Preview Questions

1. What is the view of science articulated by Harold Lasswell?
2. What is the definition of public policy?
3. What are the different fields of public policy studies?
4. How did the field of policy studies develop?
5. Why is the field of policy studies fractured?
6. What are the most important theories, models, and frameworks in the field of policy studies?

Reading Summary

Preface

* The field of policy studies is ever changing.
* There have been some significant developments in policy studies in the past few years.
  + Implementation research is now more focused on specific programs rather than general implementation frameworks.
  + Behavioral economics is continuing to influence program evaluation and impact analysis.
  + There is an effort to harmonize positivist methods with post-positivist criticism.
  + Psychological theories of human decision making are being incorporated into policy studies.
* The field of public policy is broad, diffuse, and balkanized.
  + This brings up the question of whether or not the field of public policy actually exists.
  + There is no consensus among policy scholars of how to define the field of public policy.
* Approach to integrating and defining the field of public policy:
  + Define the key research questions.
  + Organize policy studies into subfields focused on those key research questions.

Concept of public policy

* The study of public policy has several challenges:
  + It is not concentrated in any one academic discipline.
  + It does not have a defining research question.
  + It is not focused on a fundamental problem.
  + It has no unifying theory or conceptual framework.
  + It does not use any unique methods or analytical tools.
* The study of public policy is a loosely organized body of precepts and positions.
  + i.e., more art and craft than science
* Journals devoted to public policy scholarship
  + Policy Studies Journal
  + Policy Science
  + Journal of Policy Analysis and Management
* Policy analysts are professionals that study policy and are employed in various government settings:
  + Congressional Budget Office
  + Government Accountability Office
  + Legislative reference bureaus
  + Policy institutes (i.e., think tanks)
  + Nongovernmental agencies (NGOs)
  + Consulting firms
* Policy studies is a global profession

Defining public policy

* Public policy is like pornography – difficult to define but you know it when you see it.
  + Intuitive concept that is difficult to define precisely.
* There is no universally accepted definition of public policy.
* Various broad definitions
  + “Whatever governments choose to do or not do.” (Dye 1987, 1)
  + “the relationship of a government unit to its environment.” (Eyestone 1971, 18)
  + “the actions, objectives, and pronouncements of governments on particular matters, the steps they take (or fail to take) to implement them, and the explanations they give for what happens (or does not happen)” (Wilson 2006, 154)
* Broad definitions are so broad that they seem to encompass everything and don’t make clear what is not included in public policy or how it is different from other fields such as political science, welfare economics, or public administration.
* Various narrow definitions
  + “a purposive course of action or inaction undertaken by an actor or set of actors in dealing with a problem or matter of concern.” (Anderson 1994, 5)
  + Theodoulou (1995, 1-9) defined public policy as having distinct purposes
    - Resolving conflict over scarce resources
    - Regulating behavior
    - Motivating collective action
    - Protecting rights
    - Directing benefits toward the public interest
* Even narrow definitions end up at the same place as broad definitions in that it includes everything.
* Definition from Birkland (2014):
  + The process of making choices,
  + actions taken use the coercive powers of the state to operationalize those choices
  + the outputs and outcomes that result from those actions
* The field of policy studies is fractured because there is no agreement on what is being studied.
* We can define the fields of policy studies without necessarily defining public policy.
  + This may just be restating the definitional problem.

Defining the fields of public policy studies

* Public policy studies is transdisciplinary
* Policy sciences is a synonym for policy studies
  + “the application of knowledge and rationality to perceived social problems” (Dror 1968, 49)
  + “an umbrella term describing a broad-gauge intellectual approach applied to the examination of societally critical problems” (deLeon 1988, 219)
* Basic fields
  + Policy evaluation research empirically assesses the consequences of what governments say and do.
  + Policy analysis research investigates the normative question of what should be done.
    - Efficiency versus effectiveness
    - Most efficient policy is NOT necessarily the most effective, and vice versa.
  + Policy process research focuses on why and how policies are made.

History of the field of policy studies

* Policy studies generally considered a fairly recent development.
* Harold Lasswell articulated a grand vision for the “policy sciences” in the middle of the twentieth century.
* Lasswell gave political science a central place in the policy sciences.
* Lasswell’s goal was to better connect the knowledge and expertise of the social sciences to the practical world of politics and policymaking.
* Lasswell’s article titled “The Policy Orientation” (1951) laid out the goals, methods, and purposes of the policy sciences.
  + An applied social science
  + Public policy was government’s response to important choices.
  + Policy sciences clarified and informed those choices and assessed their impact.
* Distinguishing characteristics of policy sciences according to Lasswell
  + Problem oriented
  + Multidisciplinary
  + Methodologically sophisticated
  + Theoretically sophisticated (i.e., explaining cause and effect)
    - Conceptual frameworks with enough explanatory horsepower
  + Value oriented
    - Specific value orientation of maximizing democratic values including human dignity in theory and fact.
* As conceived by Lasswell, policy sciences was analogous to medical sciences for the body politic
  + Diagnose ills of the body politic
  + Understand causes and effects of those ills
  + Recommend treatment
  + Evaluate the impact of the treatment

The fracturing of the policy sciences

* Lasswell’s vision has internal contradictions that led to the fracturing of the policy sciences.
  + He envisioned specialized experts that would play a highly influential role in policymaking, which is elitist and not consistent with the egalitarian ethos of democracy
  + The citizen is the source of sovereign power of the state but essentially has no role in Lasswell’s vision of the policy sciences.
* The fundamental values of science are not democratic.
  + Objectivity
  + Objective world independent of the observer
  + Disagreements and debates amenable to empirical analysis
    - Belief and ideology do not alter the nature of the physical universe
* Belief and ideology play a central role in the political world.
  + Answers to social problems are values based.
  + Facts and values can conflict.
* Lasswell’s vision of policy sciences of democracy created conflict between those to emphasized the values of science and those who emphasized the values of democracy.
* Policy scholars are criticized as not generating theories of how the social, political, and economic worlds work.
  + Criticism is made of several social science disciplines.
* JPAM has become dominated by economists.
* PSJ has become dominated by political scientists.
* Policy scholars cite mostly from within their subfields but rarely across subfields.

Why build when you can beg, borrow, and steal

* There is no general theoretical framework tying together the study of public policy.
* The generalizability of theories in policy studies has been highly elusive.
* Theories in the fields of policy studies are created for different purposes (i.e., different questions)
* Ad hoc frameworks have limited value.
* Public policy is political and not particularly scientific.
* Normative theories don’t seek to reveal universal truths; they strive to reveal the different perspectives that are the root of conflict in public policy arenas.
  + Discourse theory
  + Social constructivism

Preview Questions

1. How do you define good policy theory?
2. What is the policy stages theory?
3. Is the policy stages model descriptive or predictive?
4. What is the policy typologies theory?
5. Are policy typologies mutually exclusive?

Reading Summary

Introduction

* The field of policy studies is criticized as lacking theoretical foundation.
* Two basic policy theories for understanding the political world:
  + Policy Stages Theory (stages heuristic)
  + Policy Typologies Theory
* Policy Stages Theory does not qualify as good theory by most criteria:
  + Descriptive rather than causal
  + Does not explain why the process happens the way it does
* Theodore Lowi posited that policy caused politics, rather than politics causing policy.
* Most students of politics and policy still assume that politics cause policy.
* The field of policy studies is partially succeeding in the two key aspects of defining itself:
  + Clarifying concepts and key questions
  + Contributing robust answers to the key questions

Good Policy Theory

* Laswell’s notion of policy sciences consisted of:
  + Applied problem orientation
  + Multidisciplinary approach
  + Complex conceptual frameworks
* According to Laswell, policy sciences was supposed to:
  + Explain
  + Solve the biggest problems encountered in democracies
* Daniel McCool’s criteria for good theory in public policy:
  + Present an accurate representation of reality (i.e., validity)
  + Impose order through economy, testability, organization, and understanding
  + Provide causal explanations
  + Predict outcomes
  + Provide relevant and useful insights
  + Provide nontrivial inferences (i.e., powerfulness)
  + Support replication of results (i.e., reliability)
  + Provide objective analysis
  + Make clear the role of values (i.e., honesty)
* Paul Sabatier’s minimum criteria for good theory in public policy
  + Coherent
  + Internally consistent
  + Causal in nature
  + Generate falsifiable hypotheses
  + Lend itself to empirical testing
  + Have some explanatory power
  + Be broad in scope
  + Provide fertile ground for research

Policy Stages: A First Attempt at Policy Theory

* What is policy theory trying to explain?
  + Individual behavior
  + Institutional decision making
  + Process
* Questions for a theoretical framework:
  + Where in the policy process do we start?
  + What does the policy process look like?
  + What should we observe when studying public policy?
  + What is the unit of analysis for studying the policy process?
* Policy stages
  + Policymakers become aware of a problem
  + Policymakers develop solutions to address the problem
  + Policymakers implement a preferred solution
  + Policymakers evaluate whether or not the solution served its purpose
* Characteristics of the policy stages model
  + Provides and intuitive and practical means of conceptualizing and organizing the study of public policy.
  + Linear, continually looped process
  + Untestable by nature

Stages Model: Descriptive or Predictive

* Drawbacks to of the policy stages model
  + Produces piecemeal theories for studying the policy process
    - Divides the field of policy studies rather than uniting it
    - Stages can be disconnected
    - Gives the perception of a neat procession through the stages
    - Variables that serve as significant predictors in one stage of the policy process may be insignificant in another stage.
  + Assumes a linear model of policymaking.
    - Does not accommodate feedback loops between stages or different starting points for the entire process.
  + Not scientific in that it doesn’t produce empirically falsifiable hypotheses
    - It’s a descriptive classification of the policy process
    - It says what happens without saying why it happens
* The policy stages model persists as the major conceptualization of public policy studies because a prevalent paradigm is not completely rejected until a new replacement paradigm is presented.
* The stages model has been discarded without any adjustments or a replacement.

Policy Typologies: Another Theory of Public Policy

* Policy stages model does not address the types of policies that are produced by the process and the effect those policies may have on politics.
  + What does the output of the policy process tell us about politics?
  + Does the process change for different types of policies?
  + Do the types of policies determine specific political patterns?
* What is the relationship between politics and policy?
* At a basic level, public policy is an attempt to influence individual behavior through government coercion.
  + Type of coercion may predict the type of politics that will follow.
* Lowi’s typology matrix based on federal-level policies from 1930s through the 1950s:
  + Distributive policy
  + Regulatory policy
  + Redistributive policy
  + Constituent policy
* Logic behind Lowi’s typology scheme:
  + Relationship types are determined by expectations
  + In politics, expectations are determined by governmental outputs or policies
  + Therefore, a political relationship is determined by the type of policy at stake
* Relative activeness level of politics by policy type:
  + Redistribution policies > distributive policies
    - Immediate likelihood of coercion
    - High level of bargaining between large groups of people
    - President takes on a slightly stronger role than Congress
  + Regulatory policies > redistribution policies > distributive policies
    - More conflictual politics (unstable, combative, decisive)
    - Immediate likelihood of coercion and applicable to the individual
    - High level of bargaining
    - Numerous amendments to bills introduced
* Differences in approaches
  + Lasswellian: public policy should be studied to improve the political system
  + Lowian: public policy should be studied to predict the type of politics displayed in the political system and predict what type of policies will succeed and what type will fail

Typologies as Non-Mutually Exclusive Categories

* For any classification system to be useful the categories must be inclusive and mutually exclusive.
  + This is the fundamental weakness of the policy typologies model.
* Complex legislation tends not to fall neatly into only one category.
* The distinguishing trait of good theory is simplicity; efforts to adjust the policy typologies model to address shortcomings added complexity.
* Drawbacks of the policy typologies model:
  + It’s not testable
  + It’s not predictive
  + It’s too simplistic
  + It’s post hoc
  + It doesn’t provide causal explanation
  + It doesn’t account for the dynamic aspects of the policy process
* Cases that do not fit into one of Lowi’s typologies may simply represent the limitations of the model.
* Many researchers do not view the policy typologies model as an explanatory framework that will advance the field.