

Introduction to Public Policy

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Learning Objectives

By the end of this course, you will be able to:

- Define and explain the nature of public policy
- Identify key concepts in public policy
- Analyze the various contexts shaping policy decisions
- Examine rationales for government involvement
- Evaluate public policies using multiple criteria
- Participate effectively in the policy process

What is Public Policy?

Core Definition

Public Policy refers to what government officials choose to do—or not do—about public problems.

Reflection Questions:

- What makes a problem public?
- Who decides what requires government action?
- How do we determine the appropriate response?

Understanding Public Problems

Key Characteristics

Public problems are conditions that:

- Are widely perceived as unacceptable
- Require intervention
- Affect the collective good

Examples:

- Environmental degradation
- Healthcare access
- Public safety
- Infrastructure maintenance

Key Terms and Concepts

1. **Intentions:** Purposes of government action
2. **Goals:** Stated ends to be achieved
3. **Plans:** Strategies for achieving goals
4. **Programs:** Authorized means for pursuing goals
5. **Decisions:** Specific actions taken

Outputs vs. Outcomes:

- **Outputs:** Formal government actions (laws, regulations)
- **Outcomes:** Actual effects on society (impact analysis)

The Policy Context

Multiple Dimensions

Social Context

- Demographics
- Social values
- Cultural changes

Economic Context

- Market conditions
- Budget constraints

Political Context

- Party dynamics
- Public trust

Why Government Gets Involved

Three Key Rationales

1. **Political Reasons**

- Public demand
- Electoral pressures

2. **Moral/Ethical Reasons**

- Social justice
- Public good

3. **Economic Reasons**

- Market failures
- Public goods

Types of Market Failures

1. **Monopolies/Oligopolies**

- Market domination
- Price control

2. **Externalities**

- Negative: Pollution
- Positive: Education

3. **Information Failures**

- Hidden risks

4. **Public Goods**

- Non-excludable
- Non-rivalrous

How to Get Involved

1. Voting
2. Joining interest groups
3. Participating in public hearings
4. Leveraging direct democracy tools

Key Criteria

1. **Effectiveness:** Does it work?
2. **Efficiency:** Are resources used wisely?
3. **Equity:** Is it fair?
4. **Feasibility:** Is it politically/technically viable?

For Next Class

To-Do List:

- Read Chapters 1 and 2 in Kraft & Furlong - Review syllabus
- Log into Canvas

Discussion Question:

Which public policy issues interest you the most and why?