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# HOW NATIONAL POLICY IS MADE\*

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National policy in the United States is made within a political party and pressure group framework which is dictated by the basic provisions of the Constitution of the United States. The result is political parties united to win office, active policy shaping by organized pressure groups, and decision making within a system of relatively autonomous power clusters.

Public policy in the American political system is made within power clusters which operate with remarkable independence from one another within the common constitutional and political party structure. Each power cluster consists of administrative agencies, executive review staff, legislative committees, interest groups, influential private citizens, and attentive publics who center their public policy concerns and activity primarily in one broad policy area. Most power clusters operate at all levels of government.

Power clusters exist in each major area of public policy and within many subareas as well. Among the better structured and more effective power clusters are the Agriculture cluster, the Environment or Natural Resources cluster, the Defense cluster, the Education cluster, the Welfare cluster, the Health cluster, the Commerce or Business cluster, the Transportation cluster, the Utilities cluster, the Urban Affairs cluster, the Labor cluster, and the Banking cluster. Many others, some really subclusters, exist in various stages of autonomy.

Each cluster exhibits the same general characteristics.

*First*, close personal and institutional ties have been built up among the members. These members include leaders of the federal executive branch agencies charged with administering policy; the staff of the Office of Management and Budget; the president's personal staff representative in that area; the members of Congress in both the Senate and the House of Representatives who serve on standing

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committees or appropriations subcommittees in the subject area; professional staff to congressional committee members and the professional staff of the congressional committees themselves, who specialize in the subject area; and the organized special interest groups which are active in the subject field. Included also are leaders of state and local government agencies and state legislative committees in the subject area; a select group of influential private citizens such as writers, keenly interested individuals, retired agency heads, and former members of Congress; university professors who do research and teach in the subject field; and an attentive public consisting of interested and informed citizens. The key people within each power cluster know each other on a first-name basis, communicate frequently, consult each other before reaching a decision, know the relative power of each of the component elements and the principal actors within their cluster, and sometimes swap jobs.

Job changes, within each power cluster, however, usually are limited by partisan political affiliation. When a party wins the presidency, it draws upon its partisans in each power cluster to man key executive agency posts. It not only fills cabinet and subcabinet posts with its men, but also key executive staff positions such as deputy assistant secretary, congressional liaison, and assistant to most policy-making leaders. When the Democrats gain the presidency, they draw manpower principally from elected officials in Congress and state government; professional staff to the party itself, the Congress, and liberal interest groups; and from the universities. When the Republicans gain power, they similarly draw upon elected officials and professional staff, but also look to conservative interest groups, business, and those universities where they continue to exercise power and influence.

*Second*, policy decisions normally are made within a power cluster without significant inputs of ideas or influence from outside elements. Unless a policy change generates conflict with another power cluster, legislative proposals, appropriations requests, agency implementation of policy, and other aspects of policy making are accepted by other congressmen, executive agencies outside the power cluster, and interest groups. Nonparticipants in a power cluster support such change in a spirit of live-and-let-live, expecting the same sort of acquiescence when their power cluster seeks approval of changes it can hammer out.

*Third*, each cluster maintains an equilibrium in which each of its component elements has a defined and continuing role. Tension develops when new elements enter the power cluster and seek to displace an existing element or to change the power relationships

or when an existing element grows or declines significantly. Thus the growth of the Sierra Club and the advent of large-scale preservationist pressure has upset the long-established equilibrium within the Natural Resources power cluster. A new equilibrium is now in the making.

*Fourth*, each power cluster has internal competing interests and conflicting groups. Within the Natural Resources–Environment cluster, for example, there long have been at least three major, distinctive interests: the preservationists, the developers, and the regulationists.

Preservationists have championed public action to save key areas of natural beauty for public use and enjoyment. Their principal activity has been in the subcluster of outdoor recreation and natural beauty, but their impact has hit several other subclusters in the Natural Resources power cluster, especially forests and water.

The development groups advocate “multiple use” of natural resources. They embrace the scientific conservation principles of Gifford Pinchot and his followers and their ethical concept of stewardship by which each generation carries responsibility to pass on to the next the natural resources it inherited.

The regulationists wish to use natural resources as a tool to regulate private enterprise. Regulation takes two forms: direct public enterprise and regulation of the practices of private industry through licensing, setting rates, and defining conditions of service.

In an earlier era the developers and the regulationists made common cause to build multiple-purpose dams and to develop the multiple-use concept in forest and range management. Now the preservationists have joined forces with the antiregulationists to stall many projects and to force others to meet higher standards of environmental protection.

*Fifth*, compromises in the political system, therefore, are of two sorts: compromises within a power cluster and compromises between or among power clusters. Congressmen normally expect intracluster compromises to be hammered out *before* a policy proposal is laid before them. If an open conflict ensues, they may even tell the combatants to go home, compromise their differences, and come back with a proposal which they can all support. Members of Congress cannot expect fellow legislators who operate primarily in other power clusters to take sides over an internal issue within an alien power cluster. To make such a demand is to force their colleagues to make enemies unnecessarily and to invite intervention within the cluster’s affairs by outsiders who have only passing interest in its matters. Thus, members of the Agriculture power cluster do not ask city congressmen

who are members of the Labor power cluster to settle their internal disputes for them.

Intercluster conflicts, on the other hand, may array one standing committee against another in each house of Congress or one cabinet officer against another—or both. Such intercluster conflicts invite debate and roll-call decisions on the floors of Congress. Even so apparently simple a requirement as the coordination of policy implementation with other federal agencies created a major issue when Senator Henry M. Jackson of Washington insisted upon including in the Department of Transportation Act an obligation to coordinate highway policy with the Departments of Interior and Agriculture. This constituted an intrusion of the Natural Resources–Environmental power cluster into the Transportation power cluster. Its enactment proved far easier than its implementation, for the Bureau of Public Roads, backed by other elements in the Transportation power cluster, simply ignored the section, despite repeated warnings from both Jackson and Interior. Both were outside the normal Transportation power cluster, and Public Roads leaders apparently believed that neither would have sufficient continuing interest in transportation matters to become a permanent part of the cluster.

Political leaders within each power cluster must therefore engage in continuing, major efforts to achieve viable compromises if new public policies are to be implemented at all. To ask them to expand the number of variables to incorporate all the other possible elements into their decision-making process is to ask the impossible.

Thus the power cluster system meets one of the crucial tests of politics: it offers a relatively efficient way to simplify the enormously complex and difficult task of reconciling policy goals and judgments.

Policy leadership across power cluster lines consequently falls principally to the president and to state governors. Legislative leaders who might claim such breadth of scope, especially the speaker and the majority and minority leaders, rarely escape the compelling need to participate in the power clusters most relevant to their constituencies. The late Speaker Sam Rayburn of Texas, who was so well entrenched in a specially drawn district that he had no opponent in election after election, could probably be cited as a notable exception to this rule.

A president who chooses to preside over the power clusters as he finds them becomes a do-nothing, a Calvin Coolidge. A president who chooses to alter public policy drastically and dares to reshape the power clusters in the process must be a Franklin Roosevelt. He must enjoy both an overwhelming majority in Congress and public

willingness to innovate. Most presidents are unwilling to be Coolidges and unable to be Roosevelts. To move policy in new directions they must try to modify existing power clusters by introducing effective new leaders into the executive branch, by fostering dynamic new pressure groups to support them, and by pushing new policies which will attract new and supportive attentive publics. President Lyndon B. Johnson attempted just that, using Lady Bird as the focus of attention, in his drive to give environmental quality considerations major force within the Natural Resources power cluster. Backed by key members of Congress like Senators Henry M. Jackson of Washington and Edmund Muskie of Maine, and Congressmen Wayne Aspinall of Colorado and John Saylor of Pennsylvania, with the enthusiastic support of Secretary of the Interior Udall and his staff, and capitalizing on the rising strength of the Sierra Club and similar environment-oriented groups, he by and large succeeded in reshaping that power cluster permanently.

President Nixon has tried three other ways to alter the power clusters as he finds them. His reorganization proposal would try to break the clusters up by rearranging the executive branch so drastically that the old cluster lines would snap. The Agriculture power cluster, for example, would be seriously disrupted. The Natural Resources cluster, however, might be made even more centralized and effective.

Revenue sharing would abolish the categorical grants by which each power cluster channels some federal funds into the lower levels of its system and place all the money up for grabs—probably by the largest and most aggressive interests—cities, education, and welfare.

Politicization of career jobs would break up well-established executive agency-congressional committee lines. But elimination of key posts at the top of the career ladder destroys the attractiveness and meaningfulness of managerial careers in the public service and thus is intolerable in our advanced society.

Congress is not likely to be interested in any of these Nixon efforts to break the power cluster lines and will probably reject all three. The Democrats are able to exercise substantial control over public policy with the existing power clusters. So long as they control Congress, they are not about to surrender their leverage.

The expansion of his own central staff remains the one weapon at his command which the president can use to deal with the power cluster system. The White House staff is so dependent upon him that he can count upon their loyalty to transcend power cluster lines.

So he is building up the most elaborate central staff of any president in history. Because even the cabinet tends to gravitate into the power cluster system, Nixon has increasingly removed critical policy decisions from the department chiefs and leaned primarily upon his own staff. This effort has been especially noticeable in foreign affairs, but was apparent in natural resources while Walter Hickle was secretary of the interior, and in the recent wage-price freeze decision.

On the other hand, the president and the leaders of the Congress can free themselves to concentrate upon the truly complex decisions by leaving most policy decisions to the affected power clusters. However, this abdication may permit many decisions which truly deserve general scrutiny to be made on an intracluster basis. The greatest opportunity for improvement in the policy-making process in the United States, therefore, probably lies in broadening the scrutiny, on a highly selective basis, of what now are intracluster public policy decisions.

The power cluster system is no clever invention of special interests to frustrate public control over policy, however. It is a highly practical system for reaching public policy decisions within a federal, separation-of-powers constitutional system. The basic structure of American government, and the consequent arena-of-compromise nature of American political parties make the power cluster system both possible and efficient.