

National school lunch program vis--vis issue networks essay example

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The case of the National School Lunch Program (NLSP) involved heavy participation of issue networks. Various interest groups and individuals, albeit loosely, form issue networks to support particular issues for public policy formation. The NLSP found support from issue networks formed by interest groups formed by interest groups on nutrition and consumer advocacy, associations formed by concerned professionals and networks of private sector groups (Stillman, 2009).

Prior to the implementation of the NLSP in 1946, concerns over nutrition deficiency in children have emerged. Whereas the NLSP became successful in implementing reforms to ensure the well-being of children in terms of proper nourishment, the later years of the program saw another emerging challenge -growing obesity rates among children. Obesity served as a health risk among children, and such has triggered the need to reduce the fat content in food served in school lunches. Although the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) sought to introduce innovative solutions for food such as fat-free beef patties, another problem that emerged concerned the popularity of such food among children. With that, issue networks have emerged to reform the NLSP (Stillman, 2009).

Issue networks that reformed the NLSP have included the involvement of two major advocacy groups - the American School Food Service Association (ASFSA) and the Public Voice for Food and Health Policy (PVFHP). The ASFSA consists of around 65, 000 members whose goals include the introduction of substantial regulatory and legislative reforms to the NLSP by serving as lobbying groups centered on the idea that school food must not induce obesity among children. The PVFHP also has a similar proposition and sought

to reduce ingredients found to be high in fat such as butter, eggs and processed food, many of which are used for preparing food for school lunches through lobbying. The success of both ASFSA and PVFHP in calling for reforms to the NLSP resulted to the implementation of relevant strategies and guidelines. Ellen Haas, the leader of PVFHP who subsequently became an Assistant Secretary of USDA, successfully implemented a rule that required schools to use a viable nutritional standard for food in line with the dietary guidelines of the department. Haas also emphasized the use of four strategies: healthy eating, greater food choices, better departmental coordination and technological management. In sum, issue networks became highly instrumental in reforming a particular area of concern, which is reforming the NLSP (Stillman, 2009).

Implications of Issue Network Theory to Training Public Administrators

Issue network theory has strong implications in training public administrators. Traditionally, the Iron Triangle model, composed of the interactions between the Congress, bureaucracy and lobbying special interest groups, has dominated the nature of public administration in the US. The Iron Triangle represents a closed system of public administration, with the first process involving the legislative roles of Congress, implementation and subsequent budget allotments of the bureaucracy and lobbying activities of special interest groups influencing members of Congress in exchange for their continued victory in the elections. However, Hugh Hecl, a leading proponent of issue network theory, noted that the Iron Triangle failed to embody the impact of issue networks - those that focus on pushing

for the resolution of issues through public policy without necessarily involving the electoral interests of members of Congress. Therefore, training public administrators in light of issue network theory would involve getting away from the vicious cycle of the Iron Triangle. Congress, in light of the presence of issue networks, should not just make laws and have those implemented by the bureaucracy simply for satisfying lobbying groups that would ensure its members of electoral victory. Rather, issue network theory should compel Congress to create policies that would help alleviate the issues raised by issue networks, which the bureaucracy would implement in turn once approved. Therefore, training public administrators would not just include concepts limited to the Iron Triangle. The growth of public scrutiny towards government activities, which is well beyond the reach of the Iron Triangle, must entail public administrators to have the necessary expertise to deal with issue-based networks. Dealing with different groups and individuals uniting over particular policies should enable public administrators to have the necessary skills to gather feedback and translate those to action (Stillman, 2009).

Effect of Issue Networks on Roles of Public Administrators

Public administrators could learn to go beyond the paradigm set by the Iron Triangle when they encounter issue networks. Policymakers should always be receptive to the needs of the public, given that they benefit most from any policies that they enact. At the same time, bureaucracies must be diligent in gathering feedback from the public on certain policies, since they spend much of their time on the groundwork of policy implementation. With

issue networks, public administrators would not just stand as mere implementers of policies anymore. Public administrators should shift to becoming receptors of public reaction in order for them to influence policymakers on certain reforms outside the exclusive interests of lobbying special interest groups. A proactive approach to public administration results from the emergence of issue networks, given that groups and individuals therein promote issues that affect the public and not just their self-interests (Stillman, 2009).

In dealing with issue networks, public administrators must have a clear understanding that societal change is constant and may thus compel reforms to existing policies or the creation of new ones. Public administrators must understand that the divergence of partisan interests to issue-based interests lies on the difference between ideologies and demands shaped by current events and norms. Political parties may not necessarily have the same impact as issue networks in influencing public policies, provided they stick to the virtues they hold. Issue networks, on the other hand, involve the engagement of groups and individuals that may not hold the same ideas but find unity due to issues that bothers them and the rest of the public.

Therefore, public administrators would inevitably have stronger linkages with policymakers in terms of influencing them over policy creation and revision, for they serve as the frontline that deals with issue networks and the various issues they hold. At the same time, however, issue networks must understand that the issues they are advocating must find viable basis on a simple set of reasons that would not cause public administrators to recommend vague proposals to policymakers, which could lead to the

enactment of vague policies. Yet, in cases where such may prove unavoidable due to the complexity of the issues per se, public administrators should always try their best to become more analytical and understanding in their approach to dealing with issue networks. In return, public administrators should put their partisan interests aside in favor of relatively genuine public interests coming from issue networks. Public administrators should thus act not as mere implementers of policies, but also as a bridging change agent connected with issue networks and policymakers (Stillman, 2009).

Personal Reflections on the Effect of Issue Networks on Public Administration

Since the concept of public administration flourished, many from the public saw it as a closed-door affair that is not entirely representative of their real interests. The emergence of political parties that has attracted special interest groups that find compatibility with their interests have since led to the formation of the Iron Triangle that includes public administrators and policymakers. Yet, issue networks have served as a strong reminder that public administration, alongside the rudimentary process of policymaking, should not find limits on the interests of political parties and special interest groups that are instrumental to the former in terms of reaching electoral victory (Stillman, 2009).

Issue networks may prove challenging in formation at first, given that various groups and individuals that do not have exactly the same interests would come together just to support specific issues. At the same time, however, most of the issues promoted by issue networks may greatly

concern the public as a whole. Partisan interests may not consistently reflect the resolution of issues promoted by issue networks, hence their difference to the latter. Therefore, issue networks serve to provide clearer paradigms to issues that need resolution through policymaking and implementation. It is just proper for public administrators to adjust to the demands of issue networks in order for them to become more efficient in their tasks to make public administration more receptive to public needs (Stillman, 2009).

References

Stillman, R. (2009). *Public administration: Concepts and cases*. Independence, KY: Cengage Learning.