

POLICYMAKING

Public policies are the products of political systems. They come in the form of laws, regulations, and guidelines to bring about specific changes and achieve goals and are the result of a chain of actions aimed to address a particular social issue. There are several different types of policies. *Distributive* policies relate to how government goods or resources are to be directed to particular recipients. *Redistributive* policies determine the transfer of resources between social groups. *Regulatory* policies set terms and conditions for individual and collective conduct while *constituent* policies make changes to existing institutions or create new ones.

Framing Policymaking

Policymaking can be conceptualised as a plan of action for finding solutions to societal problems through institutional means. Looking at institutions, especially those that form the electoral system, is instructive for how policymaking happens. A cognitive frame is the particular orientation through which actors see and make sense of the world while a normative frame refers to beliefs and values that help structure that world. Both frames can both strengthen or constrain a particular policy process.

Conceptual Models of Policymaking

Institutional Model

This model takes into account how existent institutions, both official and informal, and the limitations and opportunities they provide pre-determine the structure of policy decisions.

Rational Model

This model concentrates on how best to garner 'optimal' policy decisions using all accessible information on past policy results and deducing the policy that is calculated to yield the best outcome.

Incremental Model

This model, which originated as a reaction to the rational model, aspires to a realistic rather than an optimal process of policymaking. It places relevance on the shortcomings of decision-makers with regard to both their comprehension of a subject and their cognitive abilities leading to incremental changes to policy.

Group Model

This model situates policy as the outcome of equilibrium after group struggle. In this theory, the strength of interest groups involved determine the policy that comes about with changes to the power of a group involved, possibly sparking policy changes.

Elite Model

This model theorises that policymaking is the domain and doing of the elites in government driven by their preferences. It theorises that the non-ruling masses are considered to be deficient in their understanding of policy while the elites are well-versed on questions of policy from their proximity to power. In this model, through these articulations, a bias in policy making is identified in that policies are consistent with the priorities of elites rather than the concerns of the public masses.

The Policy Cycle

Policymaking always happens within constraints such as that of time, resources, public opinion, and constitutional law. It is a process with established precedents enacted through various institutions some of which overlap and compete with one another. New policy decisions are not discrete decisions taken independently of previous ones, and they can have an effect on policy decisions to come in the future. The process involved in policymaking is a series of political acts. They are:

Agenda Setting

In this first stage, a societal problem requiring state intervention is singled out. Being able to set a particular agenda and/or exclude societal problems from the agenda is a key source of power for the policymaking institution or individual responsible. Usually, policy agendas are set by public authorities, the bureaucracy, the media, or interest groups.

Policy Formulation

This stage calls for defining, discussing, accepting, or rejecting practical ways of moving forward to tackle the chosen policy issue. Policy formulation takes place in government offices, among lobbyists and interest groups, in legislative committees, commission meetings and think-tanks. The staff affiliated with these collectives often draw up the proposals knowing what their leaders are aiming for.

Policy Adoption

The adoption of a particular policy option depends on government institutions. If there is a need to build a majority to approve the policy, then a whole host of considerations come into play such as party values and interests of the electorate that complicate adoption. The official capacities of the actors involved making the policies also factor in how policies are adopted.

Implementation

Policies are implemented when they are put into practice as laws or initiatives. The implementation process can be a long-drawn out process. At times, there can be a gap between passing new legislation and its being put into operation. For effective implementation, there must come into being an entity, often a bureaucracy, but sometimes private actors, that can bear responsibility and convert policy targets into a workable project.

Evaluation

This stage involves an appraisal of the policymaking process and its outcome to see whether it has achieved its targets. Evaluation is usually a standard part of policymaking and the domain of experts in the given area.

Adapted from Christoph Knill and Jale Tosun, 'Policy-making' in Daniele Caramani (ed), *Comparative Politics* (OUP 2020)

Further Reading

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