



Encyclopedic Dictionary of Public Administration

The reference for understanding government action

POLICY CYCLES

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The term policy cycle refers to the recurrent pattern shown by procedures that ultimately lead to the creation of a public policy. The advantage of analyzing these procedures by dividing them into stages (agenda-setting, formulation, implementation) resides in the way it offers explanatory insights into the decision-making process. More precisely, the notion of policy cycle provides a means of thinking about the sectoral realities of public policy processes.

The concept of policy cycle was developed by Harold Lasswell in the USA in the 1950s. At the time, he provoked a near revolution by describing public policy science as being multidisciplinary, problem-solving and explicitly normative (Howlett and Ramesh, 2003). On the basis of these characteristics, Lasswell developed the concept of policy cycles, which he broke down into seven fundamental stages in decision-making. Although the three characteristics identified by Lasswell with respect to policy analysis have withstood the test of time, his cyclical model is now largely criticized for its fragmented approach to explanatory factors. At present, there is a consensus in the research community that the model should be divided into five major stages: agenda-setting, policy formulation, public policy decision-making, policy implementation and policy evaluation (Howlett and Ramesh, 2003). Although all five are important, three of them – agenda-setting, formulation and implementation – are crucial to understanding policy cycles.

Agenda-setting, the first stage in a policy cycle, refers to the processes by which social conditions are recognized and considered to have evolved into a “public problem” – no longer subject to a social or natural destiny, nor belonging to the private sphere – thereby becoming the focus of debate and controversy in the media and in politics (Garraud, 2004). Agenda-setting is a critical stage in the policy cycle since its dynamics have a decisive impact on the whole policy process and the policies resulting from it (Lemieux, 2002; Howlett and Ramesh, 2003). Accordingly, a number of academics have turned their attention to explanatory factors related to policy decisions taken at this stage. Their research leads to the conclusion that agenda-setting is a socially constructed process (Howlett and Ramesh, 2003), in which actors and institutions, influenced by their ideologies, play a fundamental role in determining the problems or issues requiring action on the part of the government.

Once the existence of a problem and the need to remedy it have been acknowledged (Howlett and Ramesh, 2003), the next stage in the policy cycle is policy formulation. It involves identifying and assessing possible solutions to policy problems, weighing their pros and cons, and deciding which should be accepted and which rejected (Howlett and Ramesh, 2003). When options are being

POLICY CYCLES

identified, policy makers are limited in their room to manoeuvre by constraints of two types. Substantive constraints are related to the nature of the problem itself and entail considerable use of state resources to resolve a problem (Howlett and Ramesh, 2003). Procedural constraints, which also affect all aspects of the formulation stage, may be characterized either as institutional, based on government procedures, or as tactical, based on relationships between various actors or social groups. According to Howlett and Ramesh, who deal with tactical constraints in some detail, actors and social groups are component parts of subsystems, and the cohesiveness between these two components with respect to discourse (reflecting values and beliefs) and their social bonds has a fundamental influence on policy formulation. The more cohesion there is between the discourse community and interest networks in a policy subsystem, the more resistance there will be to new ideas and new actors (Howlett and Ramesh, 2003, 156-157). Inversely, a less cohesive subsystem structure that is open to new ideas and new actors will offer better chances for innovation, as long as the government also favours this type of structure. The relationship between the government and social actors is thus a significant factor influencing the formulation of public policies.

The third important stage is implementation, or the process of putting a public policy into effect. This is when a decision is carried out through the application of government directives and is confronted with reality (Mégie, 2004). There is generally a discrepancy between a policy's intent and its outcome (Mégie, 2004), which stems from the role played by its actors, particularly the public servants entrusted with responsibility for its implementation. Civil servants' personal tendencies (ideologies, interests, thinking, etc.) can influence their perceptions and even their intentions when it comes to implementing a policy. However, it appears that the main factor affecting the behaviour of civil servants is their belonging to an organization (Brooks, 1998, 78).

In this respect, organizational culture has a decisive influence, since it transmits ideological and professional norms, as well as agency-specific techniques, which may influence the implementation process (Brooks, 1998). External actors may also help to widen the gap between government intentions and observable outcomes. For example, pressure groups, lobbies or stakeholders having a specific interest in a policy may influence the way in which civil servants ensure its implementation, a state of affairs that Selznick terms cooptation (Brooks, 1998).

For certain authors, the policy cycle model described above presents major weaknesses. For example, it can give a false impression of linearity, with each stage in the cycle occurring in a precise, predetermined manner, which is far from actual fact. According to Howlett and Ramesh, the model's disadvantage lies rather in its inability to explain what causes policies to advance from one stage to another. They propose that the model be further developed to account for policy changes, which may be categorized as either normal or atypical.

Normal policy change involves altering various aspects of existing policy styles and paradigms, without completely transforming the shape or configuration of a public policy regime. This continuity is maintained by a number of ideological and institutional factors that insulate the policy regime from pressure for change. Normal changes thus provide policy cycles with a certain stability, but at the same time suppress innovation and new paradigms while encouraging the establishment of "policy monopolies" that defend the status quo. Such monopolies are generally backed by a "closed network" of policy actors, who keep other, change-oriented actors from having a say in the policy cycle. According to the two authors, atypical change involves "substantial changes in policy paradigms and styles." Although normal policy change is more common, atypical change may occur at times, when the members of a subsystem realize that the existing paradigm is no longer able to resolve policy problems (Howlett and Ramesh, 2003).

POLICY CYCLES

In the coming years, the development of the notion of change will lead to a better understanding of the stakes involved and to theoretical exploration that will improve the concept of policy cycles. The development of this notion should also help to explain overlap among policy stages and foster a less linear interpretation of policy cycles.

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