Iron Triangle

What is it

The term itself is used to refer to a heuristic tool that is often employed to describe, explain and distinguish interactions between the Legislation (Elected public officials), Bureaucracy (unelected civil servant) and Big business. It presents a simplified model that facilitates an easy understanding of the allocation question - who gets how much when and why – but has its limitations. (discussed in final section)

What it (originally meant)

It originally referred to the structure of mutually supportive and interlocking relationships between Congress, the bureaucracy and special interest groups. The term refers how certain decision-makers were able to prevent interference and ensure that their policy goals/interests were protected through these mutually supportive relationships. The implications of the Iron Triangle, was that it created an ecosystem of actors who systematically colluded with each other and obstructed attempts to induce reform or pursue changes that threaten their interests. This meant that policy measures once initiated and implemented within an iron triangle, possessed a sense of rigidity and resilience which makes it difficult for actors outside of the triangle to alter and change them.

Chalmers Johnson adopted this model to explain the role of MITI and the power of its administrative guidance. Johnson argued that similar mutually supportive relationships existed between the Bureaucrats, Politicians (from the LDP) and Business interests/Big Business. Similarly, these agents would form interlocking relationships to articulate, support and prevent their interests from being dominated.

The key difference between its original function as a heuristic tool to describe the reason for resistance to change and to describe the key actors involved in this process of policy-making (and the resistance of), and Johnson's adaptation, is that Johnson sites it as the locus of the policy-making process and that all key actors are included in the model. The original model acknowledges exogenous actors and variables (external persons or groups and/or factors that also exert an influence on policy-making), for instance the President can also change and affect the policy-making process. Johnson’s use of it, argues that all/key decision-makers are endogenous (included, embedded) within the iron triangle model. In addition to this functional dimension, Johnson uses the iron triangle to focus on the contest over policy between these 3 actors.

How is it significant? What does it explain?

As seen in the diagram above, the iron triangle is made up of three broad currents (large white arrows) and sustained by 3 counter currents (solid black arrows). The three broad currents describe the "flow" of the policy making process and how each actor behaves at each stage of the policy-making process. The three counter currents show how the interactions made by one actor, can have implications which affect the other actors. These interactions and the implications which they have, give impetus for the various actors to make, mould and shape policy.

Limitations and Weaknesses.

The problem with Johnson’s Iron Triangle, lies in his assessment of bureaucratic power. Johnson gives far too much weight to bureaucratic power and its ability to shape and control the policy process. Although other scholars, such as Vogel and Van Wolfren make similar claims, recent scholarship on this issue has presented fresh perspectives and shed new light on this issue. Here, I identify three main contentions with the iron triangle model.

1. Bureaucracies are not monolithic, frequent jurisprudential fighting.
The Iron Triangle model fails to capture and describes this aspect adequately. It does not explain how the system functions when there is bureaucratic infighting over their spheres of influence and control. For instance, in his seminal work on MITI, Johnson outlines a case where the vice-minister and top bureaucrat at MITI, Sasahi, waged a fierce, but ultimately fruitless battle against the Ministry of Finance and LDP politicians in its bid to circumvent the anti-monopoly law and consolidate the steel industry. Both ministries competed and sought to appeal to different factions within the LDP. The steel industry also formed a coalition with other business interests as it feared an expansion in MITI’s scope of responsibilities which could present a threat to their interests. The Iron triangle fails in this regard because it cannot incorporate and provide a sufficiently coherent explanation when various ministries compete with each other because of divergent interests, creating fissures/coalitions in other actors. While it is able to explain the interaction between the actors in their response, it fails to take into account how the bureaucracy is not monolithic and how having divergent interests, may react and produce counter-reactions in ways that an iron triangle model might omit (e.g. public backlash).

2. Political reform: no more SNTV system, LDP out of power

The 1994 electoral reform changed the Single Non-Transferrable Vote system which produced electoral districts where multiple candidates from the same party could contest for the same seat, using special interests or on a narrow platform promising specific policies in response for votes. This meant that the interest aggregation mechanism which served as the basis for the creation of political factions which specialized in certain policy areas/business interests within the LDP, would have been terminated. This forced politicians to campaign on a broad range of policies and had to appeal to a wider base of voters rather than on special interests or narrow policy issues. This meant that the flow of donations between big businesses/special interests was severed. With the financial lifeblood of factions cut off. This meant that one leg of the iron triangle was compromised, with the link between politicians and big business being disrupted. Secondly, the strengthening of campaign laws meant that politicians were given a grant and funded by the state, with campaign donations strictly controlled or curtailed. Counter currents 5 and 6 would have been altered or changed drastically as politicians would no longer have any incentives to cater to special interests or specific industries, but have to refocus on maintaining a broad appeal among voters. The fact that the LDP was displaced by the DPJ in the 2010 elections, which campaigned with a broad mandate for change, suggests that the political leg of the iron triangle has been drastically altered.

3. Bureaucratic Reforms: loss of public confidence in Ministries, Big bang reforms

The burst of the bubble and subsequent economic downturn damaged the reputation of the bureaucracy. Concurrently, a string of corruption scandals and bad publicity for the bureaucracy destroyed its credibility in the eyes of the public that the bureaucracy could act as a restraint on the excesses of politicians and acted in the name of Japan’s interests. The bureaucrats seemed just as corrupt and self-interested as any other political actor. These twin undercurrents boiled over in a surge of public frustration and anger, cumulating in bureaucrat bashing and calls for administrative reform. LDP politicians seized upon this public anger and wielded it as a political weapon against the bureaucrats, campaigning upon it and instituting drastic reforms to curb and reduce the administrative power of the bureaucracy. Under the populist reformer, Ryutaro Hashimoto, ministries were consolidated, with their previously segmented spheres of jurisprudence merged into several large ministries overlapping and sharing authority – ostensibly with the intention to reduce their power and improve political control over these ministries – Furthermore, the amount of public servants was drastically reduced, with Hashimoto creating special public-private organizations that were affiliated and controlled by the government but run separately and according to neoliberal principles. In addition to this, further reforms carried out under subsequent Obuchi and Koizumi administrations, strengthened these reforms and have eroded away bureaucratic control. This has eroded away effect 4 and was intended to strengthen effect 6. These initiatives have chipped away and shifted the onus of policy initiation and creation towards the political leg of the iron triangle, effectively undermining and ‘hollowing-out’ the bureaucratic leg of the iron triangle.


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