

Understanding the POLITICAL WORLD

A Comparative Introduction to Political Science

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James N. Danziger • Charles Anthony Smith

framework. This chapter expands the discussion by focusing explicitly on several fundamental approaches for analyzing public policy and the exercise of political power. Initially, the chapter explicates the concept of public policy, with a consideration of taxonomies and frameworks that characterize the public policy process. It then describes three basic theories (elite, class, and pluralist) that provide alternative explanations of how public policy decisions are made and how the distribution of power shapes that decision process.

Public Policy

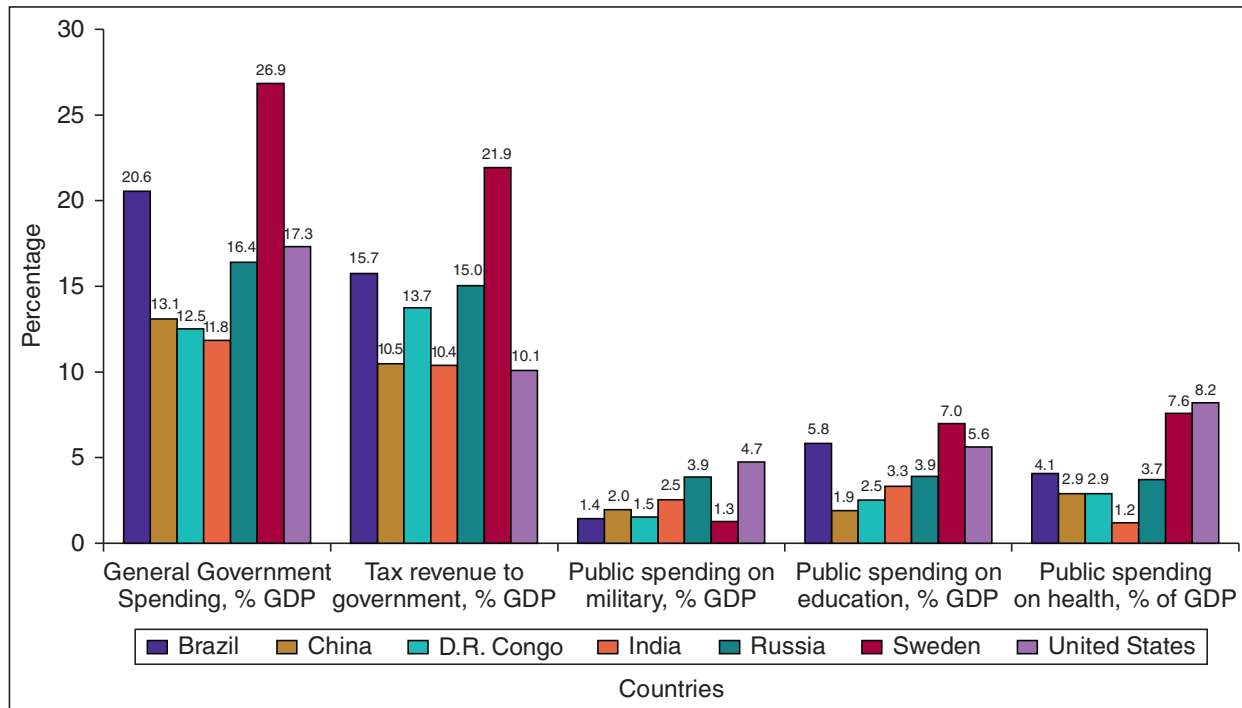
9.1 Differentiate among the types of public policy and outline the stages of public policy.

A **public policy** is *any decision or action by a governmental authority that results in the allocation of something that is valued*. Earlier chapters indicated that each political system establishes how extensively and in what forms its public policies will define *res publica* and impact its environment. These public policy decisions range enormously: in substantive area, in scale, in significance, *in the number of people affected*, and in the role of the policymakers. A national government can decide to declare war on a rival country or to commend a victorious sports team. A local government employee can decide to fill a pothole or to issue a building permit to a homeowner. The government representatives of many countries can hammer out a joint treaty to limit greenhouse gases. A security unit can arrest a suspected terrorist. A government can pass a law making sex between certain consenting adults illegal. The Chilean government can decide to allocate some land to the Mapuche or to use force to drive them off someone's private property. Each of these actions is an example of a public policy.

Table 9.1 and Compare in 9 offer some representative examples of current public policy decisions made by seven national political systems. The Compare claims that there is considerable policy variation across these countries. Do you agree? Beyond these kinds of direct comparisons of public policies, there are several other approaches to the study of public policy. One approach is to classify and compare various *types* of public policies by means of a taxonomy. A second approach analyzes the various stages of the policy *process* and attempts to explain the dynamics at each stage. A third approach studies the *impacts* of a particular public policy because what matters, ultimately, is how (if at all) the policy makes a difference in the lives of individuals and groups. Finally, a fourth general approach is more *prescriptive*, evaluating what public policy ought to be implemented, given existing goals, conditions, and resources. We can start by considering the types of public policies.

Types of Public Policies

Several criteria are used to classify different types of public policies. For example, a straightforward classification of policies is based on the *functional area* that is served, such as education, health, transportation, trade, public safety, the environment, or

Table 9.1 Selected Public Policies in Seven National Political Systems

	Brazil	China	D.R. Congo	India	Russia	Sweden	United States
Policy on abortion	Only to save life or after rape	Yes, on multiple grounds	Only to save life	Yes, on multiple grounds	Yes, on multiple grounds	Yes, on multiple grounds	Yes, on multiple grounds; varies by state
Policy on death penalty	No, since 1889	Yes, for 60 crimes, ~2,000/year	Yes, but only 2 since 1995	Yes, but only 3 since 1995	Yes, for 30 crimes, ~10/year	No, since 1921	Yes, in 32 of 50 states, ~16/year
Mandatory military service	Yes	Yes, but not enforced	No	No	Yes	No	No

Sources: World Bank (2013);
<http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/abortion/doc/unitedstates.doc>;
<http://www.icj-cij.org/icjwww/ibasicdocuments/ibasictext/ibasicdeclarations.htm>.
http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/01/03/india_is_a_death_penalty_country_again

defense. Alternatively, policies can be distinguished by the broad *objective of the policy*: (1) *Distributive* policies provide particular goods and services (e.g., the building and maintenance of a system of streets and highways); (2) *redistributive* policies explicitly transfer values from one group to another group (e.g., a policy that provides subsidized housing to those with limited financial resources); (3) *regulatory* policies limit actions (e.g., a policy that prohibits a woman from having an abortion); (4) *extractive* policies take resources from some actors (e.g., a sales tax on purchases); and (5) *symbolic* policies confer honor or disrepute on certain actors (e.g., a medal awarded to a soldier for bravery).

Compare in 9

Selected Public Policies in Seven Countries

Over time, do different political systems make substantially different public policy decisions? To explore this briefly, Table 9.1 provides examples of broad public policy decisions made by seven national political systems. The expenditure data are reported as the percentage of each country's total GDP (gross domestic product) that is allocated to a policy domain by all levels of government. This is an indicator of policy effort, given the country's overall wealth. The tax revenue measure is an extractive policy, while the other expenditure measures are distributive policies. The three non-monetary policies are regulatory, regarding certain rights and freedoms of individuals relative to state power.

The broadest conclusion from these data is that there are considerable differences in public policy decisions across the seven countries. On every specific policy domain, the country with the highest proportion allocates at least three times as much as the lowest. Each country has developed its own distinctive pattern of public policies, which are particularly grounded in the country's needs, wealth, and dominant political ideologies. For example, Sweden is a wealthy country that has a long tradition of democratic socialism and the provision of social welfare goods to its population (see Compare in 13). Thus, Sweden allocates a substantially higher proportion of its societal wealth through government spending than any of the other countries, with a particular focus on education and health care. To pay for all these public services, Sweden also collects the highest proportion of taxes. Sweden has progressive policies on abortion and capital punishment and stopped requiring military (or community) service in 2010.

It is also interesting to compare Brazil, Russia, India, and China, four of the five BRICS countries that are advancing toward global power status (see Chapter 15). Although each is attempting to project its power within its region and globally, the policy

choices vary. Russia, which aims to reassert its military might, allocates far more of its total societal wealth to the military than the others. Brazil's government, in contrast, has decided to direct more national wealth to education and health spending than the other three countries.

The level of funds allocated is one way to compare policy decisions. It is also important to consider how the money is spent. For example, what are the key targets of health care spending (e.g., disease prevention, infant health, medical training, care for HIV-positive people, hospitals)? Is public spending on education emphasizing teachers' salaries or student-teacher ratios or educational technologies or...? The manner in which a public policy is implemented is also significant for policies that are not primarily measurable in terms of money. For instance, the Chinese government not only allows abortion, it has also aggressively encouraged and facilitated abortion in an attempt to control population growth. In contrast, legal abortion is severely limited in nominally Catholic Brazil and is a deeply controversial policy domain in the United States.

And while comparing policy outputs is meaningful, the most important comparisons might be of the *impacts* of policies. That is, what is the effect of public spending on health care on indicators such as life expectancy and infant mortality rates? Does an increased level of military spending seem to increase a country's security? Which groups carry the burden of taxes and which do not? Does spending in one policy area (e.g., health care) provide indirect benefits to another policy area (e.g., education)? What is the effect of the policy of capital punishment on crime if it is rarely used (as in India)? Table 9.1 and these kinds of questions should help you to see the rich and complex considerations that are relevant when you attempt to compare public policies within and across political systems.

Further Questions

1. On what public policy do you think it would be most interesting to study crossnational differences in policy implementation? Why? What might you learn?
2. Which two countries in Table 9.1 seem to have the most similar configuration of policy allocations?

Analysis of the Stages of the Policy Process

A different approach to policy analysis examines the *stages of the policy process*—the sequence of actions from the inception of an idea for policy to the point at which the policy ceases to exist. A policy can be analyzed at each stage: what actors participate, how they interact, how the policy is defined, and so on. Such an analysis might emphasize the generally rational weighing of evidence and arguments to reach a reasoned decision, or it might focus on the complex interactions among different actors who engage in a process of competition and compromise to reach a more political decision (Stone 2011). Many public policy analyses focus on one specific stage and explore the dynamics of that stage of policymaking in detail (Andersen 2011; Bardach 2011). Six stages are usually distinguished, as characterized in Figure 9.1 and described below. And to provide

Figure 9.1 The Stages of the Public Policy Process

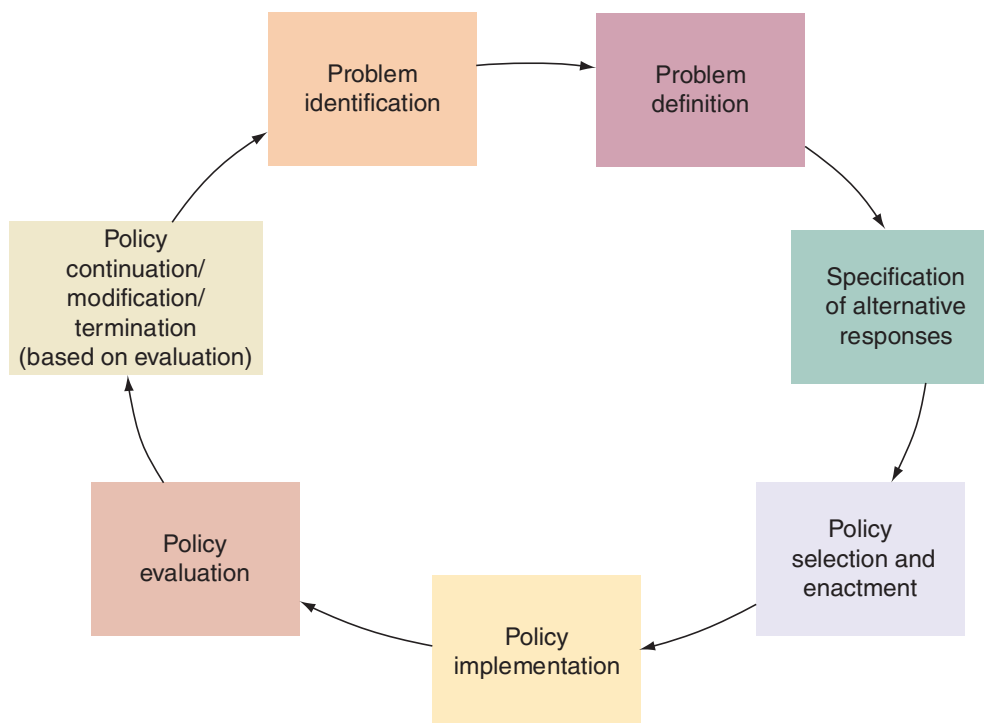


Table 9.2 An Example of Each Stage of the Policy Process: **Reading Skills of Children**

Stage	Action
Problem identification	Data indicate reading scores of children are too low.
Problem definition	Set goal: Raise mean reading scores of sixth-grade children by 10 percent in three years. Reading scores decline steadily from national average in grades 2–5. Low reading scores are especially associated with families in which English is not the first language. Lowest average reading scores are in seven schools where more than 20 percent of students come from such families.
Specification of alternatives	Target seven lowest-scoring schools or apply programs to all schools? Policy options: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intensive reading instruction in grades 3–5. • Provide teachers with training in reading pedagogy. • Provide reading specialist teachers. • Provide computer-aided learning software. • Require an extra 30 minutes of reading instruction per day. • Or...
Policy selection	Local school board decides: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus only on seven lowest-scoring schools. • Provide three new reading specialists to work with students. • Allocate funds to seven target schools for computer-based reading instruction software.
Implementation	School superintendent meets with principals of target schools and they decide how to distribute the time of the reading specialists across the schools and classrooms. Committee of principals will select and hire specialists. Interschool technology committee trains teachers to use reading software, principals require teachers to develop a plan for its use, and teachers implement it in the classrooms.
Evaluation	Changes in reading scores will be analyzed by district staff in each of the next three years. Teachers will provide written report on the effects of the new initiatives on the classroom. Continuation of the two policies will be reevaluated at end of year 3.

a concrete example of the policy process, Table 9.2 indicates how the issue of poor reading scores in a school district might evolve during the policy process.

1. **Issue identification.** Some actor decides that a condition in the environment requires a public policy response. For example, the national legislature decides that personal income taxes are too high, a group of residents complains to the county board of supervisors that traffic congestion has become a serious problem in their neighborhood, or the defense department gets secret intelligence that a rival state is developing a new nuclear weapons system. If important policymakers push forward the policy issue at this point, it becomes part of the agenda for possible action. Alternatively, policymakers might decide to drop the issue at this stage.
2. **Problem definition.** Next, there is an attempt to explain why the problem exists, to determine what seem to be the causes of the problem, and to define desired outcomes. Expert staff as well as interested stakeholders with knowledge of the policy domain can have a major role at this stage, which emphasizes research and analysis.
3. **Specification of alternatives.** Policy analysts develop policy proposals that seem to respond to the problem, given the causes, the preferred outcome, and the likely obstacles. In addition, the resources necessary to implement each policy

alternative are identified. The costs (e.g., financial, political, organizational) of each alternative policy must be estimated, as well as the level of expected benefits.

4. **Policy selection.** Decision makers study the alternatives, trying to assess the possible costs and benefits from the options. At this stage, the process will be some mix of political, financial, and technical considerations. The decision might be to enact a particular policy, to delay, or to do nothing and see if the policy issue disappears from the public agenda. Considerable negotiations, lobbying, compromises, and adjustments to the proposed policy might occur during this stage.
5. **Implementation.** The policy is now interpreted and applied in specific contexts. Those in relevant administrative positions typically take the lead role, determining how to translate the new policy into actual programs and activities, organize the necessary resources, and then deliver those programs.
6. **Evaluation.** After some period of time (or never), new information is gathered to ascertain whether the policy has had any of the anticipated impacts, whether conditions (related to the policy domain or the political situation) have changed, and whether any unintended effects of the policy must be considered.

At any stage, but especially after implementation or evaluation, the policy might be continued, modified, or terminated. This is best understood as a variation of stage 4, since it is a version of policy enactment rather than a distinct stage. It is also possible that the circumstances might trigger another cycle of the policy process outlined above, possibly beginning with a new stage of problem identification.

Policy Impact Analysis

The last stage of the policy process described above, evaluation, is an especially significant mode of policy analysis. As noted in the Compare in 9, a crucial question is: What difference did the policy make? This can be considered in different ways. What have been the direct effects of the policy? Have there also been notable indirect effects? Who benefits and who experiences negative effects from this policy? What are the nature and extent of those benefits and burdens? What have been the actual costs compared with the anticipated costs? On balance, has the policy improved the overall situation? These questions about the impacts of a policy might be addressed by policymakers and their staffs or by various other actors, such as interest groups, affected publics, and political rivals.

Policy Prescription

Every public policy affects someone's interests. Thus, there are always actors (stakeholders) trying to influence and shape public policy decisions at every stage and to influence policymakers to make some decisions and not others. As actors define and then pursue a policy goal, they are also engaged in *policy prescription*. Their policy goal might be based on careful policy analysis and policy impact studies, derived from ideological principles, or influenced by an agent of political socialization or an authority source such as a political party or political leader (recall Chapters 2–4). Whatever the basis of their policy prescriptions, policy advocates propose what public policies *should* be adopted and how policy *should* be implemented: The Chilean government