In this animated learning module, we'll review the concepts of iron triangles and issue networks.

An iron triangle is defined as the three-way alliance among legislatures, bureaucrats and interest groups to make or preserve policies that benefit their respective interests.

The bureaucracy's policy-making role has often been depicted by what traditionally has been called "the iron triangle," a three-way alliance among legislators and Congress, bureaucrats and interest groups. Iron triangles are also referred to as sub-governments. Presumably, the laws that are passed and the policies that are established benefit the interest of all three sides of the iron triangle. At one corner, interest groups and their lobbyists can influence Congressional votes in their favor by providing campaign contributions and a constituency that will offer electoral support for Congresspersons who back their programs. Interest groups also provide industry-specific information to Congress when they are researching and considering legislation. In the next corner, these Congress members serve on committees and subcommittees that make decisions about a particular field. They determine the budgets and jurisdictions of the executive agencies and regulatory commissions that work in the field. And in this third corner, these bureaucratic departments set regulations and award contracts in this field. The bureaucracy is often pressured by the same powerful interest groups. It also receives its funding and political assistance from the Congress members who rely on these interest groups reelection support. Therefore, the bureaucracy often adopts regulations that are favorable to the industry's interests. The iron triangle's benefits to these three groups works both ways. In seeking to align themselves with the constituency for political support, Congress often passed favorable legislation and grants friendly oversight of the federal agencies involved with the interest groups. The interest groups gain congressional support for the bureaucracy's programs and budget requests through their lobbyists. They also provide information about the industry. And the bureaucracy makes policy choices that will win the favor of Congress's constituency within the interest group. They can also help Congress members with their constituencies' complaints. This flow of benefits for all three corners, if each corner works in this manner, results in a three-way symbiotic alliance. Let's look at agriculture as an example. It consists of about 100,000 individuals working directly for the federal government, and thousands of other individuals who work indirectly for the department as contractors, subcontractors, or consultants. Now consider that various interest groups or client groups are concerned with what certain bureaus or agencies in the agriculture department do for agribusinesses. Some of these groups are the American Farm Bureau Federation, the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, the National Milk Producers Federation, the National Corn Growers Association, and Citrus Growers Association. Finally, take a close look at Congress, and you will see that two major committees are concerned with agriculture: the House Committee on Agriculture and the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and
Forestry. Each committee has several specialized subcommittees. The triangle is an alliance of bureaucrats, interest groups, and legislators who cooperate to create mutually beneficial regulations or legislation. Because of these connections between agricultural interest groups and policymakers within the government, at the agricultural industry has benefited greatly over the years from significant farm subsidies. Let's look at Congress's role in this exchange. The Secretary of Agriculture is nominated by the President, and confirmed by the Senate, and is the head of the Department of Agriculture. But that secretary can't even buy desk lamp if Congress does not approve the appropriation for the department's budget. Within Congress, the responsibility for considering the Department of Agriculture's request for funding belongs first to the House and Senate appropriations committees and then to the agriculture subcommittees under them. The members of those subcommittees, most of whom represent agricultural states, have been around a long time and have their own ideas about what is appropriate for the Agricultural Department’s budget. They carefully scrutinize the ideas that the President and the Secretary of Agriculture. Finally, the various interest groups, including producers of farm chemicals and farm machinery, agricultural cooperatives, grain dealers and exporters, have vested interests in whatever the Department of agricultural and whatever Congress lets the department do. Those interests are well represented by the lobbyists who crowd the halls of Congress. Many lobbyists have been working for agricultural interest groups for decades. They know the congressional committee members and the Agricultural Department staff extremely well and routinely meet with them. So in this iron triangle, interest groups provide Congress with electoral support in agriculture-driven areas. Congress approves the budget for the Department of Agriculture, and the Department of Agriculture provides subsidies to the agricultural industry.

**Slide 4:**
The iron triangle relationship does not apply to all policy domains however. Frequently, different interest groups concerned about a certain area of policy have conflicting demands, making agency decisions difficult. Additionally, divided government in some years has meant that departments are sometimes pressured by the President to take one approach and by Congress to take another. Recently, the concept of an issue network has been viewed as a more accurate description of the policymaking process. An issue network consists of individuals or organizations that support a particular policy position on the environment, taxation, consumer safety, or some other issue. Typically, an issue network includes legislators and their staff members, interest groups, bureaucrats, scholars and other experts, and representatives from the media. Members of a particular issue network work together to influence the president, members of Congress, administrative agencies, and the courts to affect public policy on a specific issue. Each policy issue may involve conflicting positions taken by two or more issue networks.

**Slide 5:**
As in an iron triangle, Congress does depend on interest groups leaders for campaign contributions, electoral support, and information, but when making policy decisions on environmental and welfare issues, for example, many members of Congress and agency officials also rely heavily on experts. Legislators and agency heads tend to depend on their staff members were specialized knowledge of rules, regulations, and legislation.
These experts have frequently served variously as interest group lobbyists and public sector staff members during their careers, creating a revolving door effect. They often have strong opinions and interests regarding the direction of policy and are thus able to exert a great deal of influence on legislators and bureaucratic agencies. Outside groups, such as scholars, the media, and other experts, also provide input. The relationship among these experts, which are less structured than iron triangles, are referred to as "issue networks." Like iron triangles, issue networks are made up of people with similar policy concerns. Issue networks are less interdependent and unified than iron triangles, however, and often include more players.

**Slide 6:**
Look at this example of an issue network in US environmental policy, for instance. As you can see, many more players are involved in this exchange, and the relationship among the various players is much more complex than is represented by the iron triangle model.

**Slide 7:**
To demonstrate you have a good understanding of this topic, you should be able to complete the following exercises. If you have any trouble answering these, review this module and your book again. This is a key concept that you will likely be tested on.