](#) - to synthesise insights from many policy theories, subject to [these kinds of limitations](#):

1. Different academics describe each concept in remarkably different ways.
2. Some differences seem irreconcilable. At least, [we should not take synthesis lightly](#).
3. The US or Global North provides the primary lens through which to view the world of policymaking. Applying that lens to Global South countries may be useful in one sense (to analyse policymaking systematically) but damaging in another (to treat some experiences as normal and others as meeting the norm or representing outliers).
4. White male professors seem the most likely to tell these stories of policymaking. One response, explored in the [2<sup>nd</sup> edition of UPP](#), is to describe the problem and commit to making continuous changes. Another is to encourage far more voices as part of a series of textbooks on policymaking. I will use part of my talk to encourage such submissions to the Palgrave series that I edit, while acknowledging that the opportunities to engage, and rewards for engagement, are not shared equally.