Understanding PUBLIC POLICY

— *Eighth Edition* —

THOMAS R. DYE

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PREFACE

Policy analysis is concerned with "who gets what" in politics and, more importantly, "why" and "what difference it makes." We are concerned not only with what policies governments pursue but also why governments pursue the policies they do and what the consequences of these policies are.

Political science, like other scientific disciplines, has developed a number of concepts and models to help describe and explain political life. These models are not really competitive in the sense that any one could be judged as the "best." Each focuses on separate elements of politics and each helps us to understand different things about political life.

We begin with a brief description of nine analytic models in political science and the potential contribution of each to the study of public policy:

Institutional model	Incremental model
Process model	Game theory model
Group model	Public choice model
Elite model	Systems model
Rational model	

We then attempt to describe and explain public policy by the use of these various analytic models. Readers are not only informed about public policy in a variety of key domestic policy areas but, more importantly, they are encouraged to utilize these conceptual models in political science to explain the causes and consequences of public policies in these areas. The policy areas studied are

Civil rights	Economic policy
Criminal justice	Taxation
Health and welfare	National defense
Education	State and local spending and services
Environmental protection	

Most public policies are a combination of rational planning, incrementalism, competition among groups, elite preferences, systemic forces, public choice, political processes, and institutional influences. Throughout this volume we employ these models, both singly and in combination, to describe and explain public policy. However, certain chapters rely more on one model than another.

Any of these policy areas might be studied by using more than one model. Frequently our selection of a particular analytic model to study a specific policy area was based as much on pedagogical considerations as on anything else. We simply wanted to demonstrate how political scientists employ analytic models. Once readers are familiar with the nature and uses of analytic models in

political science, they may find it interesting to explore the utility of models other than the ones selected by the author in the explanation of particular policy outcomes. For example, we use an elitist model to discuss civil rights policy, but the reader may wish to view civil rights policy from the perspective of group theory. We employ public choice theory to discuss environmental policy, but the reader might prefer studying environmental problems from the perspective of the process model.

Each chapter concludes with a series of propositions, which are derived from one or more analytic models and which attempt to summarize the policies discussed. The purpose of these summaries is to suggest the kinds of policy explanations that can be derived from analytic models and to tie the policy material back to one or another of the models.

In short, this volume is not only an introduction to the study of public policy but also an introductoin to the models political scientists use to describe and explain political life.

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POLICY ANALYSIS

WHAT GOVERNMENTS DO,

WHY THEY DO IT,

AND WHAT DIFFERENCE IT MAKES

Bill Clinton is sworn in as the 42nd President by Supreme Court Chief Justice
William Rehnquist, as his wife, Hillary, looks on. (Reuters/Bettmann)

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POLICY ANALYSIS IN POLITICAL SCIENCE

This book is about public policy. It is concerned with what governments do, why they do it, and what difference it makes. It is also about political science and the ability of this academic discipline to describe, analyze, and explain public policy.

Definition.   Public policy is whatever governments choose to do or not to do. (See box, Defining Public Policy: Playing Word Games.) Governments do many things. They regulate conflict within society; they organize society to carry on conflict with other societies; they distribute a great variety of symbolic rewards and material services to members of the society; and they extract money from society, most often in the form of taxes. Thus, public policies may regulate behavior, organize bureaucracies, distribute benefits, or extract taxes—or all these things at once.

Scope.   Governments in the United States directly allocate about 35 percent of the gross national product (GNP), the sum of all of the goods and services produced in the nation each year. About two-thirds of the government sector of the GNP is accounted for by the federal government itself; the remaining one-third is attributable to 83,000 state, city, county, township, school district, and special district governments combined. Overall government employment in the United States makes up about 16 percent of the nation's work force.

   Public policies may deal with a wide variety of substantive areas—defense, energy, environment, foreign affairs, education, welfare, police, highways, taxation, housing, social security, health, economic opportunity, urban development, inflation and recession, and so on. They may range from the vital to the trivial—from the allocation of hundreds of billions of dollars for the social security system to the designation of an official national bird.

Political Science.   Public policy is not a new concern of political science: the earliest writings of political philosophers reveal an interest in the policies pursued by governments, the forces shaping these policies, and the impact of these policies on society. Yet the major focus of political science has never really been on policies themselves, but rather on the institutions and structures of government and on the political behaviors and processes associated with policymaking.

   "Traditional" political science focused primarily on the institutional structure and philosophical justification of government. This involved the study of constitutional arrangements, such as federalism, separation of power, and judicial review; powers and duties of official bodies such as Congress, president, and courts; intergovernment relations; and the organization and operation of legislative, executive, and judicial agencies. Traditional studies described the institutions in which public policy was formulated. But the linkages between institutional arrangements and the content of public policy were seldom explored.

   Modern "behavioral" political science focused primarily on the processes and behaviors associated with government. This involved the study of the sociological and psychological bases of individual and group behavior; the determinants of voting and other political activities; the functioning of interest groups

and political parties; and the description of various processes and behaviors in the legislative, executive, and judicial arenas. Although this approach described the processes by which public policy was determined, it did not deal directly with the linkages between various processes and behaviors and the content of public policy.

Policy Studies. Today many political scientists have shifted their focus to *public policy*—to the *description and explanation of the causes and consequences of government activity*. This focus involves a description of the content of public policy; an analysis of the impact of social, economic, and political forces on the content of public policy; an inquiry into the effect of various institutional arrangements and political processes on public policy; and an evaluation of the consequences of public policies on society, both expected and unexpected consequences.

DEFINING PUBLIC POLICY: PLAYING WORD GAMES

This book discourages elaborate academic discussions of the definition of public policy—we say simply that public policy is whatever governments choose to do or not to do. Books, essays, and discussions of a "proper" definition of public policy have proven futile, even exasperating, and they often divert attention from the study of public policy itself. Moreover, even the most elaborate definitions of public policy, on close examination, seem to boil down to the same thing. For example, political scientist David Easton defines public policy as "the authoritative allocation of values for the whole society"—but it turns out that only the government can "authoritatively" act on the "whole" society, and everything the government chooses to do or not to do results in the "allocation of values."

Political scientist Harold Lasswell and philosopher Abraham Kaplan define policy as "a projected program of goals, values, and practices," and political scientist Carl Friedrich says, "It is essential for the policy concept that there be a goal, objective, or purpose." These definitions imply a difference between specific government actions and an overall program of action toward a given goal. But the problem raised in insisting that government actions must have goals in order to be labeled "policy" is that we can never be sure whether or not a particular action has a goal, or if it does, what that goal is. Some people may assume that if a government chooses to do something there must be a goal, objective, or purpose, but all we can really observe is what governments choose to do or not to do. Realistically, our notion of public policy must include *all actions* of government, and not what governments or officials say they are going to do. We may wish that governments act in a "purposeful, goal-oriented" fashion, but we know that all too frequently they do not.

Still another approach to defining public policy is to break down this general notion into various component parts. Political scientist Charles O. Jones asks that we consider the distinction among various proposals (specified means for achieving goals), programs (authorized means for achieving goals), decisions (specific actions taken to implement programs), and effects (the measurable impacts of programs). But again we have the problem of assuming that decisions, programs, goals, and effects are linked. Certainly in many policy areas we will see

that the decisions of government have little to do with announced "programs," and neither are connected with national "goals." It may be unfortunate that our government does not function neatly to link goals, programs, decisions, and effects, but as a matter of fact, it does not.

Political scientists Heinz Eulau and Kenneth Prewitt supply still another definition of public policy: "Policy is defined as a 'standing decision' characterized by behavioral consistency and repetitiveness on the part of both those who make it and those who abide by it." Now certainly it would be a wonderful thing if government activities were characterized by "consistency and repetitiveness"; but it is doubtful that we would ever find "public policy" in government if we insist on these criteria. Much of what government does is inconsistent and nonrepetitive.

So we shall stick with our simple definition: *public policy is whatever governments choose to do or not to do.* Note that we are focusing not only on government action but also on government inaction, that is, what government chooses *not* to do. We contend that government *in*action can have just as great an impact on society as government action.

See David Easton, *The Political System* (New York;: Knopf, 1953), p. 129; Harold D. Lasswell and Abraham Kaplan, *Power and Society* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 71; Carl J. Friedrich, *Man and His Government* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), p. 70; Charles O. Jones, *An Introduction to the Study of Public Policy* (Boston: Duxbury, 1977), p. 4; Heinz Eulau and Kenneth Prewitt, *Labyrinths of Democracy* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973), p. 465; and Hugh Heclo, "Policy Analysis," *British Journal of Political Science*, 2 (January 1972), 85.

WHY STUDY PUBLIC POLICY?

Why should political scientists devote greater attention to the study of public policy?

Scientific Understanding. First, public policy can be studied for purely *scientific reasons:* understanding the causes and consequences of policy decisions improves our knowledge of society. Public policy can be viewed as a dependent variable, and we can ask what socioeconomic conditions and political system characteristics operate to shape the content of policy. Alternatively, public policy can be viewed as an independent variable, and we can ask what impact public policy has on society and its political system. By asking such questions we can improve our understanding of the linkages among socioeconomic forces, political processes, and public policy (see Figure 1–1). An understanding of these linkages contributes to the breadth, significance, reliability, and theoretical development of social science.

Problem Solving. Public policy can also be studied for *professional reasons:* understanding the causes and consequences of public policy permits us to apply social science knowledge to the solution of practical problems. Factual knowledge is a prerequisite to prescribing for the ills of society. If certain ends are desired, the question of what policies would best implement them is a factual question requiring scientific study. In other words, policy studies can produce professional advice, in terms of "if . . . then . . . " statements, about how to achieve desired goals.

Policy Recommendations. Finally, public policy can be studied for *political purposes:* to ensure that the nation adopts the "right" policies to achieve the "right" goals. It is frequently argued that political science should not be silent or impotent in the face of great social and political crises and that political scientists have a moral obligation to advance specific public policies. An exclusive focus on institutions, processes, or behaviors is frequently looked on as "dry," "irrelevant," and "amoral" because it does not direct attention to the really important policy questions facing American society. Policy studies can be undertaken not only for scientific and professional purposes but also to inform political discussion, advance the level of political awareness, and improve the quality of public policy. Of course, these are very subjective purposes—Americans do not always agree on what constitutes the "right" policies or the "right" goals—but we will assume that knowledge is preferable to ignorance, even in politics.

QUESTIONS IN POLICY ANALYSIS

What can we learn about public policy?

Description. First, we can describe public policy—we can learn what government is doing (and not doing) in welfare, defense, education, civil rights, health, the environment, taxation, and so on. A factual basis of information about national policy is really an indispensable part of everyone's education. What does the Civil Rights Act of 1964 actually say about discrimination in employment? What did the Supreme Court rule in the *Bakke* case about affirmative action programs? What is the condition of the nation's social security program? What do the Medicaid and Medicare programs promise for the poor and the aged? What agreements have been reached between the United States and Russia regarding nuclear weapons? How much money are we paying in taxes? How much money does the federal government spend each year and what does it spend it on? How large is the national debt and how much does it grow each year? These are examples of descriptive questions.

Causes. Second, we can inquire about the causes, or determinants, of public policy. Why is public policy what it is? Why do governments do what they do? We might inquire about the effects of political institutions, processes, and behaviors on public policies (Linkage B in Figure 1–1). For example, does it make any difference in tax and spending levels whether Democrats or Republicans control the presidency and Congress? What is the impact of interest group conflict on federal aid to education? What is the impact of lobbying by the special interests on efforts to reform the federal tax system? We can also inquire about the effects of social, economic, and cultural forces in shaping public policy (Linkage C in Figure 1–1). For example: What are the effects of changing public attitudes about race on civil rights policy? What are the effects of recessions on government spending? What is the effect of an increasingly older population on the social security and Medicare programs? In scientific terms, when we study the causes of public policy, policies become the dependent variables, and their various political, social, economic, and cultural determinants become the independent variables.

Consequences.   Third, we can inquire about the consequences, or impacts, of public policy. What difference, if any, does public policy make in people's lives? We might inquire about the effects of public policy on political institutions and processes (Linkage F in Figure 1–1). For example, what is the effect of tax increases on Republican party fortunes in Congress? What is the impact of deficit reduction efforts on the president's popularity? We also want to examine the impact of public policies on conditions in society (Linkage D in Figure 1–1). For example, does capital punishment help to deter crime? Are welfare programs a disincentive to work? Do liberal welfare benefits result in larger numbers of poor people? Does increased educational spending produce higher student achievement scores? In scientific terms, when we study the consequences of public policy, policies become the independent variables, and their political, social, economic, and cultural impacts on society become the dependent variables.
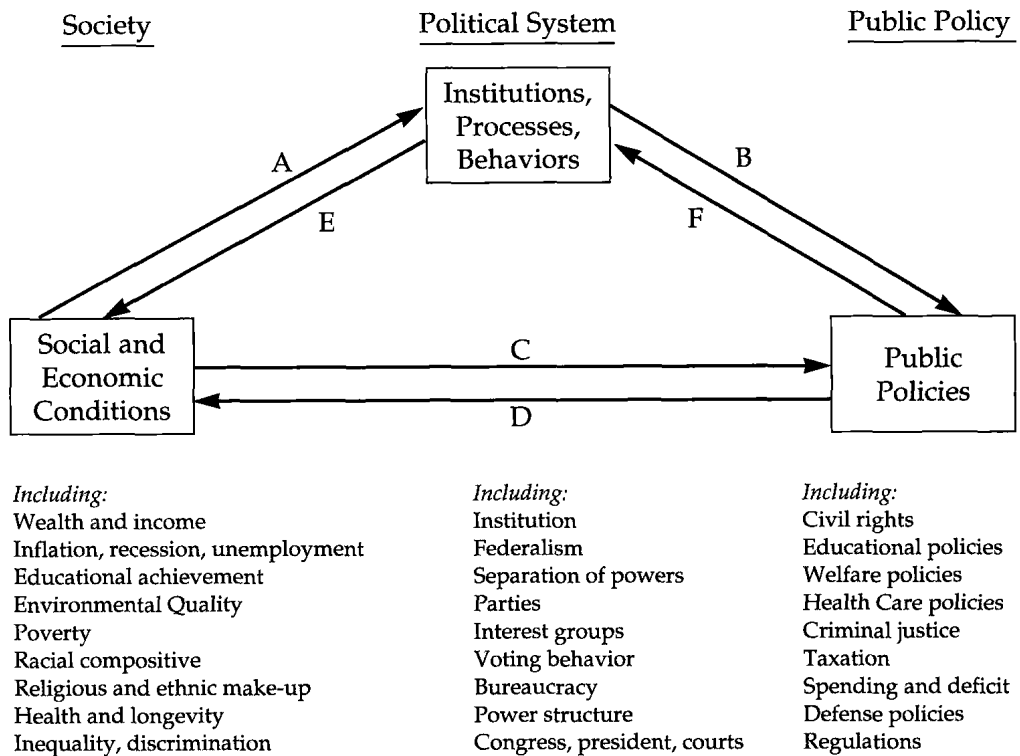
POLICY ANALYSIS AND POLICY ADVOCACY

It is important to distinguish policy analysis from policy advocacy. *Explaining* the causes and consequences of various policies is not equivalent to *prescribing* what policies governments ought to pursue. Learning *why* governments do what they do and what the consequences of their actions are is not the same as saying *what* governments ought to do or bringing about changes in what they do. Policy advocacy requires the skills of rhetoric, persuasion, organization, and activism. Policy analysis encourages scholars and students to attack critical policy issues with the tools of systematic inquiry. There is an implied assumption in policy analysis that developing scientific knowledge about the forces shaping public policy and the consequences of public policy is itself a socially relevant activity and that such analysis is a prerequisite to prescription, advocacy, and activism.

Specifically, public analysis involves

1. *A primary concern with explanation rather than prescription.* Policy recommendations—if they are made at all—are subordinate to description and explanation. There is an implicit judgment that understanding is a prerequisite to prescription and that understanding is best achieved through careful analysis rather than rhetoric or polemics.
2. *A rigorous search for the causes and consequences of public policies.* This search involves the use of scientific standards of inference. Sophisticated quantitative techniques may be helpful in establishing valid inferences about causes and consequences, but they are not really essential.
3. *An effort to develop and test general propositions about the causes and consequences of public policy and to accumulate reliable research findings of general relevance.* The object is to develop general theories about public policy that are reliable and that apply to different government agencies and different policy areas. Policy analysts clearly prefer to develop explanations that fit more than one policy decision or case study—explanations that stand up over time in a variety of settings.

FIGURE 1-1 Studying Public Policy, Its Causes and Consequences

Society   Political System   Public Policy

Including:	*Including:*	*Including:*
Wealth and income	Institution	Civil rights
Inflation, recession, unemployment	Federalism	Educational policies
Educational achievement	Separation of powers	Welfare policies
Environmental Quality	Parties	Health Care policies
Poverty	Interest groups	Criminal justice
Racial compositive	Voting behavior	Taxation
Religious and ethnic make-up	Bureaucracy	Spending and deficit
Health and longevity	Power structure	Defense policies
Inequality, discrimination	Congress, president, courts	Regulations

Linkage A: What are the effects of social economic conditions on political and governmental institutions, processes, and behaviors?

Linkage B: What are the effects of political and governmental institutions, processes, and behaviors on public policies?

Linkage C: What are the effects of social and economic conditions on public policies?

Linkage D: What are the effects (feedback) of public policies on social and economic conditions?

Linkage E: What are the effects (feedback) of political and governmental institutions, processes, and behaviors on social and economic conditions?

Linkage F: What are the effects (feedback) of public policies on political and governmental institutions, processes, and behaviors?

POLICY ANALYSIS IN ACTION: ACHIEVING EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY

One of the more interesting examples of policy analysis over the years has been the social science research on equal educational opportunity and how to achieve it. Educational opportunity has been one of the most controversial topics in American politics, and social science has played an important role in policymaking in this area. However, as we shall see, the more controversial the policy area, the more difficult it is to conduct policy research.

Early Research—the Coleman Report

The early landmark research on educational opportunity in America was sociologist James S. Coleman's *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, frequently referred to as the Coleman Report.[1] The Coleman Report dealt primarily with the consequences of educational policy—specifically, the impact of schools on the aspiration and achievement levels of pupils. Although Coleman's study was not without its critics,[2] it was nonetheless the first comprehensive analysis of the American public school system and included data on 600,000 children, 60,000 teachers, and 4,000 schools.

The results of Coleman's study undermined much of the conventional wisdom about the impact of public educational policies on student learning and achievement. Prior to the study, legislators, teachers, school administrators, school board members, and the general public assumed that factors such as the number of pupils in the classroom, the amount of money spent on each pupil, library and laboratory facilities, teachers' salaries, the quality of the curriculum, and other characteristics of the school affected the quality of education and educational opportunity. But systematic analysis revealed that these factors had *no* significant effect on student learning or achievement. Even the size of the class was found to be unrelated to learning, although educators had asserted the importance of this factor for decades. In short, the things that "everybody knew" about education turned out not to be so!

The only factors that were found to affect a student's learning to any significant degree were (1) family background and (2) the family background of classmates. Family background affected the child's verbal abilities and attitudes toward education, and these factors correlated very closely with scholastic achievement. Of secondary but considerable significance were the verbal abilities and attitudes toward education of the child's classmates. Peer-group influence had its greatest impact on children from lower-class families. Teaching excellence mattered very little to children from upper- and middle-class backgrounds; they learned well despite mediocre or poor teaching. Children from lower-class families were slightly more affected by teacher quality.

Policy Implications—Educational Spending

The Coleman Report made no policy recommendations. But like a great deal of policy research, policy recommendations were inferred from its conclusions. First, if the Coleman Report was correct, it seemed pointless simply to pour more money into the existing system of public education—raising per pupil expenditures, increasing teachers' salaries, lowering the number of pupils per classroom, providing better libraries and laboratories, adding educational frills, or adopting any specific curricular innovations. These policies were found to have no significant impact on learning.

The findings of the Coleman Report undermined the logic of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (see Chapter 7). This piece of