Issue Networks and the Executive Establishment

Hugh Heclo

The connection between politics and administration arouses remarkably little interest in the United States. The presidency is considered more glamorous, Congress more intriguing, elections more exciting, and interest groups more troublesome. General levels of public interest can be gauged by the burst of indifference that usually greets the announcement of a new President’s cabinet or rumors of a political appointee’s resignation. Unless there is some White House “tie-in” or scandal (preferably both), news stories about presidential appointments are usually treated by the media as routine filler material.

This lack of interest in political administration is rarely found in other democratic countries, and it has not always prevailed in the United States. In most nations the ups and downs of political executives are taken as vital signs of the health of a government, indeed of its survival. In the United States, the nineteenth-century turmoil over one type of connection between politics and administration—party spoils—frequently overwhelmed any notion of presidential leadership. Anyone reading the history of those troubled decades is likely to be struck by the way in which political administration in Washington registered many of the deeper strains in American society at large. It is a curious switch that appointments to the bureaucracy should loom so large in the history of the nineteenth century, when the federal government did little, and be so completely discounted in the twentieth century, when government tries to do so much.

Political administration in Washington continues to register strains in American politics and society, although in ways more subtle than the nineteenth-century spoils scramble between Federalists and Democrats, Pro- and Anti-tariff forces, Nationalists and States-
Righters, and so on. Unlike many other countries, the United States has never created a high level, government-wide civil service. Neither has it been favored with a political structure that automatically produces a stock of experienced political manpower for top executive positions in government. How then does political administration in Washington work? More to the point, how might the expanding role of government be changing the connection between administration and politics?

Received opinion on this subject suggests that we already know the answers. Control is said to be vested in an informal but enduring series of "iron triangles" linking executive bureaus, congressional committees, and interest group clienteles with a stake in particular programs. A President or presidential appointee may occasionally try to muscle in, but few people doubt the capacity of these subgovernments to thwart outsiders in the long run.

Based largely on early studies of agricultural, water, and public works policies, the iron triangle concept is not so much wrong as it is disastrously incomplete. And the conventional view is especially inappropriate for understanding changes in politics and administration during recent years. Preoccupied with trying to find the few truly powerful actors, observers tend to overlook the power and influence that arise out of the configurations through which leading policy makers move and do business with each other. Looking for the closed triangles of control, we tend to miss the fairly open networks of people that increasingly impinge upon government.

To do justice to the subject would require a major study of the Washington community and the combined inspiration of a Leonard White and a James Young. Tolerating a fair bit of injustice, one can sketch a few of the factors that seem to be at work. The first is growth in the sheer mass of government activity and associated expectations. The second is the peculiar, loose-jointed play of influence that is accompanying this growth. Related to these two is the third: the layering and specialization that have overtaken the government work force, not least the political leadership of the bureaucracy.

All of this vastly complicates the job of presidential appointees both in controlling their own actions and in managing the bureaucracy. But there is much more at stake than the troubles faced by people in government. There is the deeper problem of connecting what politicians, officials, and their fellow travelers are doing in Washington with what the public at large can understand and accept. It is on this point that political administration registers some of the larger strains of American politics and society, much as it did in the nineteenth century. For what it shows is a dissolving of organized politics and a politicizing of organizational life throughout the nation.

**Government Growth in an Age of Improvement**

Few people doubt that we live in a time of big government. During his few years in office, President Kennedy struggled to avoid becoming the first President with a $100 billion budget. Just seventeen years later, President Carter easily slipped into history as the first $500 billion President. Even in constant prices, the 1979 federal budget was about double that of 1960. The late 1950s and the entire 1960s witnessed a wave of federal initiatives in health, civil rights, education, housing, manpower, income maintenance, transportation, and urban affairs. To these, later years have added newer types of welfare concerns: consumer protection, the environment, cancer prevention, and energy, to name only a few. Whatever today's conventional skepticism about the success of these programs, posterity will probably regard the last twenty-odd years as an extraordinarily ambitious, reform-minded period. The dominant feeling behind our age of improvement was best expressed by Adlai Stevenson in 1955 when he sensed a new willingness "to feel strongly, to be impatient, to want mightily to see that things are done better."

However, we need to be clear concerning what it is that has gotten big in government. Our modern age of improvement has occurred with astonishingly little increase in the overall size of the federal executive establishment. Figure 3-1 traces changes in the raw materials of government: money, rules, and people from 1949 to 1977. The year 1955 represented a return to more normal times after the Korean conflict and may be taken as a reasonable baseline. Since that year national spending has risen sixfold in current dollars and has more than doubled in constant terms. Federal regulations (as indicated by pages in the *Federal Register*) have also sextupled. In the cases of both money and regulations, it was during the second Eisen-

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Figure 3-1
FEDERAL GOVERNMENT GROWTH: MONEY, RULES, AND PEOPLE
(1949 = 100)

Expenditures
Regulations
Employment

Note: Federal spending on income and product account. Figures are on an
accrual basis and include trust account transactions with the public as well as
grants-in-aid to state and local governments. Employment covers total end-of-
year civilian employees in full-time, permanent, temporary, part-time, and
intermittent employment in the executive branch, including the Postal Service.
Regulations are indicated by numbers of pages in The Federal Register.

Source: The Tax Foundation, Facts and Figures on Government Finance, 1977,
table 20, p. 33; U.S. Office of Management and Budget, Special Analyses,
unpublished table compiled by the Executive Agencies Division, Office of the
Federal Register, Washington, D.C. I wish to express my gratitude to this
division for their cooperation in supplying information.

hower administration that a new and expensive activism in public
policy began to sweep through the national government. The land-
slide congressional victory by liberal Democrats in 1958, the challenge
of Sputnik, the new stirrings of the civil rights movement—these and
other factors created a wave of government spending and regulation
that has continued to roll ever since. The force of this growth was
felt at least as much in the Nixon-Ford years as in the earlier decade
of New Frontier/Great Society programs under Democratic Presi-
dents.

Yet federal employment grew hardly at all in comparison with
spending and regulations (up by less than one-fifth since 1955). Despite
widespread complaints about the size of government, the federal
bureaucracy is entitled to join foreign aid as one of that small
band of cases where close to zero-growth has been the norm for
the last twenty-five years.

The paradox of expanding government and stable bureaucracy
has two explanations. In purely budgetary terms, much of the increase
in federal outlays has been due to higher costs of existing policies.
It does not necessarily require more bureaucrats to write larger
checks. Such cost increases have been especially important in the
area of income maintenance programs. Federal payments to individ-
uals (social security, medical care, veterans’ pensions, unemployment
insurance, and public assistance) increased from $22 billion in 1960
to $167 billion in 1977, accounting for well over half of the total
increase in federal domestic spending during these years. Much of
this increase came not from adding new programs but from higher
bills for existing programs, particularly social security. Thus at the
end of 1977, when federal outlays were at $402 billion, President
Carter proposed a $500 billion budget for fiscal year 1979. Of the
$98 billion increase, about 90 percent was due to the higher cost of
existing policies and only 10 percent to new spending recommended
by the President. About one-quarter of the total cost increase was
due simply to income security programs.

This sort of momentum in government obviously presents seri-
ous challenges to politicians in general and to politically appointed
executives in particular. These are the people who tend to feel they
have a mandate to “change things, shake up the bureaucracy” and
who even in the best of circumstances have only a few years in which
to do so. But there is a second and at least equally important explana-

\footnote{Office of Management and Budget, The Budget in Brief, 1979, p. 21.}
\footnote{Office of Management and Budget, Special Analyses, Budget of the United
tion for the stability of the national bureaucracy in an era of increased policy interventionism. This factor creates even more profound problems for government leadership.

In the main, Washington has not attempted to apply its policies by administering programs directly to the general population. It has therefore been able to avoid bureaucratic gianism. This is true in many programs classified as payments to individuals (for example, Medicare and Medicaid funds pass through large numbers of administrative middlemen), and it is especially true in several of the policy areas that have grown the fastest since the mid-fifties. One such area is investment and subsidies for the physical environment. Grants for mass transit, waste treatment plants, highways, and the like have tripled in real terms since 1960. Another area rich in indirect administration falls under the heading of social investment and services; spending for education, health care, employment training, urban development, and social services has risen more than tenfold since 1960. Rather than building and staffing its own administrative facilities for these programs, the federal government has preferred to act through intermediary organizations—state governments, city halls, third party payers, consultants, contractors, and many others. Administratively, the result is that what was true during the Eisenhower administration remains true today: despite huge increases in government programs, about the only time an ordinary citizen sees a federal bureaucrat is when his mail is delivered, his taxes are audited, or a trip to the local social security office becomes necessary (unless of course an FBI agent knocks on his door).

New policies associated with our modern age of improvement have tended to promote the idea of government by remote control. Political administration in Washington is heavily conditioned by an accumulation of methods for paying the bills and regulating the conduct of intermediary organizations. This pattern is consistent with a long tradition of fragmented and decentralized administration. Moreover, it offers important political and bureaucratic advantages. Spreading cash grants among various third party payers is an important way of building support for policies, translating otherwise indivisible collective goods into terms suitable for distributive politics. Rather than having to convince everyone of the value of a clean environment, government administrators can preside over a scramble for federal funds to subsidize construction of local sewage treatment plants. Likewise, in spending for health, manpower, transportation, and so on, the federal government has sidestepped the tremendously difficult task of creating a broad national consensus for its own administered activities. It has done so by counting on third parties to crave the funds which the national government makes available to serve its purposes. Recently Charles Schultze has argued that Washington should make greater use of market incentives to meet public ends. Yet as far as fiscal relations in the political marketplace are concerned, a strong case could be made that in fact the federal government has done little else.

In terms of using intermediaries to administer the new melioristic policies, the mushrooming of federal regulations has much in common with federal spending. Rather than having to work at building and policing its own delivery mechanisms, the Washington bureaucracy can use regulations and then rest content with telling other public and private bureaucracies what should be done. This has the added advantage of allowing federal policy makers to distribute not only funds but also much of the blame when things go wrong.

One might suppose that the executive establishment in Washington has put itself in an extremely comfortable position, retailing the promise of improved policies and wholesaling the administrative headaches connected with delivery. Unfortunately, life has not been so kind. People increasingly expect Washington to solve problems but not to get in anyone’s way in the process. The result is that policy goals are piled on top of each other without generating any commitment to the administrative wherewithal to achieve them. Even in the depths of anti-Washington sentiment, the overwhelming majority of Americans agreed that the federal government should control inflation, prevent depressions, assure international peace, regulate private business, and also ensure that the poor are taken care of, the hungry fed, and every person assured a minimum standard of living. A comparably large majority also felt that the federal government was too “big and bureaucratic.” As it turns out, therefore, the executive establishment in Washington tends to get the worst of both worlds—blamed for poor delivery by its public customers and besieged with bills from its middlemen.

Fraying at the Center

The strategy of responding to aspirations for improvement while maintaining a no-growth national administrative machine and relying on middlemen has succeeded in doing one thing. It has saved Washington policy makers from having to cope with what would otherwise have been an immense, nationwide bureaucracy. Yet far from simplifying operations, this "success" has vastly complicated the connection between administration and politics in Washington. Lacking their own electoral mandates, political administrators have always been in an ambivalent position in American government. Every ambitious new program, every clever innovation in indirect administration has merely deepened this ambivalence.

What is occurring at the national level is a peculiar "push-pull effect" on the relation between democratic politics and the executive establishment. On the one hand, government growth has pushed more and more policy concerns out of the federal government's own structure and into masses of intermediary, issue-conscious groups. On the other hand, the requirements for managing such a complex system are pulling government leadership further and further away from the nontechnical, nonspecialist understanding of the ordinary citizen and politician. It is worth looking more closely at how it is possible to be both politicizing organizational life and depoliticizing democratic leadership.

All Join In. During 1977–1978, Harvard University hired a Washington lobbyist and joined a loose group called Friends of DNA in an effort to influence federal regulation of research into the creation of new forms of life. The same year, the former militant chairman of the Black Panther party, Bobby Seale, founded a new Washington organization to lobby for community-controlled poverty programs. And the president of the national machinists' union convened a National Energy Coalition composed of environmentalists, neighborhood organizers, and consumer advocates. Perhaps not coincidentally, forty-seven congressmen announced their retirement, citing as the major reason a lack of enjoyment in the job.

Trivial in their own right, these incidents suggest something deeper than the feeling (probably true) that exercising power is not as much fun as it used to be in the clubby days of Washington politics. As more and more puzzling, unfamiliar policy issues have been thrust on government, more and more fluid groups have been unexpectedly mobilized. As proliferating groups have claimed a stake and clamored for a place in the policy process, they have helped to diffuse the focus of political and administrative leadership.

What has happened at the subnational level of government is a striking illustration of this process. Much of the bureaucratic expansion that might otherwise have occurred nationally has taken place in state and local governments. Between 1955 and 1977 state and local public employment grew by more than two and one-half times, to 12 million people, while federal employment hovered at around 2.5 million. The increased interdependence of subnational and national bureaucracies has led to the growth of what Samuel H. Beer has termed the intergovernmental lobby. Those in Washington whose memories go back a generation or more can recall a time when it was something of an occasion for a governor to undertake a mission to Washington. As Senator Moynihan (who was a junior aide to Governor Averell Harriman in the 1940s) put it, "You'd spend time planning how many shirts to take. Going to Washington was a very big deal." Today, not only do governors or mayors as groups have their own specialized staffs permanently stationed in Washington, but large state governments, major units within state governments, and individual cities frequently have their own Washington offices or hired representatives. In addition to umbrella organizations such as the National Governors' Conference, the Conference of State Governments, the U.S. Conference of Mayors, the National League of Cities, the National Conference of State Legislatures, and the National Association of Counties, one finds the intergovernmental lobby peopled with representatives from groups such as the New York State Association of Counties, cities such as Detroit and Boston, major counties, various state water districts, boards of regents, and so on and on and on.

Similarly, an even larger number of private and semi-private organizations have grown up as important extensions of the new federal policies. One of the enduring legacies of every reform movement in the United States—whether it was the Progressives' good government movement, Hoover's attempts at engineering voluntarism, or FDR's New Deal—has been to create new groups with a stake in the reformed processes and programs. So too our own age of improve-

10 Office of Management and Budget, Special Analyses, 1979 Budget, p. 33.
ment has encouraged a blossoming of policy participants and kibitzers. In this instance (and this differentiates it somewhat from earlier periods) virtually everyone has accepted the idea that the national government in Washington is the decisive arena and will continue to be so indefinitely.

Some groups are nurtured by the government’s own need for administrative help. For example, new neighborhood associations have been asked to take a major part in Washington’s urban and housing programs. Or when the Consumer Product Safety Commission sets new standards for extension cords, the National Electrical Manufacturers’ Association plays a major part in drawing up the new designs. Some groups are almost spontaneously called into being by what they can gain or lose from new federal policies or—perhaps just as often—the unforeseen consequences of these policies. For example, in the early 1970s Washington launched vigorous new efforts to promote grain exports. This generated not only new borrowing by farmers to expand production but also a new, militant farmers’ organization (American Agriculture) when prices later fell from their export-led highs.

A key factor in the proliferation of groups is the almost inevitable tendency of successfully enacted policies unwittingly to propagate hybrid interests. The area of health care is rich in examples. Far from solidifying the established medical interests, federal funding and regulation of health care since the mid-1960s have had diverse impacts and therefore have tended to fragment what was once a fairly monolithic system of medical representation. Public policy has not only uncovered but also helped to create diverging interests among hospital associations, insurance companies, medical schools, hospital equipment manufacturers, local health planning groups, preventive medicine advocates, nonteaching research centers, and many others. This does not necessarily mean that every group is in conflict with all of the others all of the time. The point is that even when government is not pursuing a deliberate strategy of divide and conquer, its activist policies greatly increase the incentives for groups to form around the differential effects of these policies, each refusing to allow any other group to speak in its name.

While nothing should necessarily be assumed about their political power, trade and professional associations offer a revealing pattern of growth. The number of such groups has grown sharply during three periods: during the First World War, the first half of the 1930s, and the Second World War. Since 1945 the total number has been continuously increasing, and in recent years more and more of these groups have found it useful to make their headquarters in Washington. During the 1970s the number of trade and professional associations headquartered in Washington surpassed that in New York for the first time, climbing to 1,800 organizations with 40,000 employees in 1977. Well over half of the nation’s largest associations (those with annual budgets of over $1 million) are now located in the Washington metropolitan area. This takes no account of the large number of consumer and other public interest groups that have sprouted all over the nation’s capital since the early 1960s.

Of course Americans’ love affair with interest groups is hardly a new phenomenon. From abolitionists to aristocrats there has never been a lack of issue-conscious organizations; in the 1830s, Tocqueville described how the tariff question generated an early version of local consumer groups and a national lobbying association. Yet if the current situation is a mere outgrowth of old tendencies, it is so in the same sense that a 16-lane spaghetti interchange is the mere elaboration of a country crossroads. With more public policies, more groups are being mobilized and there are more complex relationships among them. Since very few policies ever seem to drop off the public agenda as more are added, congestion among those interested in various issues grows, the chances for accidental collisions increase, and the interaction tends to take on a distinctive group-life of its own in the Washington community. One scene in a recent Jacques Tati film pictures a Paris traffic circle so dense with traffic that no one can get in or out; instead, drivers spend their time socializing with each other as they drive in endless circles. Group politics in Washington may be becoming such a merry-go-round.

How these changes influence the substance of public policy processes depends on what it is that the burgeoning numbers of par-

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14 A similar tendency for public involvement to divide private interests occurred with earlier health initiatives in other countries. See Arnold Heidenheimer, Hugh Heclo, and Carolyn Adams, Comparative Public Policy (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1976).


16 For example, a statement issued by Ralph Nader on April 24, 1976, criticizing the Carter energy program included endorsements by the National Resources Defense Council Inc., Friends of the Earth Inc., the Environmental Policy Center, the Environmental Action Foundation, Environmentalists for Full Employment, the Wilderness Society, Consumer Action Now, the Sierra Club, the Environmental Defense Fund Inc., the National Parks and Conservation Association, and the National Consumers League.

ticipants want. Obviously their wants vary greatly, but to a large extent they are probably accurately reflected in the areas of greatest policy growth since the late 1950s—programs seeking social betterment in terms of civil rights, income, housing, environment, consumer protection, and so on—what I will simply refer to as “welfare policies.” The hallmark of these policies seems to reflect attitudes in the general public. What is wanted is not more equal outcomes or unfair preferences. No, if there is a theme in the clamor of group politics and public policy, it is the idea of compensation. Compensation for what? For past racial wrongs, for current overcharging of consumers, for future environmental damage. The idea of compensatory policy—that the federal government should put things right—fits equally well for the groups representing the disadvantaged (special treatment is required for truly equal opportunity to prevail) and for those representing the advantaged (any market-imposed loss can be defined as a special hardship). The same holds for newer public interest groups (government action is required to redress the impact of selfish private interests). If middle-class parents have not saved enough for college costs they should be compensated with tuition tax credits. If public buildings are inaccessible to the physically handicapped, government regulations should change that. If farmers overinvest during good times, they should be granted redress from the consequences of their actions. The old American saying “there ough’n’ta be a law” had a negative connotation of preventing someone from getting away with something. Today the more prevalent feeling is “there ough’n’ta be a policy,” and the connotation of getting in on society’s compensations is decidedly positive.

In sum, new initiatives in federal funding and regulation have infused old and new organizations with a public policy dimension, especially when such groups are used as administrative middlemen and facilitators. Moreover, the growing body of compensatory interventions by government has helped create a climate of acceptance for even more groups to insist that things be set right on their behalf. What matters is not so much that organizations are moving to Washington as that Washington’s policy problems are coming to occupy so many different facets of organizational life in the United States.

Policy as an Intramural Activity. A second tendency cuts in a direction opposite to the widening group participation in public policy. Expanding welfare policies and Washington’s reliance on indirect administration have encouraged the development of specialized subcultures composed of highly knowledgeable policy-watchers. Some of these people have advanced professional degrees, some do not. What they all have in common is the detailed understanding of specialized issues that comes from sustained attention to a given policy debate.

Certain of these changes are evident in the government’s own work force. Employees in the field and in Washington who perform the routine chores associated with direct administration have become less prominent. More important have become those officials with the necessary technical and supervisory skills to oversee what other people are doing. Thus the surge in federal domestic activities in the 1960s and 1970s may not have increased the overall size of the bureaucracy very much, but it did markedly expand the upper and upper-middle levels of officialdom. Compared with an 18 percent rise in total civilian employment, mid-level executive positions in the federal government (that is, supergrade and public law 313 equivalents) have increased approximately 90 percent since 1960. Some of these changes are due to a slow inflation of job titles and paper credentials that can be found in private as well as public organizations. But case studies in the 1960s suggested that most of this escalation occurring in the Washington bureaucracy could be traced to the new and expanded public programs of that decade. The general effect of these policy changes has been to require more technical skills and higher supervisory levels, overlaying routine technicians with specialist engineers, insurance claims examiners with claims administrators, and so on. Approximately two-fifths of mid-level executives in the bureaucracy (grades 16–18 or the equivalent) are what might loosely be termed scientists, though frequently they are in fact science managers who oversee the work of other people inside and outside of the government.

Increasing complexity and specialization are affecting leaders in all modern organizations, even profit-oriented enterprises with stable sets of clear goals. For decision makers in government—where the policy goals have been neither stable nor clear in the last twenty years—the pressures for more expert staff assistance have become immense. This is as true for legislators as it is for public executives. President Nixon estimated that he personally saw no more than 200,000 of the 42 million pieces of paper in his own presidential materials. Recent studies of Congress estimate that the average member of the House of Representatives has, out of an eleven-hour


workday, only eleven minutes to devote personally to reading and
only twelve minutes in his or her own office to spend personally on
writing legislation and speeches.20 Congress, like the executive branch,
has responded to the pressures by creating more specialists and top-
side staff. Since 1957 the total number of personal and committee
staff on the Hill has climbed from 4,300 to 11,000 and over 20,000
more persons service the legislature from institutional staff positions
(the General Accounting Office, Congressional Budget Office, and so
on).21 At the core of this blossoming congressional bureaucracy are
bright, often remarkably young, technocrats who are almost in-
distinguishable from the analysts and subject matter specialists in
the executive branch.

There are many straws in the wind to indicate the growing skill
base of policy professionals in Washington. Executive search firms
(so-called headhunters) have found a booming market in recent years,
with many new firms being founded and prestigious New York
organizations opening up Washington offices. One indicator of this
movement, the amount of “professional opportunity” advertising
in the press, now puts Washington on a par with Los Angeles and
New York as an executive hunting ground for the private sector.
The reason is clear. As government activities and regulations have
grown, the value of policy specialists who understand the complex
Washington environment has appreciated in the eyes of all of the
private organizations with a stake in government activity. Another
indicator is the mushrooming of new Washington law firms. Typically
these firms are headed by former government officials and practice in
substantial areas of law and policy that did not exist twenty years
ago. Table 3-1 gives some idea of this trend.

Again it is tempting to borrow a term from Professor Beer and
to refer to these groups of policy specialists as constituting a
“professional-bureaucratic complex.” Certainly there are many core
groups with scientific or professional training which have carved out
spheres of bureaucratic influence over health, highways, education,
and so on. Likewise the familiar nexus of less professional, economic
interests can still be found linking various parts of the Washington
community. But the general arrangement that is emerging is some-
what different from the conventional image of iron triangles tying
together executive bureaus, interest groups, and congressional com-
mittees in all-powerful alliances.

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21 Harrison W. Fox, Jr. and Susan Webb Hammond, Congressional Staffs (New
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Unfortunately, our standard political conceptions of power and control are not very well suited to the loose-jointed play of influence that is emerging in political administration. We tend to look for one group exerting dominance over another, for subgovernments that are strongly insulated from other outside forces in the environment, for policies that get "produced" by a few "makers." Seeing former government officials opening law firms or joining a new trade association, we naturally think of ways in which they are trying to conquer and control particular pieces of government machinery.

Obviously questions of power are still important. But for a host of policy initiatives undertaken in the last twenty years it is all but impossible to identify clearly who the dominant actors are. Who is controlling those actions that go to make up our national policy on abortions, or on income redistribution, or consumer protection, or energy? Looking for the few who are powerful, we tend to overlook the many whose webs of influence provoke and guide the exercise of power. These webs, or what I will call "issue networks," are particularly relevant to the highly intricate and confusing welfare policies that have been undertaken in recent years.

The notion of iron triangles and subgovernments presumes small circles of participants who have succeeded in becoming largely autonomous. Issue networks, on the other hand, comprise a large number of participants with quite variable degrees of mutual commitment or of dependence on others in their environment; in fact it is almost impossible to say where a network leaves off and its environment begins. Iron triangles and subgovernments suggest a stable set of participants coalesced to control fairly narrow public programs which are in the direct economic interest of each party to the alliance. Issue networks are almost the reverse image in each respect. Participants move in and out of the networks constantly. Rather than groups united in dominance over a program, no one, as far as one can tell, is in control of the policies and issues. Any direct material interest is often secondary to intellectual or emotional commitment. Network members reinforce each other's sense of issues as their interests, rather than (as standard political or economic models would have it) interests defining positions on issues.

Issue networks operate at many levels, from the vocal minority who turn up at local planning commission hearings to the renowned professor who is quietly telephoned by the White House to give a quick "reading" on some participant or policy. The price of buying into one or another issue network is watching, reading, talking about, and trying to act on particular policy problems. Powerful interest groups can be found represented in networks but so too can individuals in or out of government who have a reputation for being knowledgeable. Particular professions may be prominent, but the true experts in the networks are those who are issue-skilled (that is, well informed about the ins and outs of a particular policy debate) regardless of formal professional training. More than mere technical experts, network people are policy activists who know each other through the issues. Those who emerge to positions of wider leadership are policy politicians—experts in using experts, tacticians of knowledge in a world hungry for right decisions.

In the old days—when the primary problem of government was assumed to be doing what was right, rather than knowing what was right—policy knowledge could be contained in the slim adages of public administration. Public executives, it was thought, needed to know how to execute. They needed power commensurate with their responsibility. Nowadays, of course, political administrators do not execute but are involved in making highly important decisions on society's behalf, and they must mobilize policy intermediaries to deliver the goods. Knowing what is right becomes crucial, and since no one knows that for sure, going through the process of dealing with those who are judged knowledgeable (or at least continuously concerned) becomes even more crucial. Instead of power commensurate with responsibility, issue networks seek influence commensurate with their understanding of the various, complex social choices being made. Of course some participants would like nothing better than complete power over the issues in question. Others seem to want little more than the security that comes with being well informed. As the executive of one new group moving to Washington put it, "We didn't come here to change the world; we came to minimize our surprises." 22

Whatever the participants' motivation, it is the issue network that ties together what would otherwise be the contradictory tendencies of, on the one hand, more widespread organizational participation in public policy and, on the other, more narrow technocratic specialization in complex modern policies. Such networks need to be distinguished from three other more familiar terms used in connection with political administration. An issue network is a shared-knowledge group having to do with some aspect (or, as defined by the network, some problem) of public policy. It is therefore more well-defined than, first, a shared-attention group or "public"; those

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in the networks are likely to have a common base of information and understanding of how one knows about policy and identifies its problems. But knowledge does not necessarily produce agreement. Issue networks may or may not, therefore, be mobilized into, second, a shared-action group (creating a coalition) or, third, a shared-belief group (becoming a conventional interest organization). Increasingly, it is through networks of people who regard each other as knowledgeable, or at least as needing to be answered, that public policy issues tend to be refined, evidence debated, and alternative options worked out—though rarely in any controlled, well-organized way.

What does an issue network look like? It is difficult to say precisely, for at any given time only one part of a network may be active and through time the various connections may intensify or fade among the policy intermediaries and the executive and congressional bureaucracies. For example, there is no single health policy network but various sets of people knowledgeable and concerned about cost-control mechanisms, insurance techniques, nutritional programs, prepaid plans, and so on. At one time, those expert in designing a nationwide insurance system may seem to be operating in relative isolation, until it becomes clear that previous efforts to control costs have already created precedents that have to be accommodated in any new system, or that the issue of federal funding for abortions has laid land mines in the path of any workable plan.

The debate on energy policy is rich in examples of the kaleidoscopic interaction of changing issue networks. The Carter administration’s initial proposal was worked out among experts who were closely tied in to conservation-minded networks. Soon it became clear that those concerned with macroeconomic policies had been largely bypassed in the planning, and last-minute amendments were made in the proposal presented to Congress, a fact that was not lost on the networks of leading economists and economic correspondents. Once congressional consideration began, it quickly became evident that attempts to define the energy debate in terms of a classic confrontation between big oil companies and consumer interests were doomed. More and more policy watchers joined in the debate, bringing to it their own concerns and analyses: tax reformers, nuclear power specialists, civil rights groups interested in more jobs; the list soon grew beyond the wildest dreams of the original energy policy planners. The problem, it became clear, was that no one could quickly turn the many networks of knowledgeable people into a shared-action coalition, much less into a single, shared-attitude group believing it faced the moral equivalent of war. Or, if it was a war, it was a Vietnam-type quagmire.

It would be foolish to suggest that the clouds of issue networks that have accompanied expanding national policies are set to replace the more familiar politics of subgovernments in Washington. What they are doing is to overlay the once stable political reference points with new forces that complicate calculations, decrease predictability, and impose considerable strains on those charged with government leadership. The overlay of networks and issue politics not only confronts but also seeps down into the formerly well-established politics of particular policies and programs. Social security, which for a generation had been quietly managed by a small circle of insiders, becomes controversial and politicized. The Army Corps of Engineers, once the picturebook example of control by subgovernments, is dragged into the brawl on environmental politics. The once quiet “traffic safety establishment” finds its own safety permanently endangered by the consumer movement. Confrontation between networks and iron triangles in the Social and Rehabilitation Service, the disintegration of the mighty politics of the Public Health Service and its corps—the list could be extended into a chronicle of American national government during the last generation.23 The point is that a somewhat new and difficult dynamic is being played out in the world of politics and administration. It is not what has been feared for so long: that technocrats and other people in white coats will expropriate the policy process. If there is to be any expropriation, it is likely to be by the policy activists, those who care deeply about a set of issues and are determined to shape the fabric of public policy accordingly.

The Technopols

The many new policy commitments of the last twenty years have brought about a play of influence that is many-stranded and loose. Iron triangles or other clear shapes may embrace some of the participants, but the larger picture in any policy area is likely to be one involving many other policy specialists. More than ever, policy making is becoming an intramural activity among expert issue-watchers,

positions were filled during 1977 with people from private media organizations). In recent years, the claims of women and minorities for executive positions have added a further kind of positional patronage, where it is the number of positions rather than any agreed policy agenda that is important. After one year, about 11 percent of President Carter’s appointees were women, mainly from established law firms, or what is sometimes referred to as the Ladies’ Auxiliary of the Old Boys’ Network.

How to make sense of this welter of political executives? Certainly there is a subtlety in the arrangements by which top people become top people and deal with each other. For the fact is that the issue networks share information not only about policy problems but also about people. Rarely are high political executives people who have an overriding identification with a particular interest group or credentials as leading figures in a profession. Rather they are people with recognized reputations in particular areas of public policy. The fluid networks through which they move can best be thought of as proto-bureaucracies. There are subordinate and superordinate positions through which they climb from lesser to greater renown and recognition, but these are not usually within the same organization. It is indeed a world of large-scale bureaucracies but one interlaced with loose, personal associations in which reputations are established by word of mouth. The reputations in question depend little on what, in Weberian terms, would be bureaucratically rational evaluations of objective performance or on what the political scientist would see as the individual’s power rating. Even less do reputations depend on opinions in the electorate at large. What matters are the assessments of people like themselves concerning how well, in the short term, the budding technopol is managing each of his assignments in and at the fringes of government.

Consider, for example, the thirteen department secretaries in Jimmy Carter’s original cabinet. In theory at least, one could spin out reasons for thinking that these top political appointments would be filled by longstanding Carter loyalists, or representatives of major Democratic party factions, or recognized interest group leaders. In fact, none of these labels is an accurate characterization. One thing that stands out clearly is the continuation of a long-term trend away from relying on party politicians, others active in electoral politics, or clientele spokesmen, to fill executive positions. Nelson Polsby has concluded that at most, three members of the original Carter cabinet
fell into the clientele or party political category.24 Polsby goes on to divide the remainder into specialists and generalists, but a closer look at individual careers suggests how almost all of them—the Vances and the Califanos, the Browns and the Schlesingers—came out of or had a lasting affinity to particular issue networks.

The background of Carter's cabinet can be described in terms of movement among four great estates: academia, corporate business and the law, the government bureaucracy, and (to a lesser extent) elective politics. To represent these movements on a motionless page is difficult, but even a rough, schematic presentation of top public executives' careers reveals several outstanding features (see Table 3-2). Obviously no one estate is able to dominate all of the top positions. Moreover, every cabinet secretary has seen service in more than one of the major sectors. While there is movement from lower to higher positions, few people move up through the ranks of a single organization or sector in order to reach the top slots. Rather they move in hierarchies that stretch across the estates. Lower academic or business positions are parlayed into higher political appointments; lower political appointments into higher business positions; and so on.

Finally, and most importantly, all of President Carter's new cabinet secretaries had established reputations for handling leading problems that were regarded by issue-watchers as having a place on the public agenda. The secretary of interior had an outstanding record in dealing with conservation and environmental issues. The secretary of labor was a recognized expert in labor economics, particularly the problems of minorities. The secretary of health, education, and welfare had presided over the creation of the Johnson Great Society programs a decade earlier. The secretary of defense was one of the insiders in the arcane world of defense technology. The secretary of commerce had a well established reputation as an advocate for consumer, minority, and women's issues. And so it went. For the one new field where issues and networks were poorly formed, the Energy Department, Carter chose a respected technocrat's technocrat with a strong track record in strategic theory, defense management, and bureaucratic politics.

The emergence of the policy politicians in our national politics goes back many years, at least to the new policy commitments of the New Deal era. Policy initiatives undertaken in the last generation have only intensified the process. For example, since 1960 the selec-

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<tr>
<th>Cabinet Member</th>
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<th>Government</th>
<th>Corporate Business/Law</th>
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<td>(Health, Education,</td>
<td>special assistant</td>
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<td>law practice 1969-71</td>
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<td>and Welfare)</td>
<td>1961-63</td>
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<td>Bob Bergland</td>
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<td>Juanita Kreps</td>
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<td>dean 1969-72</td>
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<td>vice president 1973-76</td>
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<td>cabinet secretary</td>
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<td>Patricia Harris</td>
<td>LL.B.</td>
<td>attorney 1960-61</td>
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<td>cabinet secretary</td>
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Note: Part-time membership on corporate boards is not included.  
Source: Compiled by the author from biographies supplied by the respective cabinet secretaries’ offices.
tion process for presidential appointees has seen important changes. Using somewhat different techniques, each White House staff has struggled to find new ways of becoming less dependent on the crop of job applicants produced by normal party channels and of reaching out to new pools of highly skilled executive manpower. The rationale behind these efforts is always that executive leadership in the bureaucracy requires people who are knowledgeable about complex policies and acceptable to the important groups that claim an interest in the ever-growing number of issue areas. Not surprisingly, the policy experts within the various networks who are consulted typically end by recommending each other. Thus over half of the people President-elect Carter identified as his outside advisers on political appointments ended up in executive jobs themselves. Similarly, while candidate Carter’s political manager promised to resign if establishment figures such as Cyrus Vance and Zbigniew Brzezinski were given appointments after the election, at least half of the candidate’s expert foreign policy advisers (including Vance and Brzezinski) wound up in major political positions with the administration.

Historical studies tend to confirm the impression of change in the political executive system. In the past, there have generally been short-term fluctuations in a few social attributes (religion, types of school attended) that can be associated with changes in party control of the presidency. But, especially since the early 1960s, changes in party control of the White House have produced few distinctive differences in the characteristics of political appointees. Instead, the longer-term trend toward specialized policy expertise tends to wash over the short-term political fluctuations. Law, the traditional career base for generalists, has become progressively less important in filling the ranks of political executives. Academia, think tanks, and people with specialized credentials have been gaining in importance. If law itself were broken down into general versus specialized practice, the trend would probably appear even more sharply. In any event, the historical findings tentatively support the view that “there is a growing distance between electoral coalitions and governing coalitions. . . . The bases a presidential candidate needs to touch in order to win election are progressively unrelated to the bases a president needs to govern.”

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Below the level of cabinet secretaries, the same changes in political administrators stand out even more sharply. Fifty years ago there were few political subordinates to the top executives in the departments, and scholars dismissed the career background of those who were there as a “miscellany of party assignments and political posts.” Today the people filling the much larger number of subordinate political executive positions are rarely partisan figures with any significant ties to party or electorate. Instead they are part of a political bureaucracy of policy specialists that sits atop and beside the permanent career bureaucracy in Washington. The key indicators for these changes are not just the obviously larger numbers of appointees. More revealing of the political bureaucracy is the growing compartmentalization by functional specialty and the increased layering of appointed executives. Figure 3-2 offers three snapshots of the top political manpower in one department: before the arrival of the New Deal, before the Kennedy-Johnson Great Society, and at the present time. Despite the picture that Figure 3-2 presents of bureaucratic expansion in political manpower, the Labor Department is actually among the smallest agencies, with a reputation for one of the leanest staff structures, in Washington.

The Agriculture Department offers another good example of change in one of the oldest and most traditional domestic departments. At one time, agricultural policies could be accounted for fairly economically in terms of general purpose farmers’ organizations, particular bureaus in the Department of Agriculture, and a congressional farm bloc in legislative committees and subcommittees. Today one would have to feed into the equation not only more specialized expressions of agricultural interests (different associations for particular commodities, corporate “farmers,” grass-roots family farm groups, and so on) but also environmentalists, international economic and foreign policy advocates, and civil rights, nutritional, and consumer groups. Whereas a previous agriculture secretary might have surrounded himself with a few political cronies and a clutch of Farm Bureau or National Farmers’ Union insiders, the current secretary’s inner circle is described as including “three women (one of them black), a Mexican-American, an environmentalist, two economists, and a politician.” Within a year of his appointment the


Figure 3-2

1933
Secretary

Assistant secretaries

1960
Secretary

Undersecretary

Assistant secretaries

1976
Secretary

Undersecretary

Deputy undersecretaries

Assistant secretaries


politician was gone after reported fights with one of the “women,” who was also the former executive director of the Consumer Federation of America.

Of course, if appointed executives were part of a coherent political team, the larger numbers and deeper issue specialization might suggest a stronger capacity for democratic leadership in the bureaucracy. But as participants themselves often come to realize, this is not the case. Political executives’ tenure in a given position is short. Their political bases of support in the electorate at large are ambiguous at best. Any mutual commitment to each other is problematic. Thus coherent political leadership in the bureaucracy—especially leadership with any ties to ordinary democratic politics—is normally at a premium. What one can count on finding in and at the fringes of every specialized part of the political bureaucracy are policy networks. It is likely to be in these that judgments about performance are made, reputations established or lost, and replacements for appointees—whoever may be the President—supplied.

The Executive Leadership Problem

Washington has always relied on informal means of producing political leaders in government. This is no less true now than in the days when party spoils ruled presidential appointments. It is the informal mechanisms that have changed. No doubt some of the increasing emphasis on educational credentials, professional specialization, and technical facility merely reflects changes in society at large. But it is also important to recognize that government activity has itself been changing the informal mechanisms that produce political administrators. Accumulating policy commitments have become crucial forces affecting the kind of executive leadership that emerges. E. E. Schattschneider put it better when he observed that “new policies create new politics.”

For many years now the list of issues on the public agenda has grown more dense as new policy concerns have been added and few dropped. Administratively, this has proliferated the number of policy intermediaries. Politically, it has mobilized more and more groups of people who feel they have a stake, a determined stake, in this or that issue of public policy. These changes are in turn encouraging further specialization of the government’s work force and bureaucratic layering in its political leadership. However, the term “political” needs

to be used carefully. Modern officials responsible for making the connection between politics and administration bear little resemblance to the party politicians who once filled patronage jobs. Rather, today's political executive is likely to be a person knowledgeable about the substance of particular issues and adept at moving among the networks of people who are intensely concerned about them.

What are the implications for American government and politics? The verdict cannot be one-sided, if only because political management of the bureaucracy serves a number of diverse purposes. At least three important advantages can be found in the emerging system.

First, the reliance on issue networks and policy politicians is obviously consistent with some of the larger changes in society. Ordinary voters are apparently less constrained by party identification and more attracted to an issue-based style of politics. Party organizations are said to have fallen into a state of decay and to have become less capable of supplying enough highly qualified executive manpower. If government is committed to intervening in more complex, specialized areas, it is useful to draw upon the experts and policy specialists for the public management of these programs. Moreover, the congruence between an executive leadership and an electorate that are both uninterested in party politics may help stabilize a rapidly changing society. Since no one really knows how to solve the policy puzzles, policy politicians have the important quality of being disposable without any serious political ramifications (unless of course there are major symbolic implications, as in President Nixon's firing of Attorney General Elliot Richardson).

Within government, the operation of issue networks may have a second advantage in that they link Congress and the executive branch in ways that political parties no longer can. For many years, reformers have sought to revive the idea of party discipline as a means of spanning the distance between the two branches and turning their natural competition to useful purposes. But as the troubled dealings of recent Democratic Presidents with their majorities in Congress have indicated, political parties tend to be a weak bridge.

Meanwhile, the linkages of technocracy between the branches are indeliberately growing. The congressional bureaucracy that has blossomed in Washington during the last generation is in many ways like the political bureaucracy in the executive branch. In general, the new breed of congressional staffer is not a legislative crony or beneficiary of patronage favors. Personal loyalty to the congressman is still paramount, but the new-style legislative bureaucrat is likely to be someone skilled in dealing with certain complex policy issues, possibly with credentials as a policy analyst, but certainly an expert in using other experts and their networks.

None of this means an absence of conflict between President and Congress. Policy technicians in the two branches are still working for different sets of clients with different interests. The point is that the growth of specialized policy networks tends to perform the same useful services that it was once hoped a disciplined national party system would perform. Sharing policy knowledge, the networks provide a minimum common framework for political debate and decision in the two branches. For example, on energy policy, regardless of one's position on gas deregulation or incentives to producers, the policy technocracy has established a common language for discussing the issues, a shared grammar for identifying the major points of contention, a mutually familiar rhetoric of argumentation. Whether in Congress or the executive branch or somewhere outside, the "movers and shakers" in energy policy (as in health insurance, welfare reform, strategic arms limitation, occupational safety, and a host of other policy areas) tend to share an analytic repertoire for coping with the issues. Like experienced party politicians of earlier times, policy politicians in the knowledge networks may not agree; but they understand each other's way of looking at the world and arguing about policy choices.

A third advantage is the increased maneuvering room offered to political executives by the loose-jointed play of influence. If appointees were ambassadors from clearly defined interest groups and professions, or if policy were monopolized in iron triangles, then the chances for executive leadership in the bureaucracy would be small. In fact, however, the proliferation of administrative middlemen and networks of policy watchers offers new strategic resources for public managers. These are mainly opportunities to split and recombine the many sources of support and opposition that exist on policy issues. Of course, there are limits on how far a political executive can go in shopping for a constituency, but the general tendency over time has been to extend those limits. A secretary of labor will obviously pay close attention to what the AFL-CIO has to say, but there are many other voices to hear, not only in the union movement but also minority groups interested in jobs, state and local officials administering the department's programs, consumer groups worried about wage-push inflation, employees faced with unsafe working conditions, and so on. By the same token, former Secretary of Transportation William Coleman found new room for maneuver on the problem of landings by supersonic planes when he opened up the setpiece debate.
sophisticated claims and counterclaims to the point that the non-specialist becomes inclined to concede everything and believe nothing that he hears. The ongoing debates on energy policy, health crises, or arms limitation are rich in examples of public skepticism about what “they,” the abstruse policy experts, are doing and saying. While the highly knowledgeable have been playing a larger role in government, the proportion of the general public concluding that those running the government don’t seem to know what they are doing has risen rather steadily. Like­wise, the more government has tried to help, the more feelings of public helplessness have grown.

No doubt many factors and events are linked to these changing public attitudes. The point is that the increasing prominence of issue networks is bound to aggravate problems of legitimacy and public disenchantment. Policy activists have little desire to recognize an unpleasant fact: that their influential systems for knowledgeable policy making tend to make democratic politics more difficult. There are at least four reasons.

Complexity. Democratic political competition is based on the idea of trying to simplify complexity into a few, broadly intelligible choices. The various issue networks, on the other hand, have a stake in searching out complexity in what might seem simple. Those who deal with particular policy issues over the years recognize that policy objectives are usually vague and results difficult to measure. Actions relevant to one policy goal can frequently be shown to be inconsistent with others. To gain a reputation as a knowledgeable participant, one must juggle all of these complexities and demand that other technocrats in the issue networks do the same.

Consensus. A major aim in democratic politics is, after open argument, to arrive at some workable consensus of views. Whether by trading off one issue against another or by combining related issues, the goal is agreement. Policy activists may commend this democratic

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31 Since 1964 the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan has asked the question, “Do you feel that almost all of the people running the government are smart people, or do you think that quite a few of them don’t seem to know what they are doing?” The proportions choosing the latter view have been 28 percent (1964), 38 percent (1968), 45 percent (1970), 42 percent (1972), 47 percent (1974), and 52 percent (1976). For similar findings on public feelings of lack of control over the policy process, see U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee on Intergovernmental Relations of the Committee on Government Operations, Confidence and Concern: Citizens View American Government, committee print, 93d Cong., 1st sess., 1973, pt. 1, p. 30. For a more complete discussion of recent trends see the two articles by Arthur H. Miller and Jack Citrin in the American Political Science Review (September 1974).
purpose in theory, but what their issue networks actually provide is a way of processing dissension. The aim is good policy—the right outcome on the issue. Since what that means is disputable among knowledgeable people, the desire for agreement must often take second place to one’s understanding of the issue. Trade-offs or combinations—say, right-to-life groups with nuclear-arms-control people; environmentalists and consumerists; civil liberties groups and anti-gun controllers—represent a kind of impurity for many of the newly proliferating groups. In general there are few imperatives pushing for political consensus among the issue networks and many rewards for those who become practiced in the techniques of informed skepticism about different positions.

Confidence. Democratic politics presumes a kind of psychological asymmetry between leaders and followers. Those competing for leadership positions are expected to be sure of themselves and of what is to be done, while those led are expected to have a certain amount of detachment and dubiety in choosing how to give their consent to be governed. Politicians are supposed to take credit for successes, to avoid any appearance of failure, and to fix blame clearly on their opponents; voters weigh these claims and come to tentative judgments, pending the next competition among the leaders.

The emerging policy networks tend to reverse the situation. Activists mobilized around the policy issues are the true believers. To survive, the newer breed of leaders, or policy politicians, must become well versed in the complex, highly disputed substance of the issues. A certain tentativeness comes naturally as ostensible leaders try to spread themselves across the issues. Taking credit shows a lack of understanding of how intricate policies work and may antagonize those who really have been zealously pushing the issue. Spreading blame threatens others in the established networks and may raise expectations that new leadership can guarantee a better policy result. Vagueness about what is to be done allows policy problems to be dealt with as they develop and in accord with the intensity of opinion among policy specialists at that time. None of this is likely to warm the average citizen’s confidence in his leaders. The new breed of policy politicians are cool precisely because the issue networks are hot.

Closure. Part of the genius of democratic politics is its ability to find a nonviolent decision-rule (by voting) for ending debate in favor of action. All the incentives in the policy technocracy work against such decisive closure. New studies and findings can always be brought to bear. The biggest rewards in these highly intellectual groups go to those who successfully challenge accepted wisdom. The networks thrive by continuously weighing alternative courses of action on particular policies, not by suspending disbelief and accepting that something must be done.

For all of these reasons, what is good for policy making (in the sense of involving well-informed people and rigorous analysts) may be bad for democratic politics. The emerging policy technocracy tends, as Henry Aaron has said of social science research, to “corrode any simple faiths around which political coalitions ordinarily are built.”32 Should we be content with simple faiths? Perhaps not; but the great danger is that the emerging world of issue politics and policy experts will turn John Stuart Mill’s argument about the connection between liberty and popular government on its head. More informed argument about policy choices may produce more incomprehensibility. More policy intermediaries may widen participation among activists but deepen suspicions among unorganized nonspecialists. There may be more group involvement and less democratic legitimacy, more knowledge and more Know-Nothingism. Activists are likely to remain unsatisfied with, and nonactivists uncommitted to, what government is doing. Superficially this cancelling of forces might seem to assure a conservative tilt away from new, expansionary government policies. However, in terms of undermining a democratic identification of ordinary citizens with their government, the tendencies are profoundly radical.

A second difficulty with the issue networks is the problem that they create for the President as ostensible chief of the executive establishment. The emerging policy technocracy puts presidential appointees outside of the chief executive’s reach in a way that narrowly focused iron triangles rarely can. At the end of the day, constituents of these triangles can at least be bought off by giving them some of the material advantages that they crave. But for issue activists it is likely to be a question of policy choices that are right or wrong. In this situation, more analysis and staff expertise—from far away or hid in a political leadership role. The influence of the policy technocrats and their networks permeates everything the White House may want to do. Without their expertise there are no option papers, no detailed data and elaborate assessments to stand up against the onslaught of the issue experts in Congress and outside. Of course a President can replace a political executive, but that is probably

merely to substitute one incumbent of the relevant policy network for another.

It is, therefore, no accident that President Carter found himself with a cabinet almost none of whom were either his longstanding political backers or leaders of his party. Few if any of his personal retinue could have passed through the reputational screens of the networks to be named, for example, a secretary of labor or defense. Moreover, anyone known to be close to the President and placed in an operating position in the bureaucracy puts himself, and through him the President, in an extremely vulnerable position. Of the three cabinet members who were President Carter’s own men, one, Andrew Young, was under extreme pressure to resign in the first several months. Another Carter associate, Bert Lance, was successfully forced to resign after six months, and the third, Griffin Bell, was given particularly tough treatment during his confirmation hearings and was being pressured to resign after only a year in office. The emerging system of political administration tends to produce executive arrangements in which the President’s power stakes are on the line almost everywhere in terms of policy, whereas almost nowhere is anyone on the line for him personally.

Where does all this leave the President as a politician and as an executive of executives? In an impossible position. The problem of connecting politics and administration currently places any President in a classic no-win predicament. If he attempts to use personal loyalists as agency and department heads, he will be accused of politicizing the bureaucracy and will most likely put his executives in an untenable position for dealing with their organizations and the related networks. If he tries to create a countervailing source of policy expertise at the center, he will be accused of aggrandizing the Imperial Presidency and may hopelessly bureaucratize the White House’s operations. If he relies on some benighted idea of collective cabinet government and on departmental executives for leadership in the bureaucracy (as Carter did in his first term), then the President does more than risk abdicating his own leadership responsibilities as the only elected executive in the national government; he is bound to become a creature of the issue networks and the policy specialists. It would be pleasant to think that there is a neat way out of this trilemma, but there is not.

Finally, there are disturbing questions surrounding the accountability of a political technocracy. The real problem is not that policy specialists specialize but that, by the nature of public office, they must generalize. Whatever an influential political executive does is done with all the collective authority of government and in the name of the public at large. It is not difficult to imagine situations in which policies make excellent sense within the cloisters of the expert issue watchers and yet are nonsense or worse seen from the viewpoint of ordinary people, the kinds of people political executives rarely meet. Since political executives themselves never need to pass muster with the electorate, the main source of democratic accountability must lie with the President and Congress. Given the President’s problems and Congress’s own burgeoning bureaucracy of policy specialists, the prospects for a democratically responsible executive establishment are poor at best.

Perhaps we need not worry. A case could be made that all we are seeing is a temporary commotion stirred up by a generation of reformist policies. In time the policy process may reenter a period of detumescence as the new groups and networks subside into the familiar triangulations of power.

However, a stronger case can be made that the changes will endure. In the first place, sufficient policy-making forces have now converged in Washington that it is unlikely that we will see a return to the familiar cycle of federal quiescence and policy experimentation by state governments. The central government, surrounded by networks of policy specialists, probably now has the capacity for taking continual policy initiatives. In the second place, there seems to be no way of braking, much less reversing, policy expectations generated by the compensatory mentality. To cut back on commitments undertaken in the last generation would itself be a major act of redistribution and could be expected to yield even more turmoil in the policy process. Once it becomes accepted that relative rather than absolute deprivation is what matters, the crusaders can always be counted upon to be in business.

A third reason why our politics and administration may never be the same lies in the very fact that so many policies have already been accumulated. Having to make policy in an environment already crowded with public commitments and programs increases the odds of multiple, indirect impacts of one policy on another, of one perspective set in tension with another, of one group and then another being mobilized. This sort of complexity and unpredictability creates a hostile setting for any return to traditional interest group politics.

Imagine trying to govern in a situation where the short-term political resources you need are stacked around a changing series of discrete issues, and where people overseeing these issues have nothing to prevent their pressing claims beyond any resources that they can
offer in return. Imagine too that the more they do so, the more you lose understanding and support from public backers who have the long-term resources that you need. Whipsawed between cynics and true believers, policy would always tend to evolve to levels of insolubility. It is not easy for a society to politicize itself and at the same time depoliticize government leadership. But we in the United States may be managing to do just this.

Congress is not unique. It belongs to a class of political institutions which, generically, are called representative assemblies.¹ There are more than 100 major institutions of this sort in the world today. They exhibit many structural differences and variously perform their representative functions. The comparative study of these representative institutions is one of the important challenges of modern political inquiry.² At the same time, Congress is probably the most impressive specimen of its genre. Among other things, it is a very powerful legislative body. In an era in which law making has in most countries fallen heavily into the hands of executives, the American Congress continues to be a significant, independent law-making institution, capable of legislative innovation and able to undertake the creative act of law making without executive leadership if necessary.³

This chapter is an exercise in taking stock of the Congress of the 1970s. The assessment focuses upon three central questions: (1) What changes have been taking place in the relationship between Congress and its constituency? (2) How has Congress changed as a legislative organization? and (3) What changes have occurred in congressional decision making? These are questions for which very extensive

¹One compendium which provides information about fifty-six national representative assemblies is Valentine Herman and Françoise Mendel, eds., Parliaments of the World (London: Macmillan, 1976).
²See Gerhard Loevenberg and Samuel C. Patterson, Comparing Legislatures (Boston: Little, Brown, 1978).