1 Policy Networks and Resource Dependency

1.1 Introduction

The aim of this book is to make a major theory of policymaking do more work, and in so doing obtain a better idea of where public policy is going than we have at present. This involves developing one of these theories into a detailed model of the causal processes leading up to policy change, using the resulting model to generate predictions about the future of public policy, and testing the plausibility of these predictions using evidence drawn from the past. The theory chosen for this task is policy network theory. This is not the only theory of political causation that could be used in this way, but it is a prominent theory that is well established in the political science literature and, as we shall see, one that is equal to this task.

The aim of this chapter is to introduce the particular version of policy network theory that will be used. It begins by surveying conceptions of policy networks discussed in the political science literature to make the point that many versions of this theory are based on defining policy networks in terms of resource interdependencies. It then goes on to set out a precise definition of a policy network based on this idea of resource interdependency. The final part of the chapter builds on this by defining policy network theory as the ensemble of the definition of the term ‘policy network’ and the propositions that necessarily follow from acceptance of the idea that policy change can be largely explained in terms of policy networks defined in this way.
1.2 Conceptions of policy networks in the literature

The term ‘policy network’ has been used in political science at least since the 1970s, although the phenomena to which it refers have of course been described in other terms before this. In its most basic sense it refers to the set of political actors inside and outside government who are involved in, or take an interest in, the making of public policy, and/or the relations between these actors. However political scientists have also used the term in more specific ways based on defining it more precisely, and a literature has grown up in which it is one of the most central concepts, if not the most central concept. This literature, as one might expect from academic discourse, is rather disparate, so that there are many different versions of what exactly policy networks are (Thatcher, 1998, p. 390). Some use the term to mean something different from what it means for others, and some use different terms to describe what others call a policy network. In other cases, variations in usage are largely attributable to the varying analytical focuses of analysts and the precise countries and sectors that are being observed.

One feature that many of these uses of the term share, however, is the idea that the relationships between network members are based on resource interdependencies: each actor wants something from one or more other actors and is prepared to exchange something of their own in order to get it. In her extensive survey of policy network literature, Tanja Börzel concludes that although the network concept varies considerably between and within different disciplines:

They all share a common understanding, a minimal or lowest common denominator definition of a policy network, as a set of relatively stable relationships which are of non-hierarchical and interdependent nature linking a variety of actors, who share common interests with regard to a policy and who exchange resources to pursue these shared interests acknowledging that cooperation is the best way to achieve common goals.

(Börzel, 1998, p. 254)

Beyond this, Börzel distinguishes between two different ‘schools’ of policy network analysis. The ‘interest intermediation school’ refers to analyses that interpret policy networks as a generic term for different forms of relationships between interest groups and the state, and share a view of policy networks as being based on power dependencies between governments and interest groups in which resources are exchanged. The