

## Policy Studies: Theory and Practice

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### 'Advocacy Coalitions and Policy Change'

#### Abstract

*This paper presents a theoretical examination of the advocacy coalition framework (ACF). Placed within the context of growing concern over the adequacy of policy networks to explain policy change, it examines whether the ACF provides a useful alternative. The ACF purports to be a framework designed to replace policy cycle conceptions of policy change, in which the policy process is disaggregated into distinct stages, whilst maintaining a sub-system or policy network focus. Its results are thus relevant to wider conceptions of the policy process as well as policy network concerns.*

*Without giving too much away, this paper argues that the ACF is theoretically flawed, and therefore its claim to widespread empirical support is undermined. Focusing on its main tenets – a flawed conception of belief systems as the basis for collective action, policy oriented learning, and the role of the policy broker – this paper argues that the ACF paradoxically reverts back to an Eastonian style of explanation, favouring wider political and environmental explanations of policy change. By defining advocacy coalitions and subsystems so widely as to ignore the insider/ outsider distinction, and by ignoring the importance of policy brokerage, or the consultation process, the ACF provides no more than a 'black box' political system, reacting in an undetermined way to external pressures.*

## The Advocacy Coalition Framework<sup>1</sup>

For Sabatier the usefulness of the 'stages heuristic' is just not enough. He is not impressed by the simplicity and comparability inherent within the approach. Whilst this approach was perhaps useful in the 60s and 70s, when its main formulators (Easton, Lasswell, Jones and Anderson) were operating, its applicability and usefulness is now wearing thin, for the following reasons:

- (1) It is not a 'causal model'; it lacks a force driving the policy process from one stage to another, nor does it specify the, 'linkages, drives and influences that form the essential core of theoretical models';
- (2) as a result, it provides no clear basis for 'empirical hypothesis testing';
- (3) it is descriptively inaccurate in that the linear process from agenda setting through to evaluation is often deviated from in practice;
- (4) it suffers from a, 'built in legalistic top-down focus' and has been subjected to telling criticisms from 'bottom-up scholars';

<sup>1</sup>Copies of the original tables and figures discussed in this paper will be available at the Conference session itself.

- (5) researchers tend to focus on one stage, leading to weakened theoretical coherence across stages;
- (6) it inappropriately, ‘emphasizes the policy cycle as the temporal unit of analysis’ because policy evolution involves multiple cycles initiated by actors at different levels of government; and,
- (7) the role of policy analysis and ‘policy oriented learning’ is ‘ghettoized’ in that it is not accounted for in the process. That is, analysis is confined to the evaluation stage.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, the ‘stages heuristic’ has outlived its usefulness and needs to be replaced. Now, on the face of it, and before examining the ACF in any detail, these criticisms appear to be misplaced and at best aimed at a strawman. Dealing with each point in turn:

- (1) It is not a problem if a framework is not a ‘causal model’, if it helps to identify causality within the process. Therefore, explanation for public policies rests in the attribution of responsibility for policies by social actors within the process. The point of the cycle is to place such activity within a fluid context.
- (2) This is indicative of Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier’s naivete regarding all things scientific, although such a statement will not be justified here, except to say that criticisms based on internal consistency are far more effective and convincing than those which stress some external, ‘objective’, yet unfounded criteria for the assessment of all research. As discussed below, one main flaw to their work is that they place too much emphasis on the verification of their hypotheses, failing to notice that the hypotheses are misplaced, and so it is immaterial whether or not they are verified. For example, various studies have verified the hypothesis that Thatcher has a strong personality, but this does not adequately explain the policy change which took place in her term of office. In short, then, confirmation is no substitute for explanatory power.
- (3) Such a problem can be instantly bypassed (3) if stating that the process need not be linear.
- (4) If the policy cycle framework, as discussed above, can be applied to all levels of government, then it is unclear why it implies a top-down focus. Rather, it implies a focus on the decision-makers concerned. Further, bottom-up criticisms may be telling, but are certainly not devastating.<sup>3</sup>
- (5) Even if this were the case, the solution would be to cease such activity.
- (6) Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier appear to conflate two issues here, whilst appearing to be arguing that different levels of government operate with some degree

<sup>2</sup>P.A.Sabatier, ‘Political Science and Public Policy’, *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 34/2, 1991; P.A.Sabatier, ‘Policy Change Over a Decade or More’, in P.A.Sabatier & H.C.Jenkins-Smith (eds) , *Policy Change and Learning: An Advocacy Coalition Approach*, Westview Press, 1993; Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, ‘The Study of Public Policy Processes’ in Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith (eds), *Policy Change and Learning*; Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, ‘Evaluating The Advocacy Coalition Framework’, *Journal of Public Policy*, 14/2, 1994.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, D.Marsh & R.A.W.Rhodes, *Implementing Thatcherite Policies*, Open University Press, 1992, pp.6-9.

of autonomy. It may well be that different actors have different agendas, but this does not mean that they operate in different cycles. In addition, it is safe to say that when something is at the top of the central government's agenda that it is at least as important elsewhere. In addition, if central government acts upon an issue, then it necessarily becomes part of the agendas of other actors, as a policy passes through the cycle. They necessarily become part of this policy cycle. It may be more appropriate to argue that each policy has its own cycle (although the identification of which has its own problems), whilst each level of government may have its own distinct agenda, depending on which stage of the policy cycle a particular policy is progressing.<sup>4</sup>

- (7) This is difficult to justify given, for example, Hogwood & Peters' emphasis on the pervasiveness of policy successions, based on reformulations of past policies.<sup>5</sup>

However, whilst the critical basis of the ACF may be suspect, one suspects that this was included as an afterthought anyway. The real issue is whether or not the substantive issues covered in the ACF present a worthwhile alternative to traditional concerns about the policy process. An increasing number of authors, most notably within the policy networks literature, find favour with the themes of such an approach. For example, in the conclusion to a volume on water policy, the editors argue that, 'the findings here suggest broad support for the themes of Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith in their model of policy change based on belief systems'.<sup>6</sup> Further, Maloney has identified the existence of advocacy coalitions within water policy subsystems.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the ACF as an alternative to policy cycles for the analysis of policy networks does merit some attention.

The ACF has four 'basic premises':

- (1) a time perspective of at least ten years is required to evaluate the effects of policy (as it completes a cycle);
- (2) a focus on 'policy subsystems, that is, the interaction of actors from different institutions who follow, and seek to influence, governmental decisions in a policy area';<sup>8</sup>
- (3) policy subsystems involve actors from all levels of government (thus negating the top-down effect); and,
- (4) public policies can be conceptualised in the same manner as belief systems, or, 'sets of value priorities and causal assumptions about how to realize them'.<sup>9</sup>

Further, policy change over time is a function of three sets of processes:

<sup>4</sup> See J.W.Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies*, Little Brown and Company, 1984.

<sup>5</sup> B.W.Hogwood & B.G.Peters, *Policy Dynamics*, Wheatsheaf Press, 1983.

<sup>6</sup> H.Bressers et al (eds), *Networks For Water Policy: A Comparative Perspective*, Frank Cass, 1995, p.211.

<sup>7</sup> W.A.Maloney, 'Regulating the Privatised Water Industry: Complexity, Conflict and Compromise', *Contemporary Political Studies* 1996, volume 2, p.962.

<sup>8</sup> Sabatier, incidentally, treats subsystems, policy communities and policy networks synonymously. See Sabatier, 'Towards Better Theories of the Policy Process', *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 34/2, 1991, p.147.

<sup>9</sup> Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 'Evaluating The Advocacy Coalition Framework', p.178.

'The first concerns the interaction of competing advocacy coalitions within a policy subsystem ... The second ... concerns changes external to the subsystem in socioeconomic conditions, system-wide governing coalitions, and output from other subsystems that provide opportunities and obstacles to the competing coalitions. The third set involves the effects of stable system parameters – such as social structure and constitutional rules – on the constraints and resources of the various subsystem actors.'<sup>10</sup>

Put simply, the ACF involves between 2 and 4 advocacy coalitions operating competitively within subsystems (although one may be dominant) and in the context of important external conditions which shape the resources and actions of such coalitions. Within the subsystem, the conflict between coalitions – even if one is dominant – is mediated by a 'policy broker', producing policy outputs, policy outcomes, changing external conditions, and then changing expectations and beliefs about policy consequences and hence actions of coalitions, based on the process of policy oriented learning which takes place over time. Now at face value such a conception seems intuitively appealing, but this may be due to the fact that none of it, bar the sections on belief systems which are examined below, is startlingly original. However, given that the ACF purports to be a grand theory of policy change, replacing the 'stages heuristic' and applicable to, 'most industrial societies',<sup>11</sup> its substance requires further examination.<sup>12</sup>

On further inspection, the first two premises are more distinctive than first imagined. The emphasis on a decade or more is required to discern a long term influence for actors such as academics and policy analysts who, whilst not affecting specific decisions, serve an 'enlightenment function', by, 'altering the concepts and assumptions of policy makers over time'.<sup>13</sup> Further, the extent of action within subsystems is distinctive in the ACF. Advocacy coalitions which operate within subsystems consist of:

Actors from a variety of public and private institutions at all levels of government who share a set of basic beliefs (policy goals plus causal and other perceptions) and who seek to manipulate the rules, budgets and personnel of governmental institutions in order to achieve these goals over time.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, because action is based around beliefs, the boundaries of inclusion are likely to be loose. Membership is as likely to consist of academics and private organisations as governmental actors:

Our conception of policy subsystems should be broadened from traditional notions of iron triangles limited to administrative agencies, legislative committees, and interest groups at a single level of government to include actors at various levels of government, as well as

<sup>10</sup>Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 'Evaluating The Advocacy Coalition Framework', p.178.

<sup>11</sup>Sabatier, 'Policy Change Over a Decade or More', p.20.

<sup>12</sup>A copy of Figure 1 will be provided at the session.

<sup>13</sup>Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 'The Study of Public Policy Processes', p.4.

<sup>14</sup>Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 'The Study of Public Policy Processes', p.4.

journalists, researchers, and policy analysts who play important roles in the generation, dissemination and evaluation of policy ideas.<sup>15</sup>

However, such an emphasis brings up an immediate criticism. It appears to ignore all the insights from the literature on policy networks which it purports to follow. In redefining the membership of networks, Sabatier fails to consider the insider/ outsider status of individuals and groups, or, as discussed by Maloney et al, the distinction between core/ specialist insider and peripheral insider/outside status, based on group strategy, group resources, and the granting of that status by government.<sup>16</sup> Thus, Sabatier fails to discern the important actors within each coalition, favouring to aggregate all action according to belief, irrespective of respective influence.

Sabatier clearly rejects the idea that membership within subsystems is limited to any great extent, because a multitude of actors who would normally be considered outsiders operate within those networks as members of advocacy coalitions. However, the bulk such entities would constitute an 'issue network' rather than a subsystem.<sup>17</sup> Or, perhaps, Sabatier is arguing, like Cavanagh et al, that sub sector action should be seen in the context of wider, sectoral level action, which constrains and facilitates the actions of subsectors.<sup>18</sup> In either case, whilst such positions may be utilised to some effect, there are problems.

In the former, whilst it may be very interesting to consider the effect of a wider policy network on subsystem action, the questions remain from such an analysis: who are the main actors within the subsystem itself? How do those actors discursively construct and act on the effects of wider network actions? How does such activity affect the actions of subsystems themselves? Where are the considerations of relative influence within coalitions? and so on. That is, by placing so much emphasis on coalitions, the ACF appears to revert back to Easton's 'black box' formulation of the political system which Sabatier has tried so hard to reject.<sup>19</sup> Or, by placing so much emphasis on the wider political environment, as opposed to the mediation process itself, there is a danger of returning to the simple inputs-outputs model of policy change. Insider/ outsider considerations could be integrated within the ACF in conjunction with Sabatier's notion of 'policy brokers', but, as discussed below, this would be to negate the importance of the aggregation itself, revolving around the notion of the prime importance of belief systems.

In the latter case, the argument would differ from Cavanagh et al's in that it would stress the politicisation of policy areas at sectoral level, leading to the restriction of network activities at the sub-sectoral level. Activities would be restricted simply because they would be under the spotlight, and insider participants would be unable to treat the issue as a technical problem. However, again, this would be to ignore one basic premise of the network approach which is that sub-

<sup>15</sup> Sabatier, 'Policy Change Over a Decade or More', p.17.

<sup>16</sup> W.A.Maloney et al, 'Interest Groups and Public Policy: The Insider/Outsider Model Revisited', *Journal of Public Policy*, 14/1.

<sup>17</sup> H.Hecl, 'Issue Networks and the Executive Establishment', in A.King (ed), *The New American Political System*, American Enterprise Institute, 1977.

<sup>18</sup> M.Cavanagh et al, 'The Relationship Between Policy Networks at the Sectoral and Subsectoral Levels', *Public Administration*, 73, 1995.

<sup>19</sup> D.Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*, John Wiley & Sons, 1965.

sectoral activity is largely insulated from the wider political system.<sup>20</sup> Certainly, the ACF in this case would be extremely limited in application.

Belief systems, however, are the main focus of this paper as they distinguish the ACF from other conceptions of the policy process. Sabatier argues that policies contain implicit theories on how to achieve objectives, and so can be conceptualised as belief systems, involving:

‘Value priorities, perceptions of important causal relationships, perceptions of world states (including the magnitude of the problem), perceptions of the efficacy of policy instruments, and so on. This ability to map beliefs and policies on the same ‘canvas’ provides a vehicle for assessing the influence of various actors over time, particularly the role of technical information (beliefs) on policy change.’<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, it is the sharing of normative and causal beliefs which provide the glue to stick governmental and private organisations and individuals together to form advocacy coalitions, since Sabatier, ‘insists that individuals engage in politics in order to turn their beliefs into policies’.<sup>22</sup> Belief systems have a tripartite structure, containing deep core, policy core, and secondary aspects of beliefs, in which the highest level constrains more specific beliefs and is most resistant to change.<sup>23</sup>

Deep core beliefs which are particularly resistant to change, contain fundamental normative and ontological axioms and so influence the formulation of less fundamental, more practical beliefs across all policy areas. Policy or near core beliefs refer to specific policy areas but are still abstract in that they refer to basic strategies within those areas which can be used to achieve core values. The third type of beliefs – secondary aspects – however, refer more to implementational aspects of a formulated policy, and hence are most subject to change. They are more readily adjustable to suit new information or, ‘changing strategic considerations’.<sup>24</sup> In addition, these administrative and legislative issues may be ones which members of the same coalition disagree on, and as Sabatier argues it would be, ‘absurd to assume that all members of an advocacy coalition have precisely the same belief system’.<sup>25</sup> The important thing is that they will agree on fundamentals or policy core issues and, given that belief systems are hierarchically structured, coalitions will still form around the beliefs less susceptible to change.

Advocacy coalitions thus form around deep seated beliefs and it is these beliefs which guide their action. The actions of advocacy coalitions are designed to convert such beliefs into public policies. It is in such a context that the importance of policy oriented learning is highlighted. This is defined as enduring alterations of thought/ behaviour resulting from experience and concerned with the revision of coalition belief systems, involving the ‘internal feedback loops’ depicted in figure 1, ‘perceptions concerning external dynamics, ... increased knowledge of problem parameters and the factors affecting them’, and the attempts by members of coali-

<sup>20</sup> A.G.Jordan et al, ‘Characterizing Agricultural Policy-Making’, *Public Administration*, 72, 1994.

<sup>21</sup> Sabatier, ‘Policy Change Over a Decade or More’, p.17.

<sup>22</sup> A.Hann, ‘Sharpening Up Sabatier: Belief Systems and Public Policy’, *Politics*, 15/1, 1995, p.21.

<sup>23</sup> A copy of Table 1 will be provided at the session.

<sup>24</sup> Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, ‘Evaluating the Advocacy Coalition Framework’, p.182.

<sup>25</sup> Sabatier, ‘Policy Change Over a Decade or More’, p.32.

tions to, 'better understand the world in order to further their policy objectives'.<sup>26</sup> However, such members will resist any information which may undermine their core or policy core beliefs, and a complex learning process develops. Changes of beliefs generally begin with individual learning or turnover, followed by resistance by groups and then group diffusion, depending on the rate of turnover, the compatibility of the information with existing beliefs, the 'persuasiveness' of the information and the, 'political pressures for change'.<sup>27</sup>

Policy-oriented learning, therefore, is a policy dynamic in that it is an important identifiable force in the altering of beliefs over time. In turn, the altering of beliefs affects coalition action and hence public policy. If the learning is sufficiently significant, either: (a) a dominant coalition will change its actions and hence public policy directly; or, (b) a formerly minority coalition may succeed the formerly dominant coalition by identifying the performance gaps inherent in its programmes, thus again causing changes to the dominant policy beliefs and hence policy change.<sup>28</sup> However, it should be reiterated that policy-oriented learning is only one force affecting belief systems and is indeed not the most important. Rather, changes in socioeconomic conditions and system-wide governing coalitions alter the composition and resources of coalitions and hence their constituent beliefs and actions.<sup>29</sup>

Policy change, according to Sabatier, can thus be understood by analysing two intertwined processes:

'First, advocacy coalitions within the subsystem attempt to translate the policy cores and the secondary aspects of their belief systems into governmental programs ... The second process is one of ... changes in socioeconomic conditions, outputs from other subsystems, and changes in the system-wide governing coalition in the resources and constraints of subsystem actors.'<sup>30</sup>

Sabatier is therefore able to provide a dynamic and far reaching framework which not only replaces the policy cycles approach, but which also interestingly replaces Lindblom's concerns. That is, one of the advantages of coalition activity is that a form of 'comprehensive rationality' can be attained where all relevant information can be considered within the policy community;<sup>31</sup> It has two forces of causal change (beliefs and external conditions); it is testable; it is parsimonious; it is flexible; and it has the potential to contribute, 'to a better world', by helping policy activists understand the complex policy process and how they might, 'make a difference over time'.<sup>32</sup> However, there are a number of problems.

The first concerns Sabatier's insistence that individuals engage in politics solely to turn beliefs into policies, as well as his subsequent lack of distinction between

<sup>26</sup> Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 'The Study of Public Policy Processes', p.42; Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 'Evaluating the Advocacy Coalition Framework', p.182.

<sup>27</sup> Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 'The Study of Public Policy Processes', p.42.

<sup>28</sup> Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 'The Study of Public Policy Processes', p.55.

<sup>29</sup> Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 'Evaluating the Advocacy Coalition Framework', p.183.

<sup>30</sup> Sabatier, 'Policy Change Over a Decade or More', p.34.

<sup>31</sup> see A.Hann, 'Sharpening Up Sabatier', p.22.

<sup>32</sup> Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 'The Advocacy Coalition Framework: Assessment, Revisions, and Implications for Scholars and Practitioners', in Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith (eds), *Policy Change and Learning*.

policy advocates and policy brokers. Given that Sabatier claims that the ACF can be applied to most industrial societies, it is surprising that he places so little emphasis on the distinguishing characteristics of such countries. For example, the distinction between broker and advocate in the U.S. system is often difficult to maintain and relatively unimportant given the political appointments of higher level civil servants. That is, civil servants are picked on the basis of their political beliefs and their activity is therefore easily subsumed within the ACF. This is a key cultural difference in Britain, where in principle the entire civil service is maintained over time and designed to assist the minister of the day, irrespective of party. Therefore, the levels of advocacy or overt political activity are surely diminished in the British political system. Indeed, much of the British literature on the civil service stresses the inertial effects of departments seeking to reduce the effects of changing, conflicting positions over time.<sup>33</sup>

Granted, Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier do recognise that 'high civil servants' may perform the role of policy broker, but that they will have some 'policy bent' which guides their actions within subsystems. The distinction between broker and advocate is thus on a continuum. However, the only justification for such a position is a footnote stating their experience with English countryside planners and an episode of 'Yes Minister'!<sup>34</sup> Further, remember that Sabatier's position is that individuals enter politics to turn beliefs into policies. How, then, does this explain civil service action over time, if a civil servant in moving from one department to another has to support conflicting positions? Such a dilemma is illustrative of the other and more important causes of civil service action, such as reference to ministerial/departmental protocols, wider political concerns, and the appearance of impartiality. In other words, civil servants are classic policy brokers. However, the ACF gives scant attention to the process of policy brokers, because advocacy coalitions are the main causes of policy change. Again, then, this seems to go against the whole ethos of networks or subsystem research which focuses on the brokerage process. Therefore, the ACF seems to revert back to 'black-box' conceptions of the policy process in which the political system is relatively ignored in favour of the wider political environment (see above).

Second, there are a number of problems with the notion of belief systems:

- (a) Sabatier places great emphasis on the fact that core beliefs determine policy objectives. Such concerns may indeed be useful when fundamental change occurs in policy areas, such as the privatisation process in Britain. This could be explained as a system-wide governing coalition affecting the resources and constraints of subsystem actors, resulting in radical policy change. However, the bulk of political activity concerns the secondary aspects of belief systems – that is, administration and implementation. And in such cases, the analysis of action in terms of core beliefs has much less to offer. That is, if there is 'core' agreement on the usefulness of the principle of a policy, then the widespread disagreement on the fulfilment of such a policy will not be resolved according to those beliefs. If this is the case, then given that strategic/secondary aspects are the most important and most subject to change, then belief systems are of limited importance.

<sup>33</sup>R.Rose, *Do Parties Make a Difference?*, 2nd edition, MacMillan, 1984; A.G.Jordan & J.J.Richardson, *British Politics and the Policy Process*, Unwin Hyman, 1987.

<sup>34</sup>Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 'Evaluating The Advocacy Coalition Framework'.

For example, a wide consensus exists in Britain on a nationalised, central government coordinated, tax funded NHS. A dominant coalition therefore exists. However, this is to mask the importance of the history of conflict between parties and between government and professionals in the specific implementation of such a broad policy. Considerations of how to make the system work have no reference point in core beliefs.

- (b) Relatedly, some important examples undermine the aggregation of political activity according to core beliefs. Concerted action between feminists and conservatives to restrict the availability of pornography or between Conservative Euroskeptics and the Labour party to defeat some aspects of the Maastricht Bill exemplify cases in which groups are acting for specific purposes, even though their core beliefs may be in direct conflict. Thus, as Hann argues, such examples undermine the ACF's hypothesis 2, that actors within an advocacy coalition will show substantial consensus on issues pertaining to the policy core but less so on secondary aspects.<sup>35</sup>

Alternatively, groups may share core beliefs but be so deeply divided on how to achieve subsequent objectives that the aggregation is inappropriate. For example, a coalition for the need for national defence exists within the Ministry of Defence. However, the competition between the army, navy and RAF is so great on, for example, the ways to implement Trident policy that it is inappropriate to aggregate their behaviour. Similarly, road rail and freight lobbies may all constitute a transport coalition (as opposed to an environmental one), but again the conflict between them is so great that to state that the bulk of their activities accord to core beliefs is misguided. Indeed, the latter examples are of the deepest divisions within departments (or sectoral level networks) when according to the ACF one could usefully aggregate such activity.<sup>36</sup>

- (c) Sabatier frequently employs the example of Clean Air versus Economic Efficiency coalitions and at first sight this seems intuitively appealing, especially in wider political, rather than specialised contexts. However, again, such analysis is hampered by the inattention to the influential coalition members and the relatively detached concerns (for example, about electoral/ political impacts of policy) of policy brokers – that is, ministers and civil servants.

Further, first, it is doubtful that the divisions between each coalition would be so absolute – that is, with, for example, the economic coalition acting in total disregard for any environmental considerations. Therefore, it would be difficult in practice to distinguish between actors at the margins of activity if we are talking about environmental/ economic arguments to some degree. That is, it would be difficult to distinguish between distinct coalition activities in some areas, as well as categorise some actors which acted towards the broad goals of each coalition. Collective action problems also suggest that members of each coalition act independently towards some broad goal, rather than in concert within a coordinated coalition. However, if each has to some extent differing goals, then again it is difficult to readily aggregate such activity.

<sup>35</sup> A.Hann, 'Sharpening Up Sabatier', p.22.

<sup>36</sup> Part of the problem is that the ACF is so vague in parts that it encourage very different interpretations. For example, Hann argues that Sabatier unwittingly provides a good basis for 3rd face of power analyses, according to dominant core – for example, patriarchal or class – beliefs.

Second, such absolutist strategies would be neither popular nor pragmatic. Particularly, the 'rules of the game' within subsystems suggest that groups are more likely to be successful in their dealings with government if their demands are modest and flexible.<sup>37</sup> Again, then, the aggregation may not be appropriate because of the proliferation of group strategies which exist under the umbrella term. For example, Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace may have the same core beliefs, but their strategies are so different that their status within government circles is significantly different, with the former often enjoying insider status.

- (d) The question remains as to how to identify beliefs in coalition members. Sabatier favours considerations of beliefs because the inference of 'real' interests is difficult. He thus advocates the use of questionnaires and content analysis of documents to elicit such beliefs. Questions of the naivete of this approach aside, as Hann argues, there are severe practical difficulties with such an approach.<sup>38</sup> First, even if individuals were willing to fill in the questionnaires on core beliefs, they may not be too sure what those beliefs are and may not be able to articulate them. The beliefs would thus have to be inferred, but beliefs can not, 'simply be 'read off' from behaviour without making other contestable assumptions about the agent's aims'. One will have as much difficulty, then, in discerning core beliefs as in discerning 'real' interests. Possibly, the only way to be sure to elicit beliefs would be to read ministerial diaries after the fact and, indeed, Yes Minister seems to be Sabatier's only British literature. However, he might do well to remember in this case that such a diary was riddled with examples of Hacker acting directly contrary to his beliefs to secure his political existence. Second, given the difficulties of discerning an individual's beliefs, how could you discover the core beliefs of an entire coalition or subsystem? This would seem impossible unless again one were to infer from behaviour. That is, one would need to assume a priori that action reflected a consensual core belief. However, considering the examples in (b) above, this would be an invalid assumption.

Third, there is a problem of contradiction in the concept of policy oriented learning. On the one hand, when speaking of coalitions seeking to, 'understand better the world', Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier seem unaware of the contested nature and discursive construction of all information, knowledge, and hence learning.<sup>39</sup> However, on the other they are at pains to stress that coalitions will resist information that undermines its policy or core beliefs in any way. Therefore, the idea of policy-oriented learning seems confused and at best conflates a number of issues on the relationship between research and policy.<sup>40</sup>

Therefore, given such criticisms, what we are left with is an interesting and a times sophisticated, but insufficient account of policy change and the policy process itself. The ACF:

- (a) fails to explain convincingly why the policy cycles approach should be rejected;

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<sup>37</sup> A.G.Jordan et al, 'Insiders, Outsiders and Political Access', British Interest Group Working Paper 3, University of Aberdeen, 1992, p.14.

<sup>38</sup> A.Hann, 'Sharpening Up Sabatier', p.24.

<sup>39</sup> Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 'Evaluating The Advocacy Coalition Framework', p.182.

<sup>40</sup> See also A.Hann, 'Sharpening Up Sabatier'.

- (b) neglects the importance of the insiders or outsider status of coalition members and of policy brokers, and hence fails to account for the traditional concerns of policy network analysis – that is, the decision making process itself, as opposed to its wider political context; and
- (c) is undermined by the the unconvincing nature of the arguments on the role of belief systems. Particularly, it does not explain coalitions which develop on a short time pragmatic basis, important conflicts between actors with similar core beliefs, and such beliefs are extremely difficult to discern anyway.

Therefore, what remains is a dynamic framework which treats the political or decision making process as a ‘black box’, contains an unconvincing ‘causal’ factor in beliefs, and hence stresses environmental pressures as the main determinant of policy change. In effect, the Eastonian type of framework which policy cycle writers have attempted to replace.

## Conclusion

The ACF purports to replace the policy cycles approach, because the latter: is not a causal model; is descriptively inaccurate; suffers from a built-in top-down focus; fosters theoretical incoherence; and, ghettoises policy oriented learning. Sabatier argues that the ACF has no such problems. This is based on four premises: a time perspective of at least a decade, a focus on policy subsystems; an emphasis on all levels of government; and, the conceptualisation of public policies in terms of belief systems. Sabatier argues that political participation is best explained by the fact that individuals enter into the political arena to turn beliefs into policies. Therefore, their actions are best explained with reference to core, policy and secondary aspects of belief systems. Advocacy coalitions thus revolve around such core beliefs, and interact with other coalitions within a subsystem and a policy broker to produce policy change. As a result, policy change is a function of three processes: the interaction of advocacy coalitions based on core beliefs and policy oriented learning over time; changes to socioeconomic conditions; and, changes to the structure of the political system in as much as this affects the resources of each coalition.

However, there are a number of problems with this approach. First, it seems to ignore the policy networks literature emphasis by defining subsystems too widely, ignoring the insider/ outsider dimension, as well as the role of policy brokers. Thus, Sabatier leaves the decision making process itself to the imagination, rather than asserting its primary importance. Second, criticisms of belief systems include: that core beliefs do not shape the day-to-day actions of coalitions; that core beliefs may not explain why some groups form a coalition; that the distinctions between core, policy and secondary beliefs is problematic; and, that the identification of coalition core beliefs is virtually impossible. Therefore, it would be difficult to explain activity on this basis. Finally, there is some degree of contradiction in Sabatier’s assertion that, whilst coalitions seek to better understand their worlds, or come closer to the truth, coalitions resist information which threatens core beliefs. Therefore, whilst Sabatier unconvincingly rejects the policy cycles approach, his purported replacement is fraught with difficulties and even resembles the ‘black box’ type of model by Easton which Sabatier clearly rejects.