



Collaborative environmental governance: Are watershed partnerships swimming or are they sinking?

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ABSTRACT

Several attempts have been made to explain the formation of collaborative watershed partnerships—that is, multi-actor groups which work together to resolve environmental problems at a watershed scale. But to what extent do these explanations ‘travel’ from their original home – namely the USA – to other jurisdictions, where similar claims are being made about the rise of collaborative environmental governance? To that end, this article critically evaluates how well one leading theory, namely the political contracting framework (PCF), explains their emergence in the rather different institutional context of the United Kingdom. Drawing on a survey of collaborative watershed practices, it argues that they are functionally equivalent to partnerships. Furthermore, when suitably amended, the PCF explains many important aspects of their emergence. The same critical factors are associated with their development, but these should now be assessed across the entire ‘life-cycle’ of partnerships. The implications of these findings are identified and explored, the underlying aim being to inform a much more comparative theoretical approach to understanding what appear to be important changes in collaborative environmental governance practices.

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Introduction

During the last few decades, water policy has allegedly undergone two fundamental transformations. Starting in the 1960s, important tasks were firstly centralised, with top-down, hierarchical (i.e. regulatory) forms of water governance emerging in many contexts, including the USA (Gerlak, 2006) and the various states of the European Union (EU) (Benson and Jordan, 2008). They tended to operate in a rather technocratic fashion (Sabatier et al., 2005a: 3), with the role of the public and other stakeholders limited to commenting on and responding to initiatives imposed from the top down. Secondly, in the period since the 1980s, this ‘traditional approach’ has, it has been widely argued, been transformed into what are increasingly termed ‘collaborative’ management approaches (Sabatier et al., 2005a: 3).

According to Sabatier et al. (2005b: 49) these approaches exhibit a number of specific characteristics: (1) the employment of the watershed as the principal ‘jurisdictional’ focus of management efforts; (2) a more active inclusion of a wider range of

stakeholders; (3) a ‘reliance on face to face negotiations’ to engender ‘civility’ and ‘trust’ amongst all the participants; (4) the aim of attaining ‘win-win’ solutions that address the three dimensions of sustainability; (5) a preliminary and ‘fairly extensive fact-finding phase designed to develop common understanding’ of the main problems and available solutions (for other definitions see Bidwell and Ryan, 2006; Margerum, 2008, 2011).

These approaches are not, of course, restricted to the water policy area; collaborative approaches in other, non-water sectors have also attracted a great deal of academic comment (for example, Wondolleck and Yaffee, 2000; Koontz et al., 2004; Heikkila and Gerlak, 2005). But it is in the US water sector that some of the most sophisticated analytical work has arguably been done to understand their emergence and prevalence (Benson et al., 2013). Sabatier et al. (2005a: 6) usefully identify three main varieties:

- *Collaborative engagement processes*: conflict management approaches that typically have a limited duration.
- *Collaborative superagencies*: formalised partnerships composed of multiple government agencies and external stakeholders that engage in negotiating and implementing management plans.

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These are limited in number and include the CALFED Bay-Delta Program in California.¹

- *Collaborative watershed partnerships*: relatively informal organisations involving a wide variety of stakeholders. They provide a forum for collaboratively negotiating plans, and then passing them over to partners for implementation. They have a relatively long duration (5–10 years) and are said to be common, with 150 alone recorded in California (Leach and Pelkey, 2001).²

In view of their popularity, the existing literature has tended to focus mainly on the third variety (for example, Duram et al., 2008). Yet even in the USA, collaborative watershed partnerships appear in a number of very different forms (Koontz et al., 2004; Margerum, 2007, 2008). Some, for example, are steered in a more top down fashion by government agencies and exist at an intra or even interstate scale (see Koontz et al., 2004). One well known example, the New York City Watershed Protection Program, arose through the efforts of city authorities to prioritise collaborative stakeholder engagement on drinking water issues, by agreeing a Memorandum of Agreement with the federal-level Environmental Protection Agency (Smith and Porter, 2010). Others are more community based and involve multiple actors. In one example, the Darby Creek Partnership was established as a non-profit organisation with only minimal input from central public bodies (Koontz et al., 2004). Scholars who want to understand the ‘collaborative turn’ in environmental management should be alive to these subtle but important differences.

Academics have responded to these changing patterns of collaboration by deriving multiple hypotheses to account for the existence of different kinds of partnership (for example, Leach and Pelkey, 2001; Lubell et al., 2002; Lubell, 2005; Sabatier et al., 2005c). One approach derives from the institutional rational choice (IRC) theories of Ostrom, and is based on the notion that collective action agreements emerge from the interaction of self-maximising individuals (Ostrom, 1990, 1999, 2005). In their landmark contribution, Sabatier et al. (2005c), drawing on Lubell et al. (2002), combine different insights from IRC to inform what they dub the *political contracting framework* (PCF). The contract in question is the collective action agreement between polluters and other stakeholders, which they analyse to determine a watershed group’s development (Lubell et al., 2002). They use this framework to generate hypotheses on how and why some watershed partnerships emerge and survive (i.e. ‘swim upstream’ – to paraphrase the title of their well-known book), whereas others quickly die (‘sink’) or perhaps never even emerge at all. Partnerships, they suggest, emerge in response to a number of biophysical, institutional and community factors, which are summarised in more detail below.

Together, this work abundantly satisfies their main objective—‘to set a new standard for studies of collaborative management approaches’ (Sabatier et al., 2005a: 13). It is undoubtedly a big step beyond the rather ad hoc, non-cumulative case studies that once represented the state of the art in this field. But although their work offers a plausible explanation for partnership formation processes in the US, we know nothing whatsoever about its applicability outside that particular setting. The question that we wish to pursue in this paper is whether or not these arguments and their associated theories and analytical concepts ‘travel’ (Peters, 1998: 39) to a very different institutional context namely the UK, which is politically much more centralised (see Pierson, 1994). Although understanding ‘travelling’ was not their initial purpose

(but see Sabatier et al., 2005a: 12, 19), the value of the PCF would now seem to be sufficiently well established to justify taking this additional analytical step. Then we would know whether it is indeed transferable to a different jurisdiction or just applicable to the US. Furthermore, is it sufficient to do what Sabatier et al. have done and focus mainly on the emergence and development of such partnerships, or is a longer term perspective (assessing their potential to endure or ultimately extending throughout their full life cycle) now warranted? These are the broad challenges that we seek to address in this paper.

We do so by tackling a number of questions. Firstly, we investigate what kinds of collaborative approaches are developing in the UK and we ask if they are functionally equivalent to those in the US. This is an extremely important question to pose, because without careful and tightly framed analysis of common concepts, we run the risk of ‘conceptual stretching’ (Sartori, 1970: 1034). That is to say, by taking a context specific concept (such as ‘watershed partnerships’) and uncritically applying it in a different context could mean that ‘gains in extensional coverage...[are] matched by losses in connotative precision’ (Sartori, 1970: 1035). This feature is arguably already apparent in the environmental geography literature on collaboration, where the concept of collaboration is subject to multiple but subtly differing interpretations across political cultures, jurisdictions, time and space (see for example, Wondolleck and Yaffee, 2000; Margerum, 2011; Benson et al., 2013). Such differences between jurisdictions are of course the very essence of insightful comparative research, without which social science understanding would struggle to advance beyond essentially non-cumulative single case studies. But if we do not think about functional equivalence (and thus compare like with like), we would experience a ‘travelling problem’ (Sartori, 1970: 1033), which Peters (1998: 86) argues is the most fundamental of all inhibitors of good comparative research.

Secondly, if partnerships are functionally equivalent in the two countries, then just how prevalent are they in the UK, why are they forming and what are their life histories? Are they relatively short lived phenomena (i.e. do they quickly ‘sink’) or do they have the potential to endure (‘swim’) over longer periods of time? In this section, empirical data from a broad-based survey covering England and Wales (Cook et al., 2012) is used.

Thirdly, how well does the PCF explain the full development of partnerships in the two jurisdictions—in other words how well does it, the theory, ‘travel’ from the empirical setting of the US to the UK? Unlike much theory in the policy sciences (see Peters, 1998), the PCF is fairly precisely articulated, contains testable hypotheses, and is grounded in empirical research. In principle, it therefore represents a good candidate for ‘travelling’ as it already explains a good deal. In this paper we aim to explore the limits of its explanatory power. In the final section we conclude by evaluating the wider implications of our research for: (i) the practices of collaborative environmental governance; and (ii) comparative academic research more generally.

Before proceeding we would like to make two further points. The first concerns case selection. The UK is different to the USA in terms of its governance (Pierson, 1994; Pierre, 2005). Moreover, the key differences between the two are relatively well known and understood. Most obviously, the USA is a multi-level federal system composed of state, federal and local governments (Watts, 2008). By contrast, the UK is a devolving unitary state (Connelly et al., 2012). Secondly, there are important differences in the way in which decision making powers or tasks are allocated between levels in these two systems. Tasks in the US are shared between local, state and federal governments to a relatively greater extent than in the UK, where powers are still more heavily concentrated in central or devolved government agencies (Benson et al., 2012, 2013). Indeed the UK has increasingly adopted a more centralised

¹ Although the authors use this example, other such governance forms could include The Chesapeake Bay Program and the Great Lakes Commission.

² Duram et al. (2008) record the existence of over 1000 local watershed groups in the USA.

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