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