Public Policy

Politics, Analysis, and Alternatives

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# Chapter 3: Understanding Public Policymaking

## The Policy Process Model

* Logical sequence of activities affecting the development of public policies
  + Depicts policy-making process and relationships among actors in each stage
  + Understand flow of events and decisions in any political system/process
* Policy cycle: process is cyclical or continuous, not a one-time set of actions
  + No policy decision or solution is final; changing conditions, new information, formal evaluations, shifting opinions
  + Stages can overlap or are skipped
* Important aspects of policymaking that correspond to reality
  + Political analysis can affect how each stage is carried out

## Table 3-1: The Policy Process Model

* Agenda setting
  + How problems are perceived and defined, command attention, and get onto the political agenda
  + Budget deficits rose sharply on the agenda during Obama administration as they increased dramatically due to a combination of events, including the economic downturn and increased federal expenditures to stimulate the economy. Many Republicans stated the increased deficit was due to increased expenditures rather than a decrease in revenues.
* Policy formulation
  + Design and drafting of policy goals and strategies for achieving them; use of policy analysis
  + The 2001 tax cut reflected conflicting economic assumptions and forecasts and differing estimates of future impacts on domestic programs
* Policy legitimation
  + Mobilization of political support and formal enactment of policies; includes justification or rationales for policy action
  + The passage of health care reform in 2010 saw intense lobbying on the part of many of the affected interests. Ultimately the bill was passed in the face of unanimous Republican opposition because Democratic supporters argued that the reform plan would provide for better health coverage for most citizens
* Policy implementation
  + Provision of institutional resources for putting the programs into effect within a bureaucracy
  + Implementation of the federal Endangered Species Act has lagged for years because of insufficient funding, which reduced its effectiveness
* Policy and program evaluation
  + Measurement and assessment of policy and program effects, including success or failure
  + Efforts to measure the effectiveness of the 1996 welfare reform policy and of the experimental use of vouchers to improve public education have produced mixed results
* Policy change
  + Modification of policy goals and means in light of new information or shifting political environment
  + Adoption of new national security, airport security, and immigration reforms following the terrorist attacks of 2001

## Problem Definition and Agenda Setting

* How do problems generate interest?
  + Why do people pay attention to them?
  + Why are they considered important enough to solve?
  + Why do some problems command so much attention at times while others tend to be ignored?
  + Who determines that it is the government’s responsibility to address it rather than leave it to individuals and the private sector?

### Defining a Problem

* Identify a problem, define objectively, ensure that politics does not enter into the equation
  + Problem definition: matter of representation because every description of a situation is a portrayal from only one of many points of view. Problem definition is strategic because groups, individuals, and government agencies deliberately and consciously fashion portrayals so as to promote their favored course of action.
  + Those who favor one view of a problem or one kind of a solution use language that describes the problem or the policy action in a framework that reflects their perspective
* Making comparisons is part of problem definition
  + Problem definition is not neutral and has implications for policy formulation and implementation
* Interest groups and private sector define public problems for government to address
  + New, objective information on the nature of a problem can steer political debate

### Setting the Agenda

* Public and policymakers must recognize defined problems, must rise high enough on agenda that action becomes likely
  + Then search for solutions begins
  + Competition for agenda space: many problems are neglected
    - I.e. population growth
  + Nonissues/agenda denial
    - Some issues kept off agenda by those who oppose them
      * Bias in favor of exploitation of some kinds of conflict and suppression of others because organization is the mobilization of bias. Some issues are organized into politics while others are organized out
    - Others are ignored by indifference
  + Systemic agenda: public is aware and may be discussing a problem
  + Institutional agenda: government agenda to which policymakers give active and serious consideration
    - List of subjects or problems to which governmental officials are paying serious attention to at any given time
  + Agenda: subjects that gain attention and become possible objects of policy action
* Agenda setting: issues without attention do not get government response
  + Policy-making elites can define a problem and raise its visibility
  + Government agencies can raise awareness for problems they deal with and move issues onto agenda
  + Media decides which issues to report on to highlight public problems and sway public opinion
  + Interest groups emphasize their problems of greatest concern and define them within their own values

### Steps to Analysis: What’s on the agenda?

* Budget issues are always on the agenda because all levels of government must develop and pass a budget to provide services
* Questions to keep in mind:
  + What is the budgetary situation for the entity being examined? Is there a surplus or a deficit?
  + What kinds of tax proposals are being discussed? Are tax increases or decreases being proposed? What are the reasons and justifications for these proposals?
  + Are there any new programs being proposed? Are there budgetary figures provided, and if so, do these figures make sense for what is being proposed?
* Look for issues that media sites emphasize and assign the most space. How does this compare to government sites?

### Determinants of Agenda Setting

* Mandated/required actions the government must deal with
  + Annual budget
  + Legislating to reauthorize existing programs
  + Acting on nominees for executive appointments
* Most of the time policymakers have available, little time for discretionary issues
  + Optional issues receive attention based on three “streams” that flow through society
    - Problem: information on the problem, who it affects, how
    - Policy: what might be done about the problem -- alternatives
    - Political: public mood
  + When they converge, opportunities arise to consider the issues
    - Policy entrepreneurs bring about convergence; inside or outside government actors
  + Policy think tanks and interest groups are sources of policy proposals
  + Salience: importance to general public
  + Conflict: level of public disagreement over an issue

## Policy Formulation

* Policy formulation: development of proposed courses of action to resolve a public problem
  + Alternatives studied and advocated during policy stream
  + Standards for acceptability
    - Economic cost
    - Social and political acceptability
    - Likely effectiveness in addressing the problem
  + Formulation can make or break policy
* Formal policy actors in government are influential
  + Appointed and career officials in bureaucracy: knowledge and technical information to develop policy
  + Can be too traditional and married to their old policies to look into new, drastic changes to policy

# Bibliography

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