Politics, Political Thought, and Policy

POSC 315: Introduction to Public Policy

Lecture 1

Week 1-2

Theme of the Course:

American Political Values

1. Individualism
2. Equality
3. Community
4. Patriotism
5. Rule of Law
6. Diversity
7. Distrust of Government

Let's start with a couple of questions:

Why do we have programs for reduced cost or free school lunches?

Why is the primary responsibility for educating children and policing people left to state and local governments?

Introduction

- We seek to understand and find solutions for public problems.

- We have many theories about how the policy process works.

  - Many are *interdisciplinary*.

- We will focus on the *politics* of policy.
  - How do we get from a problem to a solution?
  - How do we get from a solution to a policy?
  - How do we get from a policy to a program?
  - How do we get from a program to an outcome?

Across the political landscape, we have many different views about what things are problems, what are the solutions to those problems, whether a government program is the best way to solve those problems, and what are the best ways to implement solutions.

Politics and Public Policy Definitions:

- How did your friend, family member, or other person respond when you asked them to define politics?

- policy?

Politics and the Policy Process

- **Politics** is the process of making collective decisions, usually by governments, to allocate public resources and to create and enforce rules for the operation of society.

- **Politics** is how we organize and govern ourselves; the art and science of government.

- **Public Policy** is the course of action the government takes in response to an issue or problem.

- Public policy is political because it takes place in the *public sphere*.

- Public policy addresses problems that are public or problems that some members of society think *should* be public.

What is Public?

- Public versus Private come to us from the Latin *publicus* and *privatus*, from Ancient Rome

- Publicus means "of the people" or "of the state"

- Privatus means "individual" or "personal"

What is Public?

Public (publicus)	Private (privatus)
Polis – the State	The Household – private business
Freedom	Necessity
Equality	Inequality
Immortality	Mortality
Open	Closed

These distinctions begin to collapse from the 19th century onward.

Political Theory, Quickly

Political theory is the study of the ideas and values that underpin political systems and institutions.

We'll look at Western Political Theory in brief:

Early Concepts: Gilgamesh (2500-ish BCE)

- One of the earliest written records of governance.
- Introduces the concept of two classes: rulers and subjects.
- Sets the stage for Western ideas about hierarchy and authority.

The Greeks: Foundations of Political Philosophy (6th-3rd Century BCE)

- **Socrates:** Ethics and justice in governance.
- **Plato:** The "ideal state" ruled by philosopher-kings.
- **Aristotle:** Empirical approach to politics; governments must promote virtue and balance.

15th-17th Century Thinkers

- **Machiavelli:** Politics as power; pragmatism over idealism.
- **Bacon:** Knowledge as power; science and governance intertwined.

The Enlightenment (17th-18th Centuries)

- **Hobbes:** Social contract; strong authority prevents chaos.
- **Locke:** Rights to life, liberty, and property; government must protect individual freedoms.
- **Rousseau:** General will; collective good over individual interests.
- **Montesquieu:** Separation of powers to avoid tyranny.

The American Regime

- **Founding Fathers:** Jefferson, Madison, and Hamilton synthesized Enlightenment ideals for the U.S. context.
- Key principles: liberty, equality, and a government of the people.
- Continuing influence: Lincoln, Roosevelt(s), King, and others, interpreting liberalism in different eras.

20th Century Theorists

- **Rawls:** Justice as fairness; prioritizing the least advantaged.
- **Marx and Weber:** Economic forces and power dynamics shape society.
- **Dewey:** Pragmatism and the role of public engagement in policy.
- **Lasswell:** "Who gets what, when, and how"—the essence of politics.

The Evolution of Liberalism

Liberalism evolves as a response to changing societal needs and economic conditions:

- **Classical Liberalism:** Rooted in the Enlightenment, emphasizing individual freedoms, limited government, and free markets.
- **Reform Liberalism:** Emerges in response to industrialization; advocates for government intervention to address inequality and promote welfare.
- **Neoliberalism:** Reacts to perceived inefficiencies of the welfare state; prioritizes market solutions with reduced government roles.

This progression reflects ongoing debates about liberty, equality, and the proper role of the state.

Why Political Theory and Public Policy?

- Political theory provides a foundation for understanding governance and policy.
- Public policy applies theory to real-world problems and solutions.
- Together, they inform how we think about and address public issues.
- Reveal fundamental beliefs about the role of the state that frame nearly all public policy debates.

Policy for the Common Good

Policy is a tool governments use to address public problems and improve society. It reflects collective decisions about priorities and values.

- **Policy as Meaning-Making:** Defines how society understands and prioritizes public issues.
- **Policy as Action:** A deliberate statement by government outlining what it will do—or choose not to do—about a specific problem.
- **Policy as Value Delivery:** Determines how goods, services, and opportunities are distributed and regulated.

Policy Reveals Values

> "Policies are revealed through texts, practices, symbols, and discourses that define and deliver values including goods and services as well as regulations, incomes, status, and other positively or negatively valued attributes."

> - Deborah Stone

Change: The Basic Tension in Policy

- **How does policy change happen?**
  - Through manipulation of existing norms?

- – Through building relationships and coalitions?
- **How does social learning occur?**
  - – By adapting to new evidence or ideas?
  - – By responding to societal needs?
- **What happens when change occurs outside government?**
  - – Grassroots movements
  - – Non-governmental organizations (NGOs)

Key Elements of Effective Policy

Participation, Observation, and Capacity Building

- **Participation:**
  - – Who participates in the policy process?
  - – Who is excluded?
  - – How can participation become more meaningful?
- **Observation:**
  - – How do we know what is happening?
  - – How do we evaluate what works and what doesn't?
  - – How do we identify problems effectively?
- **Capacity Building:**
  - – How do we empower individuals and communities to engage?
  - – How do we enhance the ability to implement solutions?

The Common Will

Policy is an attempt to translate the popular will into a political reality.

- In a liberal democracy, the popular will is expressed through elections; it is derived from the people.
- When advocates convince the government to make a policy, one can claim the government does so in the *public interest*.

The Public Interest

The assumed broader desires and needs of the public, in whose name policy is made.

- The public interest is a contested concept.
- The public interest is a political concept.
- The public interest is a moral concept.

Hard to define:

- Who gets to define it?
- Advocates claim *their* preferences are in the public interest.
- When something goes wrong, we claim the government is not acting in the public interest.
- It changes over time.

Key Takeaways

- **Politics and Policy:** Tools for solving public problems and shaping society.
- **Values Matter:** Public policy reflects societal priorities, values, and decisions.
- **Active Engagement:** Understanding these concepts empowers meaningful participation in governance.

- **Our Journey:** This course will deepen your grasp of theory, practice, and the dynamics of policy creation.

"The future depends on what we do in the present."

- Mahatma Gandhi