

Explaining Policy Choices

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MOST OF THIS BOOK describes the stages of the policy process and individual policy areas. In each of the descriptive components of the book, there are implied ways of explaining how decisions are made and why policies are adopted in the way that they are. The *stages model* of policy, for example, assumes that the process of making policy plays a significant part in determining the outcome. This simple explanation has a great deal of validity, given that at each stage of the process certain types of solutions will have a better chance than others of being successful. At the implementation stage, for example (see Chapter 6), policies that require fewer independent decisions and that have more robust instruments available are more likely to be successful than more complex policies.

Although the stages model is a useful heuristic, it is but one of several explanations of how decisions can and should be made when making policy. Some of these models are based on economic reasoning and make strong assumptions about optimal policies. Optimality may not be achieved in the “real world” of making policy, but the optimal models are a useful standard against which to compare the results of actual policy processes. The majority of the models I will discuss, however, will be political models that attempt to explain how political forces and political institutions shape choices.

POWER AND PUBLIC POLICY

Power is fundamental to all models of policymaking, including the stages model. Many scholars would argue that the simplest way to understand policymaking or any other form of political activity is to understand who has the power to make things happen. So if we want to understand why a law is adopted in a particular manner in Congress or is implemented in a particular way within the bureaucracy, we need to identify who has the power and therefore can make other actors comply with their wishes. Although power is to some extent a function of formal positions in government—the presidency, for example—it also may be a function of the characteristics of the individuals themselves or a product of other resources, such as money, that enable them to be effective in politics.

Whatever the basis of the power, those who have it are able to overcome the opposition of others.¹ Power can be manifest in a number of ways in the policymaking process. The most obvious is when one actor is capable of getting what it wants in fights over legislation or regulations. In the United States, for example, it is often assumed that corporate interests have that capacity.² At other times, the exercise of power may be simply the power to prevent action or indeed to prevent some issues from ever being considered

in the institutions of government.³ However power is manifest, it is a factor that always must be considered when examining the choices made by governments.

The policymaking process, especially in a complex setting such as US government, involves countervailing power, with all the actors involved having some resources that they can bring to bear. Even individuals and groups outside the mainstream of political life can bring some resources, including moral claims, to bear on the final decision. Therefore, simply saying that policymaking is about the exercise of power is not sufficient, and we must attempt to understand how this fundamental resource for actors in governing is used.

THE POLICY PROCESS—THE STAGES MODEL

The study of public policy in political science has several important but somewhat disparate dimensions. The largest single body of research has been on the policy process.⁴ This approach to policy is inherently political, arguing that the policy choices that governments make are primarily a function of the political process through which they are made and the institutions in which they are made. Most process models attempt to explain policy choices by understanding the actors who are involved at each stage as well as understanding linkages among the stages. These models are, however, far more useful for describing the process than they are as means of explaining outcomes. We will deal with the stages model of policy in some detail in Chapters 4 through 8, and I will not detail the assumptions of each of its aspects. That said, it is important to consider the way in which adopting a stages model of this type shapes thinking about policy in the United States and also some of the analytic issues raised by this approach.

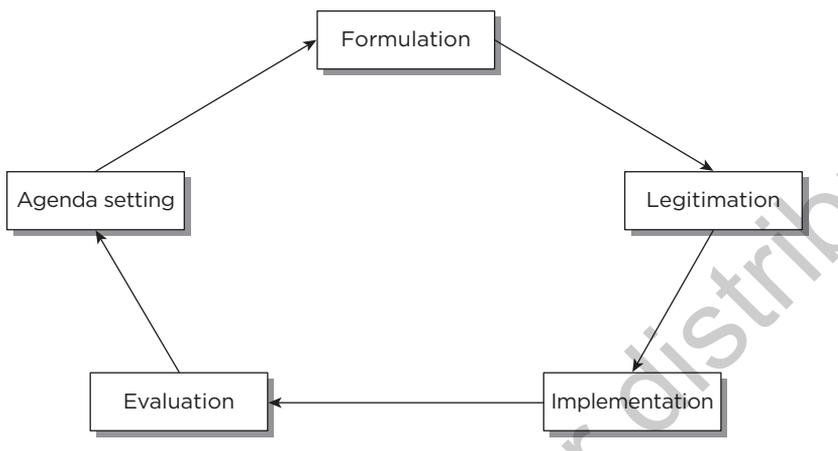
The conventional process model of policymaking begins with agenda setting or problem definition; then it proceeds through a series of steps such as program design, legitimating, budgeting, and evaluation but typically does not make any strong assumptions about the political mechanisms that are used to manage that movement (see Figure 3.1). Although some elements within the general model, such as agenda setting,⁵ rely on policy entrepreneurs to provide agency within the process, the general models tend to be largely devoid of that animation. Especially in a political system with as many institutional “veto points” and “veto players” as that of the United States, we need to understand better how the process can be made to work and who drives the action of policymaking forward.⁶

The conventional stages model, as useful as it is, also tends to assume that the stages discussed come in the order laid out in the model and that the process is taking place anew, with relatively little concern for the past. In reality, however, both of those implicit assumptions tend to be incorrect. First, the order may be less linear in practice than it appears in the model. For example, the process of implementation often involves policy formulation because the administrative decisions needed to make programs work in essence transform the policy. Likewise, important policy issues often arise when other programs are being budgeted and it becomes clear that for a program to work other programs will need to be changed or perhaps given additional resources.

It is also important to remember that most policymaking is actually revising and—we hope—improving existing policies.⁷ Some policy issues—for example, the budget—return to the agenda automatically, whereas others may remain dormant for some time. In both cases, however, policymaking involves working with existing programs. In some ways, this is an easier process for the political institutions, given that the basic parameters of public intervention have been determined and the involvement of the public sector has been legitimated. On the other hand, however, existing programs have clients and employees,

FIGURE 3.1

The Stages Model



and those groups may resist changes. Thus, the political coalition process may involve more overt conflicts than the relatively infrequent cases in which the public sector chooses to intervene for the first time.

That point raises the importance of conflict in understanding the policy process. The stages model as usually used in political science does not reflect the degree of conflict that may exist in these crucial political processes; rather, the process appears to move along smoothly to its conclusion. At each stage and as programs and policies move from one stage to the next, there will be conflicts. Furthermore, each stage of the process may involve different sets of actors with different concerns about the programs. For example, as a program moves from formulation and legitimation on to the process of implementation, the state governments are likely to become involved, given that in the United States most federal programs require some state-level implementation. This may transform conflicts about policy substance into ones of funding for the state governments. For example, the implementation of the Affordable Care Act has required an extensive role for states in creating exchanges and in expanding Medicaid (see Chapter 11).

In summary, the stages model is a very useful heuristic device for mapping the route that policies take from being just a good idea to being a functioning program, but it provides little explanation for the choices that are made. Many of the stages of the process, such as agenda setting and implementation, have well-developed theoretical explanations for choices, but the links among the stages and the overall model itself lack such capacity for explanation. Other approaches in political science may be able to provide more compelling explanations for policy choices.

INSTITUTIONAL MODELS OF POLICY

The stages model is based to some extent on the institutions that are involved in making policy; it tends to assume that certain institutions are associated with certain stages.

For example, legislatures are generally crucial for legitimating policy choices and also for budgeting, and the bureaucracy is generally responsible for implementing policy. In addition to those specific institutional linkages, we should also consider a more general institutional model for making policy decisions. Institutions do matter, but we need to specify how they exert their influence.⁸

As the new institutionalism has become a major approach to contemporary political science, the role of institutions has become more clearly conceptualized.⁹ Although there are several contending approaches to the role of institutions, they accept the general idea that institutions are crucial for understanding why the public sector functions as it does. New institutionalism emphasizes the normative elements of institutions and the “logic of appropriateness” that provides a guide for action to their members. From this perspective, individuals learn to behave in certain ways in organizations because of organizational values rather than because of the utilitarian consequences of the policies selected. For example, being a member of the US Senate is learned, and members tend to become effective only after they have mastered the formal and informal rules of that institution.

Another way of thinking about the role of the logic of appropriateness is that organizational cultures shape the policies that the organization advocates and implements. The individuals who work in many agencies and departments have their own views of what constitutes good government and good policy and will attempt to have government implement those policies. Political leaders at times find it difficult to overcome these internal logics, for example, when more conservative administrations attempt to change the policy directions of the Environmental Protection Agency or when more liberal administrations confront the Department of Defense.¹⁰ The short tenure of “Chuck” Hagel as Secretary of Defense in the Obama administration may be explained in part by differences with the basic ethos of the department.¹¹

Whereas such normative institutionalism assumes that policy choices are motivated by an internal logic of appropriateness, historical institutionalism emphasizes the importance of path dependency and the persistence of policy decisions once they are made. Whether simply because it is difficult to change ongoing programs or because of the positive reinforcement that programs receive, once they are initiated, they tend to be “path dependent”—in other words, they tend to follow the status quo—unless there is some sufficient external shock that can disrupt the stability and create a new equilibrium in the policy.¹²

The historical institutionalist perspective is very useful for describing what happens in the policy process, but it is less useful for explaining how choices are made and, more important, why change might occur. Persistence and inertia are rather standard stereotypes of the policy process and often do describe what is happening. We also need, however, a means of understanding and explaining policy choices that move away from the status quo, that enable governments to reform and, one hopes, improve policy.

Historical institutionalism has begun to think about these ideas of change.¹³ In addition to the extreme changes associated with the idea of “punctuated equilibrium,” more gradual changes have been introduced into the approach. For example, the underlying nature of the approach is to emphasize persistence and the continuity of policy.

Rational choice models of institutions assume that institutions are sets of incentives and rules that shape the rational actions of the individuals who operate within government.¹⁴ These models address some classic collective action problems in political science and policymaking, including the “tragedy of the commons,” in which rational individual action leads to the exhaustion of common resources. Furthermore,

institutions can help to create equilibrium in situations—legislatures, for example—in which cyclical majorities may make reaching a decision difficult.¹⁵ Perhaps most important for policymaking, rational choice models of institutions have examined the difficulties that institutional design may pose for making decisions.¹⁶ So, for example, the US government, with its multiple institutions, presents special problems for decision-making that may not be encountered in less complex systems of governing. These institutional problems became all too apparent during the later years of the Obama administration and in the first year of the Trump administration.

Finally, discursive models of institutions are founded primarily on the ideas and discourses that guide the institution.¹⁷ In this perspective, similar to the normative institutionalism, the institution is shaped by the discussions that members use to persuade one another and to persuade the outside world about the actions undertaken by the institution. The discursive model, however, is not as stable as the normative approach, and the present configuration within the institution reflects a short-term equilibrium that will be altered through continuing debate and discussion.

ADVOCACY-COALITION FRAMEWORK

One important addition to process models of policy that contains the conflict missing in the stages model is Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith's advocacy-coalition framework (ACF).¹⁸ This model is concerned explicitly with policy change and argues that policy change comes about through the clash of ideas, as manifest in an existing policy coalition and a potential replacement. In any policy subsystem, there are core beliefs, and those beliefs are supported by coalitions of actors—experts, interest groups, political parties. When these core beliefs are challenged, the conflicts can be worked out through bargaining, often generating a new synthesis about policy that will in turn be institutionalized and set the stage for the next round of policy change.

The advocacy-coalition framework was developed specifically to deal with issues in which there is substantial disagreement about values or feasibility—for example, the clash between environmentalists and industry. This disagreement is taking place in a policy subsystem that is at least partially insulated from the remainder of the political system. If a policy does not have those “wicked” characteristics, then perhaps it can proceed nicely through the path described by the stages model. Many policy proposals, however, involve major disagreements about both ends and means and therefore require some means of resolving the conflict.¹⁹ The ACF is primarily about change and the need to move from one policy equilibrium to another and to do so when there are some basic disagreements about the best policy.

Most policy subsystems, such as those described in the ACF, tend to be rather stable until they are confronted by some external shock or by an opportunity for learning from other successful cases. When such a disturbance occurs, different sets of perceptions and ideas are activated, and conflicts emerge over the reactions to the shocks and the need to create some new equilibrium. In the development of the new equilibrium, the contending parties are assumed to maintain their core beliefs, but at the same time, they can bargain over issues and options that do not directly threaten those core beliefs. So, for example, an environmentalist would not be expected to yield on his or her commitment to ecological values but might negotiate over acceptable levels of pollution or over the use of particular pieces of land, possibly achieving operational coalitions with industry representatives.

The advocacy-coalition framework model also provides a means of understanding how change may occur within the seemingly stable, path-dependent models of historical institutionalism. The ACF is a means of introducing conflict into those models and understanding the dynamics of policy change in the context of apparent stability.²⁰ This model emphasizes that a great deal of the change that occurs in policy is a function of clashes of ideas as well as clashes of economic interests, as would be at the center of rational choice theories. In this perspective, sometimes the best ideas win rather than the most powerful.

POLICY CAUSES POLITICS

Another strand of theorizing about policy in political science has to some extent reversed the logic of the stages model and argues that policy produces politics.²¹ This model involves the assumption that four fundamental types of policy—distributive, regulatory, redistributive, and constituent—tend to be associated with certain types of political action. For example, redistributive policies, such as Social Security, are assumed to be associated with a type of politics in which political elites (often the president and his advisers in the private sector) create a policy and appeal to class divisions to build support for it. Salisbury and Heinz used a similar set of policy variables but related them more to the types of demands being placed on the policymaking system and the degree of the system's fragmentation.²²

The model developed by Theodore Lowi has motivated a great deal of empirical research as well as a number of theoretical critiques.²³ Perhaps its most fundamental contribution, however, has been to make political scientists think about policies in more analytic categories. There is always the tendency to think about policies in terms of the names one finds on government buildings—agriculture, defense, and housing, for example. That manner of thinking is useful, but only up to a point, and it may mask some of the internal variations in individual policy areas.

A slightly different version of the “policy causes politics” approach is the argument made by Gary Freeman and others that differences across political systems are not as great as differences across policy areas. That is, the technical and political foundations of a policy area, such as health, may be more similar across countries than are those foundations for disparate policy areas within a single system. As policy ideas spread across national boundaries, the common aspects of policy may become more similar. Pressures from globalization and from Europeanization have tended to homogenize policy across national boundaries, further reinforcing Freeman's argument.²⁴

Policy Styles

To be able to understand public policy, it is important to consider the policy choices made by any one country (or subnational unit) and compare them with the choices made by other countries. That comparison could be done on a policy-by-policy basis, as described for the welfare state below, or we could typify a policymaking style for the political system in question. In this case, rather than politics being assumed to cause policy, policy is being used to characterize the political systems and as the lens through which to compare them.

Jeremy Richardson did the first major analysis of policy styles in western Europe, arguing that the policy styles in those countries could be characterized by two variables:²⁵ One was an active-reactive dimension, assessing the extent to which

a country attempted to anticipate policy problems. The other dimension was the extent to which the political system operated by reaching consensus decisions versus the dominant political group—generally a party in control of government—being able to impose its view. So, for example, the need of the United States to create a consensus among multiple institutions and its general aversion to government planning would place it in one cell, while the United Kingdom might share the tendency to reactive solutions to problems but would have a stronger government, able to impose decisions.

Richardson's model is not the only approach to understanding policy styles. Frans van Waarden, for example, has been concerned with identifying the dimensions of policy styles that can be used to assess the capacity of political systems to make and implement policies effectively. His dimensions include such factors as links with society and legalism, which shape the politics of public policy. Interestingly, in this analysis, the presumably weak government of the United States appears to have the capacity to be much stronger than it is usually thought to be. The reactive policy style of the United States, therefore, may be a function more of its political culture and the longstanding *laissez-faire* tradition than of institutional factors within government itself.

Another approach to policy styles focuses more on the nature of the principal policy actors in involved in the policy process, and participatory opportunities available in the policymaking system, along with the inclusiveness of the policy process.²⁶ In this model the American policy style is considered very participatory, although there are a number of more formal and legalistic elements that shape policymaking,

For policymaking in a single country, such as the United States, the utility of the policy styles approach is to understand some of the implications of the manner in which policies are made and implemented in that country and what the options might be. For example, the reactive policymaking style of the United States has meant that the country does not anticipate major problems and therefore may have difficulty responding to problems such as floods, hurricanes, and declining infrastructure, as evidenced by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005 and the collapse of Minneapolis's I-35W bridge in 2007. On the other hand, as Frans van Waarden points out, the capacity to mobilize after recognizing problems helps to ameliorate conditions once the disasters occur.²⁷ The major question, then, is the extent to which citizens are willing to bear the costs and dangers of the reactive style.

Furthermore, there may be greater differences across policy areas in a single country than there are across countries.²⁸ For example, the United States may be very reactive in a policy area such as health care, except when policy windows open as one did for Medicare and Medicaid in the 1960s (see Chapter 11) and as another did after the election of Barack Obama in 2008. But American government may be very active in foreign policy and some areas of public education. The internal dynamics of these policy areas may be very different, with government having greater latitude for action without influence from interest groups in foreign policy than in most areas of domestic policy.²⁹

Policy Instruments

Implementation studies have been concerned with the ability to transform stated policies into effective action. The ability to make that difficult translation from law to action involves a number of components; an important one is the choice of one or more policy instruments.³⁰ The basic idea of policy instruments is that the public sector can

AP Photo/Evan Vucci



President Donald Trump walks with FEMA administrator Brock Long, second from right, and Lt. Gen. Jeff Buchanan, right, as he tours an area affected by Hurricane Maria in Guaynabo, Puerto Rico, in October 2017. Natural disasters such as this force governments into quick and decisive action.

achieve its goals using a variety of different types of programs—subsidies, regulation, vouchers, and so forth—and each of these will have different substantive and political characteristics that will influence the likelihood of success.

While it is common to think of these instruments in more or less technical terms, it is crucial to remember that they do have a strong political dimension. For example, as the politics of governing has changed to cast suspicion on direct public sector interventions, many of the conventional “command and control” instruments of the public sector, such as regulation, have been exchanged for softer instruments, such as recommendations and nonbinding agreements.³¹ The choice of policy instruments may also reflect the need to build coalitions to have legislation adopted. For example, much of the federal support for university students in the United States has been provided through private bank loans guaranteed by government. Although it might be more efficient to have the loans managed through the universities, it was important to create a political ally in the banking industry.

The study of policy instruments leads to a number of other, even more difficult issues about public policy and the possibilities of effective public sector intervention. The most fundamental of these is that the choice of instruments raises the possibilities of policy design. Do policy analysts, whether in political science or not, have the ability to design better policies than those designed through political mechanisms? To do so requires some understanding of the causes of policy problems and the relationship of those problems to the instruments available to address them and some normative basis to evaluate the outcomes of the policy intervention.³² The design issue also raises the question of whether the simple functional categories we generally use for policy are sufficient to capture the complexity of the challenges of attempting to match instruments to policy problems.³³

BOUNDED RATIONALITY, MULTIPLE STREAMS, AND INCREMENTALISM

Economic models of policymaking stress the rationality of human action when humans act politically or use rational, economic criteria to assess the quality of decisions. In the former case, rational choice models of politics argue that the best way to understand how politicians,³⁴ bureaucrats,³⁵ and interest groups,³⁶ among others, act when making policy is to consider those individuals as rational utility maximizers. People operate within the context of formal, legal institutions, but advocates of rational choice argue that we can best understand their behavior by beginning with those basic motivations.

Scholars have advanced any number of critiques of the rationalist model of policymaking. While still adopting some of the basic orientation toward rationality, scholars using the bounded rationality approach point to the extreme difficulty of making fully rational decisions and argue that rationality can best be seen as bounded by organizational, political, and cultural parameters that constrain the choices that an individual will have to make. This school of policymaking is based on the work of Herbert Simon and has continued through other literature that has emphasized the difficulties in depending on models that assume entirely rational decision-making.³⁷

The garbage can model of organizational decision-making is one of the important contributions of the bounded rationality approach.³⁸ The basic idea of the garbage can is that the multiple constraints on policy prevent real-world implementation of the rational model of policies to pursue goals. Rather, in the garbage can, streams of opportunities converge almost at random, so it is difficult to predict what policies will be adopted. For example, John Kingdon has discussed agenda setting in policy as the opening of windows of opportunity that present the opportunities to use solutions.³⁹ The confluence of those streams may mean that solutions pursue goals rather than the usual assumption that programs are formulated to solve problems. This is often a function of the organizational nature of politics. Bureaucratic organizations have commitments to instruments and other “solutions” and hence may want to find ways of using their instruments. This behavior may be especially evident when the organization is threatened by termination or by other organizations competing for their turf.

The garbage can model has been generalized to the multiple streams approach to policymaking.⁴⁰ The logic of this approach is that three streams of factors—problems, politics, and policy characteristics—converge in more or less accidental manners. The substantive discussions of policy in Chapters 9 through 16 point to a number of instances in which policy choices have been made through such a convergence. For example, the crumbling infrastructure in the United States might have continued to crumble if the economic crisis of 2009 had not provided an opportunity for funding public works to get people back to work.⁴¹ This process is not entirely accidental, however; policy entrepreneurs play a crucial role in bringing together the various streams and in using, if not creating, windows of opportunity. Thus, although elements in the streams may emerge somewhat randomly, there is a need for some political or administrative actor to bring the streams together and produce effective action.

The logic of bounded rationality that rejects comprehensive rationality when considering policymaking appears also in the incrementalist approach to policy. *Incrementalism* has two distinct elements, but both support the basic logic that making comprehensively rational policy decisions is impossible and perhaps even unwise.⁴²

The empirical approach to incrementalism has examined repetitive policymaking—especially on the budget. Those studies have found that the volume and complexity of decisions lead decision-makers to fall back on simple incremental rules of thumb rather than attempt to make perfect allocations of funds. The assumption is that by making a series of small adjustments over time, appropriate allocation of funds will be achieved.

The normative argument for incrementalism is that in the long run, better decisions are made by “successive limited comparisons” of a policy choice to the status quo and by gradually adapting policies through trial and error and learning.⁴³ The argument is that this allows retreats if poor initial choices are made and prevents costly investments in poorly designed programs. On the other hand, incrementalism can be seen as excessively conservative, retaining existing policies for longer than might be justified and preventing significant reforms.

THE PRIVATE SECTOR, IRON TRIANGLES, AND NETWORKS

The liberal, pluralist tradition of politics in the United States has provided the private sector a rather ambiguous position in policymaking. To some extent, the involvement of interest groups and other private actors in policy is illegitimate. The groups that gain access to policy often have a great deal of influence, and their actions are often hidden from public view. The increasing openness of the private sector to the media and other forms of scrutiny has made the involvement of those groups more obvious to the public and has often made policymaking appear even less “in the public interest” than it is meant to be.

Even in the absence of apparent corrupt practices, the interaction of the public and private sectors in the United States has been described as “iron triangles,” in which there is a symbiotic relationship among interest groups, congressional committees and subcommittees, and administrative agencies.⁴⁴ The interest groups need access to Congress and to the administrative agencies who serve their members. The agencies need support (on their budgets and other legislation) from Congress, and they use interest group support to obtain it. Congress members want to be reelected and need effective programs that serve their constituencies as well as support (including financial support) from interest groups. These three sets of actors have worked together effectively and are able to prevent interference in their cozy relationships.

The continuous expansion of interactions between citizens and government has to some extent eroded the exclusivity of the iron triangles and has produced important changes in the ways that private sector actors become involved in the public sector. In particular, networks of public actors have been formed around numerous policy areas that include a range of private sector actors who have some involvement with the policy. For example, the health summit that President Obama called early in his term involved a number of federal and state officials but was mostly populated by a range of medical professionals and insurance and other corporate executives. The conventional iron triangle description of American politics has been supplanted by an understanding of the complex networks that now surround many policy areas.⁴⁵ A growing body of literature on network theory points to the role of social actors in governing.⁴⁶

OPTIMAL DECISION-MAKING

The models of policymaking presented thus far are politically driven, their motivations coming from the need to reconcile competing interests and political pressures. The outcomes of those processes are often very disappointing to the participants, but they do reflect the manner in which institutions function and their ability to begin with a contradictory set of values and interests and produce an outcome. Furthermore, these political models often can be illuminated by comparative analysis, using other cases to understand better how policies are made and how they may be improved.

Another approach to policy is to attempt to develop more abstract models of optimal policy processes and optimal policies. Whereas political models are driven by process, most economic models are driven by attempts to define optimal policy outcomes and to design institutional arrangements that may be capable of producing those desirable outcomes. While these optimal models may not be achievable in the real world of politics, they can function as a useful standard against which to compare “real” policy processes and policy outcomes. In addition, if the utilitarian assumptions are converted into measurements, the models can be used to advise policymakers about the best choices.

The starting point for economic analysis of policy is the justification for public sector intervention into the economy and society. If one believes that the market can produce optimal economic outcomes, then any interventions into that market must be justified by some form of market failure.⁴⁷ Public goods are one of the classic cases in which markets do not work effectively. Markets cannot efficiently produce goods such as national defense or public parks that, once created, are difficult to prevent all citizens’ enjoying.⁴⁸ Therefore, these goods (and services) may have to be delivered through the public sector and financed through taxation. Markets may also fail because of externalities, meaning that the total social costs—for example, pollution—of some activities are not included in the market price of a product. And markets may also fail because the participants do not have adequate information and therefore cannot make optimal decisions. This is the (economist) justification for regulations that force producers to provide consumers information about risks of the products.

Economic models of policy also look at the capacity to change from one policy position to another, especially to find so-called Pareto optimal moves that make at least one person better off without harming anyone else. The problem is that few such opportunities present themselves in the real world of public policy, and most policy choices involve making choices that may benefit some people but at the same time make others worse off.⁴⁹ Similarly, optimal budget making in the public sector is supposed to be an allocation in which the marginal utility of a dollar spent for each and every activity covered by the budget is equal.

In addition to these more abstract economic models of policy, more applied approaches such as cost-benefit analysis (see Chapter 17) apply the same utilitarian logic for thinking about public policy. In other words, the best policy is one that maximizes total utility, with that utility being considered in economic terms. Even attributes such as environmental quality are reduced to monetary values, so the costs and benefits can be compared easily. Unlike Pareto optimal moves, however, this version of welfare economics accepts that decisions will have negative consequences for some people and assesses the balance between the positive and negative contributions to total social utility.

CONSTRUCTIVIST MODELS

I have argued above that one of the problems with the normative economic models of policymaking is that they do not have as close a connection with the complexities of reality as do the political science models. Constructivist, or argumentative, models of policy, on the other hand, argue that the reality of policymaking must be constructed through social and political processes. The existence and nature of some policy problems may be obvious—public pensions, perhaps—but most must be created and defined. Some policy problems—the environment or spousal abuse—may be excluded from the agenda of government until a policy entrepreneur or a confluence of events brings attention to them.

The logic of constructivism has been linked to the general problem of policy design.⁵⁰ That is, not only are policy problems constructed politically but so too are the overall patterns of the public sector's response to a problem once constructed. Just as ideas can be used to understand policy problems, they can be linked to the solution of those problems, and solutions must also be constructed. The ideas used may be general orientations toward politics and governing—for example, limited government—or they may be more specific ideas about particular policies, such as Keynesian approaches to economics.

Drug policy has been one of the best examples of the constructivist logic in policy in the United States. Although few people would disagree that there is a real policy problem there, the question is what type of problem it is. The definition of the problem will influence the political forces that are brought to bear on it.⁵¹ In the case of drugs, the policy has been constructed primarily as an issue of criminal justice, and therefore, law enforcement organizations have become central in implementation.⁵² If, however, drugs had been considered more of a health issue or a social issue, then a very different set of organizations and different policy instruments would have been central to the solutions that government would have pursued.

The constructivist position in policy analysis has a close relationship to the agenda-setting literature. If issues are to be placed on the agenda of the public sector, then they must be defined in a way that makes them acceptable to important political forces and that can be used to mobilize support. The constructivist position, therefore, is not a passive one but often depends upon active political intervention by entrepreneurs—organizations as well as individuals—to define the policy and make it function as intended. The constructivist position is also closely connected to the advocacy-coalition framework model, given that there may be several alternative conceptions of a policy and that different entrepreneurs will contend to have their own views dominate.

Deliberative policy analysis represents one variant of the general constructivist approach to policy. The logic of deliberative analysis is that better policies can be chosen through interactions of the affected actors and even the interactions of ordinary concerned citizens than through the imposition of more technocratic solutions by experts.⁵³ The logic is that there are a number of interests and points of view in society and the policy process should not privilege one view or one set of actors. In the American context, the New England town meeting, with open discussions of policy, is used as a model of such deliberations, although organizing such discussions for larger political units and more complex issues is at best problematic.

The majority of thinking about public policy has been in a strongly objective model, attempting to measure policies as dependent variables and then finding the factors that explain those policy choices. Likewise, economic and utilitarian values tend to undergird much of this analysis, assuming that policies are best understood in terms of improving

the economic well-being of those affected by them. One strand of reasoning in political science, however, argues that policy is best understood in more linguistic terms. The assumption of deliberative models is that the discourse surrounding a policy and conflicts among alternative discourses defines the ways in which policy choices are made.⁵⁴ Of course, utilitarian value is one discourse but only one among many possible sets of values that can guide policy choices.

Discourse and deliberative models are often best applied in areas such as science policy and some aspects of environmental policy, where there are often widely diverging understandings of the nature of the policy. Herbert Gottweiss, for example, has examined the deliberative aspects of research on human biology, and there have been a number of analyses of environmental policy that apply the deliberative approach.⁵⁵ These studies have demonstrated the range of values that may be involved in complex policy issues as well as something of the ways in which those almost inherent conflicts may be resolved.

SUMMARY

Policymaking is an extremely complex process, involving a wide range of actors and ideas. This chapter has been my attempt to provide some alternative approaches for understanding that process and evaluating the outcomes. Many of these themes are echoed in other parts of this book. For example, when discussing the agenda-setting process (see Chapter 4), we can see the importance of framing issues and hence can see how constructivist approaches to policy can be used. Likewise, the discussion of the evaluation of policy (see Chapter 8) is closely related to the normative economic models discussed in this chapter. It is important, therefore, not to separate policy analysis from the understanding of substantive policy dynamics.

It is also important not to separate conflict and political action from thinking about policy. Too often the search for optimal outcomes by policy analysts ignores the political debates and the deeply entrenched conflicts that define policymaking. Ultimately, public policy is, as Harold Lasswell argued, concerned with “who gets what,” and making those choices will provoke intense political activity.⁵⁶ The institutions and processes of policymaking help to channel the demands of groups into effective action and enable government to make decisions in the face of those competing demands.

Finally, these alternative conceptions of the policy process represent some of the richness of the discipline of political science, but they also represent some of the possible confusion. This is especially a problem if a student is seeking a single “right answer” and finds it frustrating that there may not be one. The availability of these multiple approaches does allow the student or the policy analyst to triangulate and to see what light each of several different approaches may shed on the policy process being researched. For example, institutions may matter, but the exercise of overt political power may matter as well. The use of these multiple lenses⁵⁷ provides a richer view of the reality and, while providing no simple answer, helps us to understand how policy is made and what its effects may be.

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