

What is Public Policy?

POSC 315: Introduction to Public Policy

David P. Adams, Ph.D.

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POSC 315

Week 1



Figure 1: Public Policy

What is Public Policy?

Public Policy is what officials within government, and by extension the citizens they represent, choose to do or not to do about public problems.

There's no single definition of public policy. It's a complex and multifaceted concept that can be understood in many ways.

Defining the Field(s) of Policy Studies

- **Policy studies** is an interdisciplinary field that examines both the content and process of public policies.
 - Smith and Larimer emphasize that it encompasses multiple subfields:
 - **Policy Analysis:** Evaluates policy outcomes and alternatives.
 - **Policy Process:** Studies how policies are formulated and implemented.
 - **Policy Advocacy and Governance:** Examines the influence of interest groups and governance structures.
 - These subfields are interconnected, reflecting the complexity of real-world policy challenges.
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Many different ways to discuss public policy

1. **Intentions:** the purposes of government action
 2. **Goals:** the stated ends to be achieved
 3. **Plans or proposals:** the means to achieve the goals
 4. **Programs:** the authorized means for pursuing the goals
 5. **Decisions or choices:** specific actions that are taken to set goals, develop plans, and implement programs
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Policy Outputs and Outcomes

1. **Policy Outputs:** the formal actions that governments take to pursue their goals
2. **Policy Outcomes:** the effects that result from policy outputs



Figure 2: What's the difference?

The Basics

- **Institutions:** the rules, norms, and procedures that structure the behavior of individuals and organizations.
 - **Government:** the institutions and political processes through which public policy choices are made with legal authority to govern or rule a group of people.
 - **Government Institutions:** the US Constitution, Congress, the President, the Courts, the bureaucracy, and state and local governments.
 - **Federalism:** the division of power between the national government and state governments; the division of power and authority on a geographic basis.
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The Basics (cont.)

- **Politics:** the process of making and implementing decisions that apply to members of a group; concerns the exercise of power and the resolution of conflicts.
 - **Policy Making:** the process by which authorities decide which actions to take to address a problem or set of problems.
 - **Policy Analysis:** the process of identifying and evaluating policy options and their consequences.
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The Context of Public Policy

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The Social Context

- **Social Problems:** conditions that are harmful to individuals or society and that require collective action to address.
 - **Social Values:** the beliefs that people hold about what is good, right, and desirable.
 - **Social Norms:** the unwritten rules that guide behavior in a society.
 - **Social Changes:** the transformations in society that affect the way people live and work.
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Figure 3: Policy Context

The Context of Public Policy (cont.)

The Economic Context

- **Economic Problems:** conditions that are harmful to individuals or society and that require collective action to address.
 - **Economic Policy:** the actions that governments take to influence the economy, such as setting tax rates, spending money, and regulating businesses.
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The Context of Public Policy (cont.)

The Political Context

- **Political Problems:** conditions that are harmful to individuals or society and that require collective action to address.
 - **Political Party System:** the organization of political parties and the competition between them.
 - **Trust in Government:** the belief that government will act in the public interest.
 - **Ideology:** a set of beliefs about the proper role of government in society.
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The Context of Public Policy (cont.)

The Governing Context

- **Complex Governance Structures:** the overlapping and interdependent relationships among government agencies, interest groups, and other organizations.
 - **Shared Responsibility:** the idea that government, the private sector, and civil society all have a role to play in addressing public problems.
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The Context of Public Policy (cont.)

The Cultural Context

- **Political Culture:** refers to widely held values, beliefs, and attitudes, such as trust and confidence in government and the political process, or the lack thereof.
 - **Political Socialization:** the process by which individuals learn about politics and acquire political values and beliefs.
 - **Political Participation:** the ways in which people get involved in politics, such as voting, running for office, or joining interest groups.
 - **Cultural Differences:** help to explain the wide variation in state and local public policies.
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Reasons for Government Involvement

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1. **Political:** shifts in public opinion; rise of social movements
 2. **Moral or Ethical:** action is the “right” thing to do, even without public support
 3. **Economic:** market failures; externalities; public goods
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Reasons for Government Involvement (cont.)

Economics and Market Failure

1. **Market Systems and Government Intervention**



Figure 4: Government Involvement

- In a pure capitalist or market system, government intervention is often seen as a distortion of market efficiency.
 - **Market Failure:** Occurs when the private market is not efficient, justifying government intervention.
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Reasons for Government Involvement (cont.)

Economics and Market Failure

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 - In a pure capitalist or market system, government intervention is often seen as a distortion of market efficiency.
 - **Market Failure:** Occurs when the private market is not efficient, justifying government intervention.
 2. **Types of Market Failures**
 - **Monopolies & Oligopolies:** Occur when one or a few companies dominate the market, controlling prices.
 - **Externalities:**
 - *Negative Externality:* Harm caused to a third party without compensation.
 - *Positive Externality:* Benefit gained by a third party without payment.
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Reasons for Government Involvement (cont.)

Other Types of Market Failures

1. Information Failure

- Occurs when crucial information for buyers and sellers is incomplete or not easily accessible.

2. Inability to Provide Public/Collective Goods

- **Public/Collective Goods:** Defined by two criteria:

- *Exclusion:* Ability to exclude someone from accessing the good.
 - *Joint Consumption:* Ability for multiple people to consume the good simultaneously.
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Reasons for Government Involvement (cont.)

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Reasons for Government Involvement (cont.)

Examples of Public Goods

NO JOINT CONSUMPTION	JOINT CONSUMPTION
 Exclusion Is Feasible 1 Pure private goods Examples: computers, automobiles, houses	2 Toll goods Examples: cable TV services, electrical utilities 
 Exclusion Is Not Feasible 3 Common pool resources Examples: air, water, grazing land, oceans, fisheries, wildlife	4 Pure public goods Examples: national defense, public parks 

Figure 5: Public Goods

The Practice of Policy Analysis

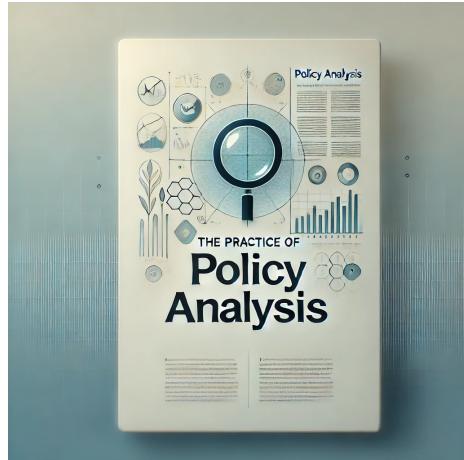


Figure 6: Policy Analysis

The Practice of Policy Analysis

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 - Describing the scope of public problems.
 - Assessing the feasibility of policy choices.
 - Evaluating program effectiveness.
 - Providing a counterweight to partisan or ideological decision-making.
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 - **Citizens and Policy Analysis:**
 - Helps citizens and interest groups make informed decisions and arguments.
 - Important for students to evaluate information critically.
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Deciding the Best Policy: Using Multiple Criteria

- **Key Criteria:**
 - **Effectiveness:** Will the policy work?
 - **Efficiency:** What are the costs vs. benefits?
 - **Equity:** Is the policy fair?
 - **Political Feasibility:** Is the policy acceptable to officials and actors?
 - **Flexibility:**
 - These criteria are not exhaustive—others may be relevant based on the specific issue.
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That's all for today!

1. Discussion 1 Post due on Tuesday
2. Read Kraft & Furlong, Ch. 2 and Smith & Larimer, Ch. 3 for Next Week
3. Sign up for Kritik
4. Have a great long weekend!