

Policy Types and Why They Matter

Distributive & Redistributive Policies

Why Study Policy Types?

- Different policy types involve different actors, conflicts, and outcomes.
- Some are highly visible, others barely register with the public.
- Policy types help explain *who wins*, *who loses*, and *why*.

What Are Policy Typologies?

- Tools for categorizing and understanding different policies.
- Let us predict what kind of politics will accompany different policies.
- No typology is perfect—policies can change types or fit into multiple categories.

Distributive Policies

Definition: Take resources from a broad group and deliver benefits to specific groups or individuals.

- "Logrolling" or "pork barrel" politics—trading favors.
- Creates "Interest Group Liberalism": government tries to please many narrow interests.
- Broader public interest often neglected.

Distributive Policies: Features

- Interest groups form to protect and expand these policies.
- Popular with politicians, bureaucrats, media, and public.
- Difficult to change or eliminate once established.
- Resistant to reform efforts.

Distributive Policies: Examples

- Farm subsidies
- Social Security
- Medicare & Medicaid
- Student loans
- Tax breaks for homeowners
- Tax deductions for charitable giving

Distributive Policies: Equity

Equality vs. Equity

- *Equality* = everyone gets the same thing.
- *Equity* = distributions that are fair (not necessarily equal).
- U.S. tends to focus on *equal opportunity*, not *equal outcomes*.

Distributive Policies: Three Dimensions of Equity

1. **Recipients:** Who gets the benefits?
2. **Item:** What is being distributed?
3. **Process:** How are distribution decisions made?

Redistributive Policies

Definition: Take resources from one clearly identifiable group and give them to another.

- Affects allocation of wealth, property, rights, or privileges.
- Can work in either direction (rich→poor, poor→rich).
- Not always about money—can be about rights and status.

Redistributive Policies: Examples

- Welfare programs
- Food stamps (SNAP)
- Unemployment insurance
- Affirmative action
- Civil rights protections
- Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid

Redistributive Policies: Characteristics

- Highly controversial; usually face public opposition.
- Difficult to enact, change, or eliminate.
- Highly visible and often debated.
- Challenging to reform.

Stop & Reflect

Which policy type generates the fiercest political fights in the U.S.? Why?

How do distributive and redistributive logics show up in debates over programs like Social Security or tax reform?

