Can national policy blockages accelerate the development of polycentric governance? Evidence from climate change policy in the United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Many factors can conspire to limit the scope for policy development at the national level. In this paper, we consider whether blockages in national policy processes − resulting for example from austerity or small state political philosophies − might be overcome by the development of more polycentric governance arrangements. Drawing on evidence from three stakeholder workshops and fifteen interviews, we address this question by exploring the United Kingdom's recent retrenchment in the area of climate change policy, and the ways in which its policy community have responded. We identify two broad strategies based on polycentric principles: 'working with gatekeepers' to unlock political capital and 'collaborate to innovate' to develop policy outputs. We then empirically examine the advantages that these actions bring, analysing coordination across overlapping sites of authority, such as those associated with international regimes, devolved administrations and civic and private initiatives that operate in conjunction with, and sometimes independently of, the state. Despite constraining political and economic factors, which are by no means unique to the UK, we find that a polycentric climate policy network can create opportunities for overcoming central government blockages. However, we also argue that the ambiguous role of the state in empowering but also in constraining such a network will determine whether a polycentric approach to climate policy and governance is genuinely additional and innovative, or whether it is merely a temporary 'sticking plaster' for the retreat of the state and policy retrenchment during austere times.

1. Introduction

In theory, nation states can be attuned to accommodate the demands of long-term inter-woven social and material challenges such as anthropogenic climate change e.g. by building non-partisan coalitions, ensuring independent monitoring and fostering a reflexive policy process (Giddens, 2009; Grin et al., 2010; Latour, 2009; Voß et al., 2009). For example, Barry and Eckersley (2005) provide empirical evidence of effective state-based environmental stewardship such as strong collaboration beyond territorial boundaries, decision-making based on environmental objectives, and integrated environmental impact assessments. In the right circumstances, entrepreneurial individuals can work with(in) governments to promote innovative policies and help institutionalise state leadership (Kingdon, 1984; Lovell, 2009; Mazzucato, 2015). Accordingly, there have been high hopes for, and some empirical evidence of, such leadership in the area of climate change; especially because state governments have several rationales to act e.g. to protect vulnerable communities and infrastructure, promote intergenerational justice and drive economic competitiveness (Boasson and

Wettestad, 2014; Giddens, 2009; Lorenzoni and Benson, 2014; Jordan and Huitema, 2014).

However, policy progress can also be slow and inconsistent in democratic governments for many reasons, including the veto power of senior decision-makers and risk aversion of politicians, whose jobs depend on re-election. This is especially true when high levels of uncertainty and delayed or diffused benefits are involved, which is clearly the case with regards to climate change (Howlett, 2014; Rickards et al., 2014; Russel and Benson, 2014). Further exacerbating this inertia is the constant battle for political saliency at a time when many different issues are competing for a limited amount of public and political attention. Most theories of public policy treat this political agenda setting as a zero-sum game because of policymakers' bounded rationality and governments' limited capacity, and this often results in contradictory and insecure policy trajectories (Sabatier, 2007). For instance, longitudinal studies have shown that reactionary rollback due to a political swing and gradual retrenchment due to resource constraints are constant threats to policy progress (Patashnik, 2014; Pierson, 2004).

The recurring theme of de-centralisation is another factor effecting

states' governing capacities and the feasibility of certain policies (Treisman, 2007). It is especially relevant for environmental policy where locally sensitive, or 'bottom-up', and 'polycentric' forms of governance are often claimed to be most effective (Andersson and Ostrom, 2008; Ostrom, 2010). Here, scholars highlight the efficacy and cost-saving virtues of delivering environmental policy through civic, private or public partnership forms and across multiple levels and scales (Bäckstrand, 2010; Bulkeley and Newell, 2010; Bulkeley et al., 2012; Lemos and Agrawal, 2006; Newell et al., 2012). It is suggested that these additional opportunities for experimentation, learning, and trust building should be particularly appealing to governments when they face political and economic barriers to unilateral action (Cole, 2015), a claim that this article seeks to test.

At the international level, the polycentric approach (sometimes described as a 'fragmentation') is increasingly evident in political institutions and governance arrangements (Abbott, 2012; Zelli, 2011). For example, the European Union's (EU) principle of 'subsidiarity' − that 'rules out Union intervention when an issue can be dealt with effectively by Member States at central, regional or local level' (Chateau, 2016, 2) − can encourage self-governance and autonomy. It also characterises the 2015 UNFCCC Paris Agreement, which replaced earlier top-down targets with a bottom-up agreement based on 'nationally determined contributions'.

At the national level, the rise of non-state and hybrid forms of governance has involved community projects, private sector voluntary agreements and a variety of market-based mechanisms. They have forced governments to think beyond traditional state-centric policies (Jordan, 2008; Lemos and Agrawal, 2006). The hierarchy and authority of national governments is thus directly challenged by new initiatives spanning multiple scales and territories (Bäckstrand, 2008; Bulkeley, 2005; Termeer et al., 2010). Whether this empowers non-state actors or hollows out the state's responsibilities is an ongoing debate within the governance literature.

Following these reflections, we start from a view that national government leadership on complex long-term issues such as climate change is likely to encounter difficulties due to the vagaries of political and economic trends. Therefore, we set out to explore whether government engagement with other actors and levels could strengthen a policy area and help overcome blockages in central state institutions. To explore this argument, we first introduce the common conceptualisation of the state as an autonomous unitary actor and the structuralist understandings of its capacities that this gives rise to. Then we describe a more relational understanding based on polycentric governance before empirically exploring its key tenets in the UK case study. The findings advance our understanding of 1) what policy communities can do when faced with blockages in national policy processes and 2) to what extent non-central government sites of authority can provide effective remedies to these blockages.

2. Theory

2.1. Climate change and the constraints of state-based governing

Throughout the wide-ranging and long tradition of writings on the nation state, there is a common tendency to conflate the state apparatus with broader, non-governmental, social structures and processes (for an overview see: Chernilo, 2008). Although this ontological expedience has produced some important analyses, e.g. political economy critiques of capitalist states (Jessop, 1990) and various comparative typologies, it has also steered research towards structuralist theories of statecraft at the expense of more agency-oriented readings. Since Giddens (1984) proposed a 'third way' to view structure and agency as a dualism and the forces of globalisation diversified the governance landscape, more relational and deterritorialised theories of the state have gained ground (Brenner et al., 2008; Holton, 2011; Jessop, 2016; Latour, 2009; cf. Davies, 2011).

Yet, despite a widespread retreat of the state from certain issues and policy retrenchment in many areas − hastened by a preference for market-based mechanisms driven by neoliberal ideology (Harvey, 2005; Cashore, 2002; Okereke, 2007) − national government policies remain an important source of innovation and a promising area of research, especially for climate change (Boasson, 2014; Jänicke, 2005; Fankhauser et al., 2015; Jordan and Huitema, 2014; Townshend et al., 2013). In 2014, a total of 804 national climate laws and policies were in existence in the highest emitting industrialised countries (Nachmany et al., 2014). Many of these countries have decreased their emissions from the 1990 baseline (UNFCC, 2015), although some of this may have happened because of the offshoring of production to industrialising countries (Peters and Hertwich, 2008). Inevitably there are leaders and pioneers, as well as laggards, among these countries whose high outward ambitions depend to a large extent on their inward policy performance and consistency (Liefferink and Wurzel, 2016).

The ability of the leading European countries to advance domestic climate policies and deploy low-carbon investment has been stymied by the financial crisis of 2008 and the slow recovery of national economies (Geels, 2013; Skovgaard, 2014). Such moments of crisis and disruption can lead to significant policy change by prompting critical reflection on the status quo and heightening the demand for a proactive response i.e. creating a window of opportunity for entrepreneurial individuals working within government (Bauer et al., 2012; Kingdon, 1984). Broadly speaking, early opportunities for re-orienting socio-economic systems towards sustainability as a response to the crisis were recognised by many in the climate policy community but ultimately were not achieved because of resistance from vested interests and entrenched economic biases blocking such innovation (Geels, 2013).

Marxist and political economic critiques of capitalist states and societies have long pointed to the fundamental constraints of governing within, or through, the structures of liberal-capitalist democracies (Jessop, 1990). These analyses pay close attention to power imbalances, but in doing so they often posit the state as a unitary actor vis-à-vis non-state actors. This distinction is useful as a purely descriptive tool − and indeed will be used as such in this article − but it is less helpful as an analytical tool for understanding the dynamic power relations and social processes that take place beyond the confines of central government institutions. These interactions still shape, and are shaped by, public policy and governance. In practice 'the state' is not a distinct actor but rather an assemblage of multiple arenas for governing collective action (DeLanda, 2006; Paavola, 2011). What matters for theory and for practice is the number and type of arenas that are engaged in a given policy area i.e. its degree of polycentricity.

Starting from an empirical observation that monocentric forms of climate governance (such as unilateral state action) are fraught with structural biases and impediments to effective policy development, proponents of polycentricity have highlighted the benefits of pursuing an alternative, more pluralistic, approach (Cole, 2011; Harris, 2013; Jordan et al., 2015; Ostrom, 2010, 2012). In essence, they claim that the potential costs of having multiple, often overlapping, domains of governance are outweighed by the benefits of experimentation, learning, trust building and context sensitivity (Cole, 2015).

Experimentation and learning have been argued to be able to improve policy; especially in areas of high uncertainty and complexity such as climate change (Pahl-Wostl, 2009; Ostrom, 2010). This flexibility, or adaptive capacity, within a governance arrangement is vital for responding to rapid or unexpected changes in the natural environment (Pahl-Wostl, 2009) as well as in the social, political and economic environment (Voß et al., 2009). Perhaps most relevant for our focus on policy blockages and climate transitions is the claim that trial-and-error development of policies at multiple governance levels can lead to innovation and improved outcomes, especially if it is accompanied by close monitoring and information sharing between actors (Cole, 2015; De Búrca et al., 2014). Put simply, a polycentric policy arena allows for