

INTRODUCTION

Public policy is a subject of study, not a discipline. As such, numerous disciplines, from the social sciences to the humanities and natural and biological sciences, all contribute to our understanding of public policy and how changes in policy can improve society. Not only is public policy best understood from the vantage point of different disciplines, the subject of inquiry is broad, including the process of policymaking, the social determinants of policy evolution, the historical trajectories of policymaking, the ethical basis of public policy, the economic impacts of public policy, the impacts of new technologies on public policy (and vice versa), and a long list of others. In order to provide our readers—many of whom may be studying public policy for the first time—with an overview of the field, we divide our discussion into four major areas: studying public policy, making public policy, choosing public policy, and the role of the policy analyst.

STUDYING PUBLIC POLICY

We can think of policy research generally in three broad categories: research that treats public policy as an *explanation* of social/economic/political factors (in which we might say that policy research is seen as an independent variable), research that treats public policy as something to be *explained* (public policy as a dependent variable), and research that develops *information* that provides substantive input into public policymaking.

Public policy research that focuses on policy as an explanation of different outcomes is generally conducted by social scientists (economists, anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, and so forth). For example, economists study the impact of changes in the minimum wage on unemployment rates and household income, and sociologists study the impact of welfare reform on family structure, crime, and other social variables. Political scientists study the impact that public policy has on the formation of interest groups and the politics surrounding an issue, such as crime or banking deregulation.

Political scientists and political sociologists are principally involved in the study of public policy as a dependent variable, where they seek to discover why public policies emerge in the patterns we observe. For example, political scientists study why major deregulatory initiatives happened in the late 1970s and early 1980s, why environmental laws are generally federal but involve states in significant ways, how social insurance programs have evolved over time, and more generally how policy decisions are made. Political sociologists

study the role of money in politics, or how, in comparative terms, we can explain the emergence of one type of health care system in the United States and quite another in most other industrialized nations.

The broadest range of disciplines is involved with providing information for public policy decisions. While the first two categories are reserved mostly for the social sciences, when it comes to providing information for policy-making, the natural and biological sciences are heavily involved (e.g., witness the membership and emphasis of the National Research Council), as are the humanities (e.g., ethical issues surrounding cloning). Besides making claims on the federal budget, scientists and humanists contribute significantly to policymaking, such as economists testifying on the impact of deregulation on electricity markets, biologists forecasting species losses from changes in development policies, philosophers and bioethicists studying the ethical issues involved in the use of genetic information, doctors assessing the impacts of changes in Medicaid on health care delivery, and geoscientists predicting vulnerability to natural hazards. In this regard, many individuals identify themselves and their disciplines as involved in public policy.

MAKING PUBLIC POLICY

There are two different strands of inquiry related to making public policy. The first focuses on the policy process, or how public policies are made procedurally. The second focuses on developing theories of policymaking that try to explain the determinants of policymaking.

The Policy Process

The process of making public policy has both theoretical and empirical dimensions. Theoretically, the policy process is generally conceptualized as a series of stages through which policies pass, namely (1) problem identification, (2) development of policy alternatives, (3) policy selection, (4) implementation, and (5) evaluation. While this model divides the process into a series of somewhat manageable steps, it does not explain well policymaking in practice, nor does it explain how a policy might move from one stage to another. And if viewed too simply, it may obscure the important political, cultural, and sociohistorical dimensions that shape each step.

A variety of other explanations has been developed to explain the policymaking process, from policy ideas that emerge from the "policy primeval soup,"¹ to an "advocacy coalition,"² to the importance of symbols in policymaking,³ to the "issue attention cycle."⁴ While none explains the full complexity of policymaking in reality, nor is any model intended to, taken together they provide a far more sophisticated understanding of policymaking than the policy stages that typify many discussions. Many excellent case studies point to the complexity of actual policymaking, such as Martha

Derthick's examination of tobacco politics in *Up in Smoke*. The serious student of public policy will understand both the theoretical explanations and the complexity of political reality.

Theories of Policymaking

How policies emerge in the way they do (e.g., Why does the United States have the current system of old-age pensions?) is the subject of intense inquiry and debate, and seemingly people will each give their own version of why things are the way they are (e.g., "All politicians are crooked"). Even among academics there are various unique explanations of how policies emerge in the shape they do. Many of these different strands of thought can be organized into a set of reasonably coherent possible explanations for the pattern of public policymaking. These include the rational actor model, elite theory, and interest group pluralism.

The rational actor model presents an image of individualistic, self-interested behavior as a way of understanding public policy. In one interpretation, based originally on Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, individuals pursuing their own self-interest lead to collectively desirable outcomes, namely greater social wealth. While their efforts are self-interested, it is argued that market mechanisms produce outcomes that benefit society as a whole. However, important exceptions to this argument include a group of goods, referred to as "common pool resources." The "tragedy of the commons" is that individual self-interest can lead to collectively ruinous outcomes, as evidenced in Garrett Hardin's example of the overgrazing of commonly owned land that is ultimately destroyed by individual self-interest. Variations of the rational actor model include tools of economic decision making, such as benefit-cost analysis, which seek to assess the advantages and disadvantages of public policy changes, convert them into common currency, and recommend a course of action based on whether benefits exceed costs. Another variation on the rational actor model is what is known as "public choice," the application of self-interest as an explanation of individual and political decisions, such as voting and the behavior of congressional committees.

Elite theory views the actions of public organizations as instruments of the policy elite to further their own goals through public means. While government actions may appear to be serving the public interest, in fact they serve to advance the goals of wealthy, powerful individuals who are elites. In the chapter on globalization (Chapter 4), for example, elite theory suggests that while multinational assistance to developing nations may serve to improve living standards marginally among the world's poor, the larger goal is to enrich powerful individuals and corporations in the developed world.

Interest group pluralism suggests that public policy is the result of the interplay between sometimes strong and sometimes weak interest groups. In its most benign interpretation, interest groups can be seen to represent the underlying preferences of individuals; the AARP, for example, should be

powerful because its members include millions of retired seniors, while the National Model Railroad Association, with a relatively small membership, should have less influence over public policy. Therefore, this interpretation of pluralism suggests that the power of the organization appropriately represents social interests, and that policy outcomes represent an appropriate mix of these interests as represented by groups.

The more common interpretation of interest group theory challenges the notion that interest groups accurately reflect social values, and instead argues that particular, "special" interests often trump broad social interests in policy formulation. For example, if farmers are the only group to lobby for agricultural price supports, and no one is inclined to lobby against farm price supports because the benefits are too diffused to make it worthwhile for any person to do so, then special interests such as farmers will win particularized benefits at the expense of the broad public interest. In many chapters in this volume, one can see the influence of special interest groups on the formation or implementation of public policy; just a few examples include education policy (Chapter 2), environmental policy (Chapter 5), and health care (Chapter 10).

CHOOSING PUBLIC POLICY

The formation and expression of individual policy preference, while often informed by empirical evidence, is fundamentally a normative exercise. Policy choice involves developing a preference for what society can and should collectively try to accomplish and how to go about it (usually through government action, but potentially using some other means). Such preferences spring less from scientific or empirical analysis than from already existing individual values, norms, world views, and beliefs that together form the analytical framework within which policy choices are analyzed and preferences formed. The identification of problems that policies are supposed to alleviate also proceeds from these different perspectives, so that something that may seem a problem within one framework is not seen as such from another. While such frameworks may overlap in some ways, in many cases they represent fundamentally different ways of viewing the world, and thus cannot be synthesized into a single, shared framework. Often, these perspectives cannot be compared along a single continuum. What's more, individual decisions over various policy options rarely follow the simple and logical chain of argument characteristic of philosophical debate (for example).

So what must be kept in mind when reading debates over policy issues like those presented here is that there are multiple perspectives on any given policy issue, that such perspectives spring from different and often irreconcilable premises, and that understanding policy debates requires not only an analysis of conclusions or even *stated* preferences but also an attempt to understand the often unstated premises from which each argument starts. Such

premises/perspectives are almost infinite, but it is possible to identify several basic viewpoints that, with some modification, reemerge in debates over a variety of policy issues.

For example, there is considerable disagreement over both the scope and goal of government action. Should government be held responsible for providing a basic safety net for all citizens with social welfare and health care programs, or should that be left to private forces? Should government go beyond ensuring basic rights? These are questions with no simple answers, and yet sometimes through reflection and conversation/debate, people begin to realize other sides of the issue, some of the impacts on groups they may not have considered, and may begin to adjust their positions accordingly. Therefore, while individuals bring to debates preconceived notions of appropriate responses to policy problems, debate is as much about listening as it is talking, and it is our hope that greater understanding will emerge from both forming a coherent argument and listening to those of others.

If we examine education policy, we can see how different orientations to public policy produce different sets of preferred policy outcomes. Those with a limited government or free market approach would tend to favor vouchers or other market mechanisms to support free choice in choosing schools. Egalitarians, who support a more equal distribution of resources, may favor policies that improve equality, such as raising per-pupil expenditures in poorer school districts or even redistributing funds from wealthier to poorer districts. Communitarians may view school choice as desirable in some respects but as working to erode the social cohesion formed by the communities that develop around neighborhood schools. Social conservatives may focus not on funding or testing but instead on an issue such as school prayer. Finally, those who believe in policies that promote economic efficiency may rely more on studies that track achievement levels of students graduating from schools with different institutional forms (e.g., some with school choice, some without) to determine the appropriate ways to commit resources. In short, the old political adage that "where you stand depends on where you sit" in many cases holds for preconceived political views as well.

THE ROLE OF THE POLICY ANALYST

Some of you may choose to enter the policy arena professionally, either directly as an elected official or more indirectly (and commonly) as a journalist or activist seeking to understand or influence policy outcomes. Broadly conceived, these are all roles of a "policy analyst," a professional who spends at least part of the time thinking about improving public policy and management for the public's good. (In contrast, a lobbyist may seek to influence public policy for the benefit of a special interest group.)

The role of the policy analyst has changed considerably over time. Once policy analysts were conceived of purely as "number crunchers" for the

federal government, focusing on technocratic solutions to public problems. Over time, however, the role of the policy analyst has broadened considerably, as has training in graduate schools, to include a wide range of career options, from running local governments, to being activists with international nonprofit organizations, to working at private consulting firms conducting work for federal government clients.

There are numerous graduate programs in public policy, public affairs, public administration, and public management that provide professional training for careers in public service. Some are more oriented to economics and analytical methods, others to management and administration, and still others to specific policy areas such as environmental or family policy. Most provide broad professional education, generally leading to a master's degree in public policy and/or administration, and can lead to exciting careers in public service in the public, nonprofit, and private sectors. National organizations, such as the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management (APPAM, at www.appam.org), can provide listings of graduate programs in public policy and management.

Endnotes

1. John Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984).
2. Paul Sabatier, *Policy Change and Learning: An Advocacy Coalition Approach* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1993).
3. Murray Edelman, *Symbolic Uses of Politics* (Champaign-Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1985).
4. Anthony Downs, *Up and Down with Ecology: The 'Issue-Attention Cycle' The Public Interest* (Summer 1972).

FURTHER READING

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