



American Public Policy

Promise and Performance

9th
edition

B. Guy Peters

American Public Policy Promise and Performance

Ninth Edition

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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

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