

comment on: studying policy advocacy through social network analysis

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Varone and his colleagues provide a concise and knowledgeable review on the use of social network analysis in interest group studies focusing on policy advocacy and influence. They demonstrate how the different methods and techniques can enhance the description and modeling of complex influence relations and relational structures. If policy processes are modeled in a way that actors, relations, and relational structures are crucial components of policy systems, then network analysis, in fact, is particularly well-suited to investigate the effect of this relational phenomenon. Network analysis helps to identify central or peripheral positions of interest groups in policy networks and the relational infrastructure of their advocacy strategies. The short presentation of exemplary studies in this article demonstrates this quite impressively.

However, the added value of a network analytical perspective in interest group studies is presented in a too modest way. First, the authors are not convinced that network analysis can offer new theoretical insights and hypotheses on interest groups, and their influence in politics and

polycymaking. Somehow, they reduce it to a mere technical toolbox. As network analysis with graph theory, as its mathematical foundation, provides important concepts in the analytical description of relational configurations, the authors' perspective overlooks recent meta-theoretical debates on relationalism and the relational paradigm. In particular, the authors neglect the new impetus social network analysis has received by the spectacular expansion of network science within the last decade. Network analysis offers precise theoretical concepts and models for the study of complex configurations and relationships. If we associate specific effects with such configurations in political processes, its contribution is undoubtedly also of a theoretical nature.

Second, as the title of the article already indicates, the article applies a rather narrow focus on interest group studies. If we take on the perspective of political science in general and start from its division into various subdisciplines such as comparative politics, international relations, and public administration, and so on, there is a range of additional perspectives beyond

the narrow angle of policy analysis. For instance, in a comparative politics perspective, network analysis can be – and also is – used to analyze the spectrum of formal and informal relations between interest groups and other components in political systems, such as parties, governments, and administrations in a general way. If we consider specific subdomains such as ‘business and politics’ or ‘industrial relations’, also studies on inter-interest group relations are a fertile ground for network analysis, for instance, when analyzing sectoral systems of (self-)governance. As important players in modern democratic political systems, large companies also constitute important research objects with respect to their relational profiles to traditional interest groups. Another research orientation is – in Tocqueville’s tradition – the contribution of voluntary associations to the social capital

of modern democracies. Also this area is heavily populated by network analysts. Last but not least, in international relations INGOs – international non-governmental groups – have become increasingly popular research objects of relationalists who study global inter-organizational networks and their contribution to global governance.

The fact that modern democracies are becoming increasingly complex in the sense that both the heterogeneity of actors – including interest groups – and also their interdependency and interrelations increase, creates a specific need for methods by which these relational structures can be more accurately described and analyzed than by traditional methods. Interest groups and their relational embeddedness in national political systems and political economies thus remain a fertile area for network analysis in the coming years.