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.

Preview Questions

1. Who makes policy decisions?
2. How are policy decisions made?
3. What is bounded rationality?
4. What is incrementalism?
5. What are some examples of incrementalism?
6. What is public choice?
7. What is the Tiebout Model?
8. Are citizens efficient policymakers?
9. What is institutional rational choice?
10. What are collective-action dilemmas?
11. What is the institutional analysis and development (IAD) framework?

Reading Summary

Introduction

* Public policy is essentially the study of decision making.
* Public policy borrows heavily from rational choice theory to explain decision making.
* Ideal decision making process under rational choice:
  + Identify problem
  + Comprehensively search for alternative solutions
  + Consider the pros and cons of alternative solutions
  + Select the most efficient and effective solution
* Time pressures make it impossible to pursue truly rational choice decisions
  + Policymakers at least intend to be rational.
* Rational choice is predicated on methodological individualism
  + Public policy decision making becomes the study of how individuals make choices
  + However, individuals do not make public policy choices in a vacuum
* Institutions help safeguard against self-interest overtaking public interest
* Change in institution can lead to change in individual behavior

Bounded Rationality and Incrementalism

* Simon, Herbert (1947) *Administrative Behavior*
  + People are NOT completely rational actors
  + People are limited by cognitive and environmental constraints
  + Policy actors do NOT operate with complete information
  + Policy actors do NOT engage in exhaustive cost-benefit analysis
  + Policy actors make compromises and adapt to the situation at hand
  + Complete rationality is unattainable
    - Incomplete knowledge
    - Imperfectly anticipated values
    - Uncomprehensive alternatives
* Bounded rationality
  + Individuals intend to be rational and make optimal decisions but must settle for satisfactory decisions because of cognitive limitations.
* Substantive rationality from economics 🡪 economically rational choice; start anew
* Procedural rationality from cognitive psychology 🡪 reliance on mental shortcuts; build on past experience
* Irrationality is the lack of consistent preferences
* Good policy decisions are not necessarily the substantively rational decision.
* Incrementalism is decision making based on small, incremental adjustments from previous decisions 🡪 satisficing 🡪 branch approach to decision making
* Root method separates means and ends
  + Decided desired policy outcome
  + Determine the best means of achieving the outcome
* Branch method combines means and ends
  + Successive limited comparisons
  + More likely to reach agreement among policy actors

Incrementalism in Practice

* Incrementalism is descriptive rather than explanatory
* Public budgeting processes
  + Rational budget process would be zero-based budgeting; produces significant potential for conflict
* Punctuations are non-incremental changes in policy often instituted during critical junctures, which is something that happens relatively frequently
* Critical junctures are significant political or economic events

Public Choice and the Tiebout Model

* Post-positivist desire to make public policy more bottom-up and participatory.
* Public Choice
  + Application of neoclassical economic ideas to the public sector
  + Based on the logic and theory of how markets work
  + Governments should supply public programs and services in response to demand from citizens who should be given choices in what they consume
  + Government will supply demanded services efficiently
* Public goods are indivisible goods provided by the government
* In the Tiebout Model, competition is among local governments
  + Citizen choice is the key to improving public service
* Public choice equates democracy with free markets but they are NOT synonymous
* Empirical support for Public Choice Model has been mixed at best.

The Tiebout Model: Citizens as Efficient Policymakers

* Citizens are consumer-voters that act on their preferences
* Mobility decisions should not be affected by considerations external to the quality of public services
* Tiebout Model breaks down if citizens choose jurisdictions on factors other than quality of public service
* Hypotheses under the Tiebout Model
  + Citizens in polycentric jurisdictions are more informed about public services than those in monocentric jurisdictions 🡪 Not supported by the data
  + Citizens in polycentric jurisdictions are more satisfied with public services than those in monocentric jurisdictions 🡪 Not supported by the data
  + Citizens in polycentric jurisdictions exercise their exit option more often than those in monocentric jurisdictions 🡪 Not supported by the data
* Paul Teske contended that only a subset of actors must make fully informed decisions for the market to function efficiently in Tiebout’s Model 🡪 Some empirical support
  + Local governments can be competitive and efficient by responding only to a small group of consumer-citizens (i.e., elite minority).

Institutional Rational Choice

* Disadvantage of designing jurisdictions in accordance with the Tiebout model:
  + Citizens will make decisions that potentially worsen racial and economic disparities if left to their own devices.
  + The model ignores equity
* Rules or institutions can be used to improve the rationality of decision making and the quality of policymaking.
* People make decisions in the context of institutional rules which shape individual preferences.
* Institutionalism and School Choice
  + Public schools have no incentive to respond to the demands of parents and teachers.
    - They respond to elected officials who determine the level of financial support.
    - Parents have no choice as to where to send their children.
  + John Chubb and Terry Moe argued for removing policy delivery mechanisms from democratic control.
  + Some argue that school bureaucracy is a response to negative performance rather than a cause of negative performance.
    - That is, a response to the demands of parents and teachers.
  + According to rational choice theory, policymakers are incapable of making public decisions because they are driven to maximize self-interested utility.
* Collective-Action Dilemmas: Ostrom’s IAD and the Logic of Appropriateness
  + Institutional Analysis and Development put forth by Elinor Ostrom
    - Institutions can shape individual preferences.
    - People will use institutional rules to solve collective-action problems.
  + Action situation is the social space where individuals interact, exchange goods and services, solve problems, dominate one another, or fight.
    - Influenced by biophysical conditions, community attributes, and rules-in-use
  + Purpose of IAD is to describe and explain outcomes resulting from human interaction in the context of existing institutions.
  + External sanctions not the only way to solve collective-action problems
    - Communication can solve collective-action problems
    - Possible to achieve an efficient policy outcome in the absence of an external enforcer.
* The IAD as an Alternative Framework for Decision Making
  + IAD scholars focus on common-pool resources:
    - Common-pool resource dilemmas tend to lack formal institutional rules
    - The ability to solve common-pool resource dilemmas without external authority provides insight into how to solve other collective-action dilemmas.
  + IAD seems to move closer to rational-comprehensive model of decision making
  + IAD considered one of the best representations of the reality, complexity, and confusing nature of the policy process.
  + IAD allows flexibility in adapting to different units of analysis
  + Logic of Appropriateness is a more simplistic model of decision making
    - People will do what is appropriate given the situation
    - Departure from a purely rational model
    - Appropriate includes informal rules and norms
    - Who defines what is appropriate is a question.

Conclusion

* A theoretical framework that explains the origins of our boundedly rational preferences is needed (i.e., preference formation).
* Why does face-to-face communication increase cooperation so dramatically?
* Why are people extremely sensitive to violations of fairness norms in group settings such as common-pool resource dilemmas?
* Models accept bounded rationality as a given which results in high explanatory power but little predictive ability 🡪 trial-and-error approach to policymaking.

Preview Questions

1. Is policy design objective?
2. What is the paradox of policy design?
3. What are social constructions?
4. What are target populations?
5. How do democratic values related to policy design?
6. What is the narrative policy framework?
7. How do you test policy design theories?

Reading Summary

The Role of Values

* Public policy is values-based.
* The difference between politics and public policy:
  + Politics is the authoritative allocation of values.
  + Public policy is the means for allocating and distributing those values.
* The central question of public policy is whose values are sanctioned by the coercive powers of the government.
* Policy design is the study of the content of public policy.
* Policy design scholars are interested in identifying and interpreting the symbolic elements of public policy.
  + Understanding the “blueprint” or “architecture” of public policy.
  + Understanding what and whom society values as reflected in public policy.
  + Understanding why particular outcomes of interest were or were not achieved.
* Core research question of policy design scholars:
  + Whose values does public policy promote?
    - Whose values are being supported and distributed by the public policy?
    - Whose values are being used to judge the relative success or worth of the public policy?
* Even objective evidence is used subjectively and selectively.
  + Accepted when it supports a position
  + Rejected when it does not support a position
* Symbolic cues are often more appealing than policy facts.
* Symbolic and emotional dimensions reveal the true purposes of public policy.
  + Values embedded in policy design reflect what the real political struggle is about.
* Difference in approach
  + Rational actor model: citizens engage in politics to express their preferences for policies consistent with their values by electing officials with preferences similar to their own.
  + Policy design scholars: Elected officials use policy design to secure and maintain political power by embedding values in policy to secure the support of citizens.

Objective Policy Design

* Policy design refers to the content of public policy:
  + Those who receive the benefits or bear the cost of a policy (i.e., target population)
  + Values being distributed by the policy
  + Rules governing action
  + Rationales for the policy
  + Underlying assumptions of the policy
* Imagery and narratives communicated through language are used to justify or rationalize actions and outcomes.
* Symbols and language are used to perpetuate political status and ideology.
* Policymakers appeal to certain values when designing public policy.
* Policy analysis is more about argument than problem solving.
  + Policy Design Scholars: Policymakers craft a perception of reality that fits with their policy design.
  + Rationalists: Policymakers design policy that fits with reality.
* Policy scholars should employ a multi-methodological approach.
  + Account for multiple perspectives.
* Policymaking consists of:
  + Reasoned deliberation
  + Argument
  + Criticism

The Paradox of Policy Design

* Deborah Stone argues that the rational evaluation of policy design and the policy process is not possible because all policies exhibit a double-edge sword.
  + There is no one rational or objective way to evaluate public policy.
  + Policy process is irrational because alternatives are not considered equally
* Policymaking is a struggle over ideas.
* Rewards and sanctions have different meanings to different populations.
* Public policies are often justified as adhering to one of five democratic values
  + Equity
  + Efficiency (unit inputs per unit output)
  + Security
  + Liberty
  + Community
* There is disagreement over what each of the values means.
  + Rational evaluation requires a common understanding of those meanings.

Social Constructions and Target Populations

* Policy design requires awareness of how the public and political world will respond to proposals:
  + Policies with publics must adhere to the expectations of interested advocacy groups
  + Policies without publics do not have interested advocacy groups but instead must avoid inciting conflict with uninterested advocacy groups.
* Policy design is based on the politics of categorization.
* Policies are designed to reinforce social constructions of target populations.
* Four main types of target populations:
  + Advantaged (high political power; high deservedness)
  + Contenders (high political power; low deservedness)
  + Dependents (low political power; high deservedness)
  + Deviants (low political power; low deservedness)
* Policy design constructed based on burden-benefit analysis of the four types of target populations.
* Types of policies associated with various types of target populations:
  + Advantaged 🡪 distributive policies that minimize costs and maximize benefits
  + Contenders 🡪 distributive policies with hidden benefits
  + Dependents 🡪 redistributive policies that fail to maximize benefits
  + Deviants 🡪 regulatory policies the distribute burdens to this group
* Social constructions are not static.
* Policy learning = social learning + instrumental learning
  + Social learning is goal-oriented and focuses on the cause of the problem and beliefs about the target population.
  + Instrumental learning is learning through policy evaluation and emphasizes the means for solving policy problems.
* Policy learning is more likely in policies with publics.
* Political learning involves the ability to craft politically feasible policy proposals.
* Success of policy proposals designed to burden deviant groups:
  + Group must be viewed as marginal by those with political power.
  + Someone with political power or influence must link the actions of the group to a larger societal problem (i.e., moral entrepreneur).
  + Someone must convince other policymakers that the proposal is sound public policy (i.e., political entrepreneur).
* Policymakers are not guaranteed to design legislation based on what constitutes good public policy because of political risks.

Democratic Values and Policy Design

* Some argue the policymaking process has shifted away from core democratic values.
  + Utilitarianism ignores human factors.
  + Liberal-rationalism
* Participatory policy analysis is proposed as the solution for this trend.
* Policy design should serve democracy.

Narrative Policy Framework (NPF)

* There are distinct patterns in policy design.
* NPF examines the role of narratives in policy design.
  + Narratives are comprised of stories, images, and symbols.
  + Narratives can be studied using empirical and quantitative methods.
  + Studying narratives can provide insight into how and why policy change occurs.
* Three levels of analysis
  + Micro level policy narratives – concerned with how individual public opinion is affected
  + Meso level policy narratives – concerned with beliefs and opinions within existing policy subsystems
  + Macro level policy narratives – concerned with the effects on subsystems and policy outcomes
* Components of the policy narrative
  + Setting
  + Characters
  + Plot
  + Moral
* To be effective, narratives must be persuasive, compelling, consistent with existing beliefs, and delivered by a trusted source.
* Changing public opinion is less dependent on policy details and more dependent on good storytelling.
* Humans have a predisposition towards tribalism.
  + Distrusting outside groups
  + Taking satisfaction in benefiting at the expense of outside groups.

Testing Policy Design Theories

* NPF equates narratives with belief systems.
* Research suggests that most citizens do NOT want to be involved in policymaking.
  + Want to know that policymakers are looking out for their best interest.
  + Participate only when they feel it necessary to prevent undesired behavior from elected officials.
* Policy design theory does not have a particular value to guide judgments as do the rationalists who value efficiency.

Conclusion

* NPF is cumbersome.
* NPF is part of a call to create a subfield of public policy akin to political psychology (i.e., policy psychology).

Preview Questions

1. What types of questions are of interest to studies of the policy process?
2. What is the relationship between power and the policy process?
3. What are policy subsystems and issue networks?
4. What is the difference between a theory and a framework?
5. What are advocacy coalitions?
6. What is punctuated equilibrium?
7. What is the value of punctuated equilibrium?
8. What is the multiple streams approach to policy change?
9. Is there a unified theory of policy change?

Reading Summary

Studying the Process of Policy Change

* Public policy is a solution-oriented response to social problems.
  + Deliberate action or inaction by the government to achieve some objective.
* Policy process is the study of how public policy is made.
* Key questions:
  + What problems should the government address?
  + Who decides if a phenomenon is a problem?
  + Who decides if the government should address a problem?
  + Why do policies change?
  + How do policies change?
* Agenda setting is the process by which the attention of policymakers is allocated to some problems rather than others.
  + Logical and political (i.e., illogical, irrational)
  + Rationalization of decisions versus rational decision making

Process and Power

* Political power is a core factor in the policy process.
* Political power is the relative influence over policy decisions.
* One way to wield political power is to determine which problems the government considers for action (i.e., agenda setting).
  + Indirect power
  + Often more influential in determining final outcome than direct power.
* Policymaking process does not generally conform to the ideal of pluralistic democracy.

Policy Subsystems and Issue Networks

* Pluralistic theory
  + Key points
    - Competition among organized groups
    - All interests are accounted for
    - Each interest has an equal chance of making it on the agenda
  + Policy process scholars are skeptical of the pluralist framework
* Policy triangles
  + Components
    - Congress
    - Bureaucracy
    - Special interest groups
  + Clear, separable, and semi-permanent roles
* Policy subsystems
  + Public and private organizations play a role
    - Think tanks
    - Research institutes
    - Interest groups
    - Individual citizens
  + Policy process is
    - Decentralized and fragmented
    - Informal, shifting alliances
  + Issue networks
    - Structure
      * Informal alliances among policy actors
      * Coalesce around certain common issues
      * Exert influence on the policymaking process
      * Overlay existing alliances
    - Advantages
      * Tend to reflect the general sentiment of citizens
      * Provide greater number of policy alternatives
      * Legislative and executive branch policy actors less constrained
    - Those with specialized knowledge of the issue tend to wield more power (i.e., technopols)
      * Operate under the radar
      * Disconnected from ordinary citizens
  + More similar to iron triangle that originally thought

Advocacy Coalitions: Theory or Framework

* Irion triangles are highly permeable and unpredictable
* Policy process is dynamic
* Coalitions may disagree on details of a policy but agree on the fundamental beliefs
  + Policy core is the fundamental (i.e., core) beliefs
  + Deep core is more foundational beliefs
  + Policy detail is the secondary beliefs
* Policy core and deep core are resistant to change
* Issue networks organized around policy core beliefs
* Advocacy coalitions organized around deep core (i.e., technical expertise and ideology)
* Policy actors are primarily motivated to advance their policy core and deep core beliefs
  + Less prone to free riding
  + Longer term alliances
* Advocacy coalitions engage in policy-oriented learning
  + Adapting policy design to changes in the political and socioeconomic environment
  + Learning takes place at the level of secondary beliefs
* Advantages of ACF
  + Explains both stability and rapid change in policy
  + Policy process is not linear or purely rational
* Limitations
  + No standard operationalization of underlying concepts
  + Long window for policy change (e.g., 10 years)

Punctuated Equilibrium: A Descriptive Framework for Policy Change

* Incrementalism is bounded rationality applied to policymaking.
* Policymaking is not always incremental.
* Pace of change is not constant or linear.
* Punctuations caused by shifts from one point of stability to another when the policy subsystem experiences change.
  + Underlying policy subsystem changes when the issue definition changes.
    - Image
    - Tone
    - Attention
    - Venue
  + External events can shock a policy subsystem producing disrupted exponential incrementalism.
  + Policy monopoly is the established policy subsystem that dominates the issue.
* Policy actors redefine an issue until it reaches a favorable venue
* Stability in the policy process dependent on:
  + Existing institutional structure
  + Definition of issues
* Structure-induced equilibrium is maintaining the the policy monopoly
* Policy decisions and changes have a leptokurtic distribution rather than normal distribution
  + Power law
* Bargaining and information-gathering contribute to policy punctuation

Assessing the Value of PET

* PET can’t forecast policy change since it can’t predict timing of punctuations.
  + Shift is often caused by events external to the subsystem.
  + Punctuations can flow in both directions.
  + Human psychology is critical to PET but is not completely understood.
* Advantages of PET
  + Incorporates the possibility of significant change in policies.
  + Moves away from model of negative policy feedback.
* Key to instigating policy change is finding the right policy image to mobilize previously disengaged policy actors.
  + Venue shopping is targeting specific individuals and governmental institutions.
  + Venue specialization is forging longer term relationships with specific policy actors.

Garbage Cans and Policy Windows: A Multiple Streams Approach to Policy Change

* Organized anarchies are organizations that share three general characteristics:
  + Problematic preferences
  + Fluid participation
  + Unclear technology
* Solutions are searching for problems rather than problems searching for solutions.
* Policy entrepreneurs learn by trial and error.
* Three streams in the garbage can:
  + Problems
    - Focusing events
    - Indicators
  + Policies
    - Prominent policy actors (e.g., president, members of Congress)
    - Hidden policy actors (e.g., policy specialists)
    - Softening the agenda to ensure political receptivity
    - Coupling is linking policy alternatives with problems
  + Politics
    - Venue shopping and political learning
    - Election results, national mood
* Convergence of the streams creates a policy window, which is an opportunity for rapid policy change.
* Limitations of multiple streams framework
  + Not used in models of change
  + Streams are not distinct and distinguishable
  + No empirically falsifiable hypotheses

A Theory of Policy Change

* ACF, PET, and Multiple Streams are not able to rule out alternative explanations.
* Policy diffusion is when policies in one jurisdiction impact the policies of other jurisdictions.
* Determining what constitutes a focusing event is still unclear.
* Little evidence to support the idea that public opinion affects which issues make it on to the policy agenda.
* Policies rarely considered for more than two Congresses.
* Little advocacy for most issues.

Conclusion

* Policy process is neither rational nor random.
* Some advocate using evolution as a guide for developing a general theory of policy change.

Preview Questions

1. What is impact analysis and program evaluation?
2. What is the difference between impact analysis and policy analysis?
3. What questions define policy analysis as a field of study?
4. What are formative and summative evaluations?
5. What is process and outcomes evaluation?
6. What are the core elements of impact analysis?
7. What is the logic and theory that guide impact analysis?
8. What is program theory?
9. What research designs are appropriate for impact analysis?

Reading Summary

Defining Impact Analysis and Program Evaluation

* The actual and intended consequences of a policy are likely to differ to some degree.
* *Ex ante* policy analysis is essentially trying to foretell the future.
* Causes of differences between intended and actual policy outcomes:
  + Unforeseen events
  + Unaccounted-for effects
  + Misunderstood causal relationships
* Uncertainty of policy analysis creates the need for *ex post* assessment of policies.
* Impact analysis (also called program evaluation)
  + Systematically assessing the effect a public policy has actually had on the real world.
  + Policy analysis is prospective and/or prescriptive assessment.
  + Impact analysis is retrospective assessment.
* Ex post analysis helps inform decisions about policy or program design.
  + Cost-benefit analysis only helps assess whether there is a net social benefit.
* Key questions of impact analysis:
  + What is the policy actually doing?
  + What outcomes is the policy affecting?
  + Is the policy worth the cost?
  + Should the policy be continued, expanded, contracted, modified, or abandoned?
* Impact analysis generally uses a rationalist approach but must consider normative justifications for the policy under evaluation.
  + Normative yardstick needed to differentiate among policy options.
  + Central challenge is identifying the objectives of the policy, the actions taken to achieve those objectives, and the causal claims purported to link objectives with actions.

Impact Analysis and Program Evaluation

* Impact analysis is part of the broader field of policy evaluation.
* Key elements of definitions:
  + Focus on consequences of actual implementation of a public policy.
  + Judgment of the consequences based on some normative yardstick.
  + i.e., compare what is with what should be
* More applied that academic
  + Results considered less generalizable (i.e., policy and program specific)
  + Considered trans-discipline in nature.
    - Like logic or statistics.
* Types of policy evaluations
  + Academic studies
  + Reports from management consultants
  + Formal reviews by the Government Accountability Office
  + Informal assessments by program managers
* Subfields of policy evaluation:
  + Formative evaluations
  + Summative evaluations
  + Process evaluations
  + Outcome evaluations

Formative and Summative Evaluations

* Formative evaluations are conducted in the early stage of policy implementation.
  + Focus is identifying necessary adjustments.
  + “Should we change what we’re doing?”
* Summative evaluations are conducted when the policy is mature.
  + Focus is assessing overall worth.
  + “Should we keep doing what we’re doing, do something different, or stop doing anything at all?”

Process and Outcome Evaluations

* Process evaluations assess policy activities to determine if the policy is actually being implemented as intended.
  + Overlaps with policy implementation.
* Outcomes evaluations assess what a policy has achieved and the reasons for the outcomes produced by the policy.
  + Impact analysis is a specific form of outcome evaluation.
* Basic approaches
  + Descriptive
    - Goals
    - Processes
    - Outcomes
  + Normative
    - Pragmatism of goals
    - Social desirability of outcomes
  + Impact
    - Goal attainment
    - Outcome attribution
    - Outcome variability
* Descriptive and Normative Approaches
  + Tend to be qualitative
  + Tend to be formative
  + Tend to be process-focused
* Impact Approach
  + Tend to be quantitative
  + Tend to be summative
    - Formative if it seeks to explain why outcomes occurred
  + Tend to be outcome-focused

The Core Elements of Impact Analysis

* Three core elements
  + A problem
  + An action
  + Desired outcome
    - Operationalize an aspect of the problem.
    - Causally linked to the policy.
* Depends heavily on the chosen dependent variable.
  + Choice is complicated because:
    - Problems are complex and multidimensional.
    - Policies often have multiple, vague, or contradictory desired outcomes.
* Outcomes and problems are not necessarily the same thing.
  + The outcome measured may not represent the target problem.
  + Inaccurate diagnoses.
  + Harmful prescriptions.
* How an outcome of interest is operationalized can predetermine the results of an evaluation.
  + Has led to cynicism about the worth of policy evaluation.
* Wilson’s Laws of Policy Evaluation
  + All policy interventions produce the intended effect if the evaluation is performed by those who support the policy.
  + No policy intervention produces the intended effect if the evaluation is performed by those who do not support the policy.
* Types of analysis competence
  + Neutral competence 🡪 analysis based solely on expertise
  + Responsive competence 🡪 expertise employed for partisan preferences

The Logic and Theory of Impact Analysis

* Key question is how do we know when X causes Y?
* Three elements needed to establish a causal claim:
  + Temporal precedence (i.e., X precedes Y)
  + Covariation (i.e., when X changes, Y changes also)
  + Co-occurrence (i.e., when there is no X, there is also no Y)
    - Counterfactual 🡪 what would have happened if there was no X
    - Impact = Resultant – Counterfactual (i.e., I= R-C)
* Estimating the counterfactual
  + Identify key causal link between policy activity and outcome of interest.
  + Generate valid estimate of counterfactual based on understanding of causal link.
* Qualitative approaches to policy evaluation are defined by the absence of a counterfactual.
  + Approach causality like medical diagnosis (i.e., diagnostic)
  + Causality is inferred from symptoms or physical traces of the policy activity.
* Sources of theoretical frameworks for establishing causal explanations in impact analysis.
  + Theories that make claims of universal explanation of human behavior.
    - Public Choice Theory
    - Institutional Rational Choice Theory
  + Theory has to be able to identify the problem and outcome of interest.

Program Theory

* Program theory is the set of beliefs that underlie human behavior.
  + May be specific to the policy or program being studied (i.e., not generalized)
  + Don’t necessarily need to be correct.
* Existence of a policy represents a theory.
  + Impact analysis does not require a single program theory.
* Approach to program theory
  + Outcome line
    - process
      * Backward induction
      * Start with ultimate outcome of interest
      * Work backwards building causal chain of activities and outcomes
    - Outcome of interest
      * The outcome for which all outcomes to its right are considered immaterial.
      * The outcome for which we assume that all outcomes to its right will occur if it occurs.
* Criticism of program theory
  + Causal explanation limited to a single policy at a single time in a single place.
    - Does not produce a general theory for why a policy does or does not work.
  + Oversimplified model of reality.
  + Causal beliefs can be routed in the biases of the researcher.
* Ultimate aim of impact analysis is to generate a valid estimate of the counterfactual.

Research Design in Impact Analysis

* Research design is the means used to estimate the counterfactual.
* Three basic designs
  + Experimental
  + Quasi-experimental
  + Correlational
* Key difference in the basic research designs is how the comparison group is created.
  + Experimental 🡪 random assignment to control group
  + Quasi-experimental 🡪 selective assignment to comparison group
    - Similarity to treatment group based on certain variables.
  + Correlational 🡪 no centralized selection for comparison group (i.e., subjects self-select)
    - Statistically control for alternative causes of the outcome of interest.
* Effectiveness ratio is the proportion of a policy’s goals that have been achieved on a given outcome of interest.
  + Effectiveness ratio =
* Without counterfactual, impact analysis is an educated guess at best.