

American Public Policy

Promise and Performance

9th
edition

B. Guy Peters

American Public Policy Promise and Performance

Ninth Edition

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Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
Singapore | Washington DC



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FOR INFORMATION:

CQ Press

An Imprint of SAGE Publications, Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320
E-mail: order@sagepub.com

SAGE Publications Ltd.

1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London, EC1Y 1SP
United Kingdom

SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.

B 1/1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road, New Delhi 110 044
India

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte. Ltd.

3 Church Street
#10-04 Samsung Hub
Singapore 049483

Acquisitions Editor: Charisse Kiino

Production Editor: Laura Stewart

Copy Editor: Patrice Sutton

Typesetter: C&M Digital (P) Ltd.

Proofreader: Talia Greenberg

Indexer: Teddy Diggs

Cover Designer: Edgar Abarca

Marketing Manager: Jonathan Mason

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Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Peters, B. Guy.
American public policy: promise and performance / B. Guy Peters.—
9th ed.

p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4522-1871-7 (pbk.)

1. United States—Politics and government. 2. Political planning—
United States. 3. Policy sciences. I. Title.

JK271.P43 2013
320.60973—dc23 2012020438

This book is printed on acid-free paper.



SFI label applies to text stock

12 13 14 15 16 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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American Public Policy

Tables and Figures

Table 1.1	Public Perception of Honesty and Ethics in Various Professions	12
Table 2.1	Changing Levels of Federal Grants-in-Aid to State and Local Governments	26
Table 2.2	Per Capita Appropriations in Highway Bill of 2005	37
Table 2.3	Percentages of Public Employment in Selected Policy Areas, 1980–2005	39
Table 2.4	Growth of Public Employment and Expenditures, 1950–2009	41
Table 5.1	Confidence in American Institutions, 1983–2008	97
Table 6.1	Examples of Employment in Federal Organizations	119
Table 7.1	Recissions Proposed and Enacted, by President	159
Table 7.2	Estimated Federal Budget Balances with and without Social Security	162
Table 7.3	Changes in “Uncontrollable” Federal Expenditures	163
Table 9.1	Unemployment in the United States, 1970–2011	220
Table 9.2	Inflation Rates of the United States and Major Trading Partners, 1990–2007	222
Table 9.3	U.S. Federal Deficit and Debt, 1965–2011	229
Table 9.4	Changes in Gross Capital Formation, 1980–2007	232
Table 10.1	Kinds of Tax Revenues, 2003	248
Table 10.2	Property Tax Revenue of Local Government, 1960–2008	249
Table 10.3	Federal Spending versus Tax Expenditures for the Same Program Area, 2007	252
Table 10.4	Opinions on Income Tax, 1963–2011	255
Table 10.5	Poll Respondents’ Views about Fairness of Tax Deductions and Exemptions	257
Table 11.1	Major Health Programs	275
Table 11.2	Percentage of Population Not Covered by Health Insurance, 2010	277
Table 11.3	Health Expenditures as a Percentage of Gross Domestic Product, 2006	278
Table 11.4	Infant Mortality Rates, 2009	278
Table 11.5	Changes in U.S. Medical Care Costs Compared with Consumer Price Index	284

Table 11.6	Distribution of Physicians by Type of Practice	287
Table 12.1	Costs of Federal Income Maintenance Programs, 1980–2007	313
Table 12.2	Social Insurance Recipients, 2012	314
Table 12.3	Current and Projected Earnings Replacement Ratios of Social Security Benefits	317
Table 12.4	Changes in Social Security Trust Fund, 1980–2010	322
Table 12.5	Opinions on Coping with Problems in Social Security	325
Table 12.6	Percentages of TANF Recipients Involved in Work, 2009	333
Table 13.1	Sources of Education Funding	354
Table 13.2	Inequalities in Education Funding	374
Table 13.3	Increases in the Cost of Higher Education, 1976–2008	376
Table 14.1	Sources of Energy, 1970–2010	382
Table 15.1	Most Important Issues for Americans	414
Table 15.2	Military Expenditures as Percentage of Gross Domestic Product, 2009	415
Table 15.3	Nuclear Warheads Possessed by the United States and Major Potential Adversaries	423
Table 15.4	U.S. Crime Rates, 1980–2010	435
Table 16.1	Public Attitudes about Abortion, 1996–2012	452
Table 17.1	Costs and Benefits of a Dam Project	472
Table 17.2	Hypothetical Costs and Benefits of the Dam Project for Twenty Years	475
Table 17.3	Costs and Benefits of Alternative Projects	478
Table 17.4	Choosing a Package of Projects by Net Benefit Ratio	478
Table 17.5	“Who Shall Live, and Who Shall Die?” Liver Transplant Candidates	485
Figure 3.1	The Stages Model	49
Figure 4.1	Kinds of Policy Formulation	88
Figure 4.2	A Decision Tree on Evacuation	91
Figure 5.1	Modes of Legitimation	99
Figure 7.1	Relationship of Budget Authority to Outlays, Fiscal Year 2007	166
Figure 9.1	Value of the U.S. Minimum Wage	238
Figure 10.1	Taxes Collected by Type and Level of Government, 2007	251
Figure 10.2	Distribution of Tax Expenditures by Income Level, 2007	254
Figure 11.1	Sources of Payment for Health Care, 2007	274
Figure 11.2	Percentage of People Assessing Their Personal Health Status as “Fair” or “Poor,” 2007	279
Figure 11.3	Distribution of Health Insurance Coverage, 2007	280
Figure 12.1	Opinion on Social Security Privatization	326
Figure 12.2	Changes in Poverty Rates, 1960–2010	341
Figure 13.1	Public Grades for Public Education, 1981–2007	350
Figure 13.2	Scholastic Aptitude Test Scores, 1967–2011	363

Preface

Public policy is the fundamental reason that scholars and citizens should be concerned about government, whether in the United States or in any other country. As much as we may find voting and elections entertaining or find interest in the ways lobbyists cajole public officials, in the end, the outcome of the political process is a set of policies that affect the lives of citizens, often in profound ways. As Harold Lasswell argued more than seventy years ago, politics is about “who gets what.” The policy choices of the United States are particularly important, given that the economic and military power of this single country establishes parameters within which many other political systems make their own policy choices.

At times, public policies change rather rapidly and dramatically, and at times, they persist for long periods with only incremental changes. Most voters expected rapid change after the election of President Barack Obama in 2008, but the complex political process in Washington slowed that change. Likewise, the policy process itself may appear stable, yet it also undergoes slight changes in response to changing political ideas and the changing relative power of institutions and individuals. Therefore, relatively frequent updates concerning both process and substance are required to capture the contemporary nature of the U.S. government and the dynamics of this extremely complex system for governing and making policy.

The characteristics of continuity and change have been very evident since the last edition of this book. Despite strong efforts by political leaders, some policies, such as Social Security, have been changed hardly at all, whereas others, such as health care, are in the process of almost monumental change. The policy process in Washington is on the surface unchanged, but sharp ideological divisions between the two major parties have made it more difficult and more contentious.

This book is an attempt to provide a rather comprehensive view of policy and policymaking in the United States. Part 1 explains the nature of public

policy and includes a new chapter, “Explaining Policy Choices,” that outlines several alternative approaches to understanding the policymaking process and evaluating its outcomes. Part 2 describes the structure of the policymaking system and the process through which ideas and demands are converted into policy. While the “stages” model used in this analysis is generic, there are a number of important peculiarities in U.S. government that must be examined if we are to understand how the system succeeds—and why it fails—in making choices. If nothing else, the multiple divisions caused by the separation of powers, federalism, and a decentralized bureaucracy tend to make the process more difficult than in other countries.

Part 3 examines a number of important policy areas in the United States. These are discussed primarily at the federal level, although state and local governments have a significant impact on each of these areas as well. A detailed analysis of the role of each level of government would require a much larger book.

The final section, Part 4, provides an introduction to two forms of policy analysis. One depends on economic assumptions and is an attempt to make government more efficient and cost-effective. The other focuses on the normative element of public policy, an element of analysis often ignored when people think about policy. Rather than asking questions of efficiency, normative analysis is concerned with equity and justice. Neither of these modes of analysis can provide a complete answer to the difficult question of what is good policy, but in combination, they may begin to help readers develop an answer.

Although I have attempted to be as comprehensive as possible, some aspects of policy must be left out in the interest of space. Perhaps most significant, this is a book about federal policy and the federal level of government, although in the United States state and local governments are also significant actors. I have had to make choices about which policies to include and which to exclude from more detailed discussions. This is done in part because of my own interests but largely because of the impact of those policies on citizens.

I would like to acknowledge the academics whose reviews helped make this new edition possible: Susan Opp, Colorado State University; Paul Pope, University of Texas at Brownsville; Sandra K. Schneider, Michigan State University; and David Webber, University of Missouri. I also thank Dwain Smith for revising the ancillary materials, which include a test bank of exam questions and lecture slides for instructors as well as a student website (located at www.cqpress.com/cs/peters) that features chapter summaries, review questions, practice quizzes, and annotated web links.

This is the ninth edition of *American Public Policy* and is the fourth to be published by CQ Press. It has been a pleasure to work with Charisse Kiino, Patrice Sutton, Nancy Loh, and all the other editors and staff at CQ Press. They have been professional, patient, and supportive in preparing this edition and in

helping to prepare the enhanced teaching aids for instructors. This edition should continue the movement toward making the book even more student—and professor—friendly than the previous ones.

B. Guy Peters
Pittsburgh, Pa.
June 2012

Contents

Tables and Figures	xiii
Preface	xv

PART ONE **The Nature of Public Policy**

1. What Is Public Policy?	3
Defining Public Policy	4
The Instruments of Public Policy	6
Law	7
Services	8
Money	9
Taxes	10
Other Economic Instruments	11
Suasion	11
The Effects of Tools	13
The Environment of Public Policy	13
Conservatism	14
Participation	15
Pragmatism	17
Wealth	19
Diversity	20
World Leadership	21
Summary	21
2. The Structure of Policymaking in American Government	23
Federalism	24
Separation of Powers	29
Subgovernments	31

	Public and Private	38
	The Size and Shape of the Public Sector	40
	Summary	44
3.	Explaining Policy Choices	47
	Power and Public Policy	47
	The Policy Process—The Stages Model	48
	Institutional Models of Policy	50
	Advocacy-Coalition Framework	52
	Policy Causes Politics	53
	Policy Styles	54
	Policy Instruments	55
	Bounded Rationality, Multiple Streams, and Incrementalism	56
	The Private Sector, Iron Triangles, and Networks	58
	Optimal Decision Making	59
	Constructivist Models	60
	Summary	62

PART TWO

The Making of Public Policy

4.	Agenda Setting and Public Policy	65
	Agenda Setting	65
	Kinds of Agendas	68
	Who Sets Agendas?	70
	Pluralist Approaches	70
	Elitist Approaches	71
	State-Centric Approaches	72
	From Problem to Issue: How to Get Problems on the Agenda	75
	The Effects of the Problem	75
	Analogous and Spillover Agenda Setting	76
	Relationship to Symbols	77
	The Absence of Private Means	78
	The Availability of Technology	79
	Policy Formulation	81
	Who Formulates Policy?	82
	How to Formulate Policy	87
	Aids for Policy Formulation	89
	Policy Design	92
	Summary	93
5.	Legitimizing Policy Choices	95
	Legislative Legitimation	99

Regulations and the Administrative Process	104
Public Access to the Regulatory Process	106
The Processes of Writing Regulations	107
The Courts	111
Popular Legitimation	113
Summary	114
6. Organizations and Implementation	117
Dramatis Personae	118
Implementation	125
The Legislation	126
Policy Issues	126
Political Setting	128
Interest Group Liberalism	130
The Organizational Setting	130
Organizational Disunity	131
Standard Operating Procedures	132
Organizational Communication	134
Time Problems	136
Horseshoe-Nail Problems and Public Planning	137
Interorganizational Politics	138
Vertical Implementation Structures	140
Horizontal Implementation Structures	141
From the Bottom Up?	143
The Third Generation?	144
Summary	144
7. Budgeting: Allocation and Public Policy	147
Characteristics of the Federal Budget	148
An Executive Budget	148
The Line Item	149
An Annual Budget	150
The Budget Cycle	150
Setting the Parameters: The President and His Friends	151
Agency Requests	153
Executive Review	154
Congressional Action	156
Budget Execution	158
Budget Control	160
Problems in the Budget Process	160
The Deficit	161
Uncontrollable Expenditures	163
Backdoor Spending	164

The Overhang	166
Intergovernmental Budget Control	167
Reprogramming and Transfers	167
The Defense Budget	168
Supplemental Appropriations	169
Earmarks	170
Assessing the Outcomes: Incrementalism or What?	170
Critiques of Incrementalism	172
Reforming Budgeting: Large-Scale Approaches in the 1960s and 1970s	174
Program Budgeting	174
Zero-Base Budgeting	177
From Scalpels to Axes: Budget Reform from the 1980s to the 2000s	179
Gramm-Rudman-Hollings	180
The Balanced Budget Amendment	182
The Line-Item Veto	183
Decrementalism	185
Summary	186
 8. Evaluation and Policy Change	 189
Problems in Evaluating Public Programs	189
Goal Specification and Goal Change	190
Measurement	192
Targets	197
Efficiency and Effectiveness	199
Values and Evaluation	200
Politics	200
Increasing Requirements for Evaluation	201
Summary	202
Policy Change	203
Summary	208

PART THREE

Substantive Policy Issues

9. Economic Policy	213
Background	213
The Goals of Economic Policy	214
Economic Growth	215
Full Employment	217
Stable Prices	221
A Positive Balance of Payments	222
Structural Change	225

The Instruments of Economic Policy	226
Fiscal Policy	227
Monetary Policy	233
Regulations and Control	236
Public Support for Business	239
Public Ownership	242
Public Support for Labor	243
Incentives	244
Moral Suasion	245
Summary	245
10. Tax Policy	247
Background	247
Public Opinion and Taxation	253
Fairness	253
Value for Money	256
Choices in Tax Policy	259
Collectibility	259
Fiscal Neutrality	260
Buoyancy	261
Distributive Effects	262
Visibility	263
The Politics of Tax Reform	264
The Tax Reform Act of 1986	265
Tax Reform in the 1990s	265
Tax Reform in the George W. Bush Administration	267
Tax Reform in the Obama Administration	268
Proposals for Further Fundamental Tax Reform	268
Summary	271
11. Health Care Policies	273
Problems in Health Care	277
Access to Medical Care	278
Cost	283
Quality	288
The Affordable Care Act of 2010	290
Public Programs in Health Care	292
Medicare	292
Medicaid	295
Health Maintenance Organizations: Managing Managed Care	297
Health Care Regulation	299
Hospital and Physician Costs	299
Health Care Quality	300
Drug Regulation	301

The Pursuit of National Health Insurance	304
"Play or Pay"	305
Canadian-Style Comprehensive Coverage	305
Past Attempts at National Health Care Reform	306
Summary	309
12. Income Maintenance: Social Security and Welfare	311
Social Insurance	313
Problems in Social Security	317
Social Security and the Economy	321
Financing Social Security	322
Reforming Social Security	324
Means-Tested Programs	327
AFDC and the Origins of Welfare	328
The Family Support Act	330
The 1996 Reforms and PRWORA	331
Implementing Workfare	334
Alternatives for Further Reform of Income Support	335
The War on Poverty	339
Other Means-Tested Programs	340
The Persistence of Poverty in the United States	340
The Homeless	343
Private Social Programs	344
Summary	345
13. Education Policy	347
The Federal Government's Role in Education	351
Local Financing and the Federal Role	353
Higher Education	355
Elementary and Secondary Education	358
Issues of Education Policy	362
Quality of Education	362
Vouchers and Choice	364
Competency Testing	367
Testing Teacher Competence	369
School Facilities	369
The Separation of Church and State	370
Unionization and Management	370
Equalization of Resources	372
Desegregation and Busing	373
Higher Education Costs	376
Summary	377

14.	Energy and the Environment	379
	Background	379
	Energy Sources	381
	Oil	381
	Natural Gas	383
	Coal	383
	Nuclear Power	384
	Alternative and Renewable Energy Sources	386
	The Formation of Energy Policy	390
	Federal Energy Policy	390
	The States and Energy Policy	392
	Environmental Policies	393
	The Politics of Pollution	394
	Environmental Legislation	398
	Implementation of Environmental Controls	407
	Alternatives to Regulation	409
	Summary	410
15.	Protective Policies: Defense and Law Enforcement	413
	Background	413
	Defense Policy	414
	The Environment of Defense Policy	416
	Technology	421
	Public Opinion	421
	U.S. Force Configurations	422
	Problems of Defense Policy	424
	Military Procurement	424
	Updating the Strategic Deterrent	428
	The All-Volunteer Military	429
	Other Personnel Issues	431
	Conventional Forces and Strategies	432
	Defense and/or Jobs	433
	Law Enforcement	435
	Federal Law Enforcement	436
	Federal Support to State and Local Governments	437
	Issues in Law Enforcement Policy	438
	The Causes of Crime	438
	Gun Control	439
	The Death Penalty	441
	The Rights of the Accused	443
	Youth Crime	444
	Summary	445