

# The Public Policy Primer

Managing the policy process

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and Scott Fritzen**



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# The Public Policy Primer

This short guide provides a concise and accessible overview of the entire policy cycle, taking the reader through the various stages of agenda setting, policy formulation, decision-making, policy implementation, and policy evaluation.

Public officials at every level of government play a vital role in the development, adoption, and implementation of government policies. Yet most existing works focus only on the most senior politicians and public officials and, thus, often fail to provide an insight into the work of the vast majority of other officials. This book provides an introduction to key policy functions, the challenges they entail, and how these challenges may be addressed by mid-level and other public officials. Written from a comparative perspective, the authors include examples from a diverse range of countries at different stages of development, highlighting key principles and practices through which officials can effectively manage their policy processes and outcomes.

This important tool offers both students and practitioners of public policy guidance on how to make, implement, and evaluate public policies in ways that improve citizens' lives.

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This series provides high-quality textbooks and teaching materials for upper-level courses on all aspects of public policy as well as policy analysis, design, practice, and evaluation. Each text is authored or edited by a leading scholar in the field and aims both to survey established areas and present the latest thinking on emerging topics.

### **The Public Policy Primer**

Managing the policy process

*Xun Wu, M. Ramesh, Michael Howlett and Scott Fritzen*

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# 1 Public managers and the policy process

This book is for public managers concerned about their role in a policy world in which their efforts are often undermined or underappreciated by both their political executives and the general public. While the term “public managers” includes the elite echelons of government, consisting of ministers and heads of agencies, the intended main audience for the book is the vast and diverse group of career public servants who assume managerial positions at various levels in public sector organizations and who play an important role in designing and implementing public policies. These public managers often shoulder a disproportionately larger share of the public scrutiny for failures in public sector governance than they should, and our book is intended to assist them. It is built upon the premise that, informed by a better understanding of policy processes, public managers can overcome many of the barriers that undermine their potential for contributing to the policy process and, eventually, to policy success.

## **A fragmented policy world**

Public policy occupies the center stage in the world of public managers, potentially providing them with both the legitimacy and resources they require in order to perform their tasks at a high level of intelligence, sophistication and competence. However, the policy process is often rife with irrationality, inconsistencies, and lack of coordination, all of which can become major sources of tension and distress for these officials. In particular, if public managers are unfamiliar with the nature and workings of the policy process, they may be unable to devise effective strategies for influencing its direction and ensuring it results in an integrated set of policy outcomes.

The following illustrations show that one need not travel far to encounter examples of policy problems caused by the existence of a fragmented policy world:

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- *Ineffective but popular policies command the attention of policy-makers while many unpopular but necessary policies encounter severe resistance.* During the recent financial crisis, for example, many developing countries, for political reasons, had to continue providing subsidies that they could ill afford and that were counterproductive in terms of improving overall living conditions and standards.
- *Policy-making is driven by crises in which policy-makers must act as firefighters while policies to prevent the crises in the first place are undervalued.* In the UK and the US, for example, many of the banking practices that led to the 2008 financial crisis had their origin in the earlier deregulation of the financial industry whose shortcomings were well known but ignored in the pursuit of economic growth.
- *Policy failures lead to changes in political leadership but the root causes of the failures remain inadequately addressed.* In many developing countries, leaders have rotated through periods of military and civilian governments without being able to address the basic problems—such as lack of skills and infrastructure—that hamper their development efforts.
- *The effects of policies championed by a particular government agency can be undermined by strategies employed by another agency, deliberately or otherwise.* Thus, for example, in countries such as India and Pakistan, agriculture ministries continue to promote agricultural production at the expense of decreased water availability for industry and households, which are themselves the subjects of major expenditure initiatives by ministries of public works and infrastructure.
- *Policies are formulated in order to secure the support of politically powerful groups at the expense of long-term public interests that are underrepresented in the political system.* In the Philippines, Mexico and many other countries, small groups of agricultural and business elites exercise a virtual veto over reforms aimed at redistributing land or improving wages and working conditions for the large majority of the population.
- *Disagreements between different levels of government lead to contradictory policies that are mutually destructive.* The goal of a future policy can be thoroughly clouded by different government agencies, at different levels of government, pursuing incompatible or contradictory agendas. In Canada and Australia, for example, federal and provincial or state-level governments can pursue mutually exclusive goals—for example, where one level promotes coal or oil and gas extraction to produce electric power while another level tries to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

- *Policies implemented by street-level bureaucrats deviate considerably from what was envisaged at the policy formulation stage.* Local officials in many developing countries often override or subvert policies, not least by demanding and accepting payments for overlooking or amending rules. Even where corruption is less of a problem now than in the past, such as Indonesia, Taiwan, or Sri Lanka, such actions can easily lead to a confusing patchwork of rules and regulations, undermining the efficiency and effectiveness of many policies. Conversely, national policies (which may, for instance, be adopted for purposes of political signalling) may at times be so poorly conceived that they are practically “built to fail,” regardless of implementation effort.
- *Despite its importance, policy evaluation is rarely used for most policy decisions, and, when it is conducted, it is motivated by procedural requirements or narrow political considerations and thus fails to contribute to continuous policy learning.* Numerous governments around the world regularly block access to information, depriving evaluators of the ability to conduct high quality evaluations and themselves of opportunities for policy learning and improvement.

The commonality of such fragmented policy processes across different political systems and regimes begs not only for explanation, but also for solutions that public managers can adopt when faced with these and other similar situations. These are what this book aims to provide.

### **Public managers as the missing link**

Due to their prominent role in developing policy choices and implementing executive decisions, public managers as a whole tend to shoulder a large share of public scrutiny, and blame, for failures resulting from fragmented policy processes. They are often lumped together with the agencies they serve as “the bureaucracy,” which in itself is seen in many circles as largely responsible for most failures in public sector governance. Because of their purported “bureaucratic incompetence” and “resistance to change,” public managers are often blamed for poor policy formulation and weak implementation of policy initiatives. Their motivations and commitments are also frequently questioned. Much of the economics-inspired literature on bureaucratic behavior, for example, is based on the assumption that a typical public manager is largely motivated by his or her personal interests and/or narrowly defined institutional interests such as information or budget maximization in dealing with public affairs. The hostile political environment in which they operate in many countries further undermines the efforts of

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public managers and over time can give rise to popular demands for downsizing the government and transferring many public responsibilities to the private or non-profit sectors, further promoting policy fragmentation.

The above views, however, contrast sharply with how the public managers themselves view their roles. Public managers tend to perceive their role as delivering high quality services or maintaining the government machinery (for example, policing the streets and collecting taxes) rather than contributing to policy-making. Many public managers, when they do think about the subject of policy-making at all, see their policy role as one limited to policy implementation, since they often feel, or have been trained to think, that policy-making is the sole responsibility of political decision-makers.

This narrow self-perception of the policy role of public managers is rooted in traditional public administration theories developed on the basis of Western experiences which historically have advocated a strong separation between administration and politics, with the latter belonging exclusively to the realm of political executives. Although the empirical and conceptual validity of the separation between administration and politics have been challenged by generations of scholars, its staying power in influencing administrative practices can be seen clearly from many key reform measures introduced as part of the New Public Management (NPM) adopted in many countries in the 1980s and 1990s. The NPM was an approach that often aimed to separate more clearly “policy-making” agencies from “implementation” agencies in order to boost administrative efficiency and effectiveness. In the Netherlands, for example, reforms in the 1990s created completely separate agencies for policy and administration.

In addition to the influence of traditional public administration theories, the perceived narrow policy role of public managers also arises from a misperception that equates “policy process” with “decision-making” (which often does involve, mainly or exclusively, more senior political executives). But the policy process consists of a much broader range of activities than merely making decisions. It includes setting agendas, developing alternatives, implementing decisions, and evaluating public measures—all tasks in which public managers can play a major part. And public managers can also play a bigger role in decision-making than is often realized. For example, policies adopted by legislators can be broad and vague (often deliberately so for political reasons), leaving crucial details to be decided by public managers, or street-level bureaucrats, when implementing them.

Several recent developments, moreover, have led to a renewed questioning of this historical “politics–administration dichotomy” and have

reinforced the need to expand the definition of the appropriate policy roles that can be played by public managers.

First, decentralization and devolution have transferred critical policy roles to public managers at lower levels of governments in many countries. In countries ranging from the Philippines to Peru and Chile, for example, the responsibilities for major health policies have been devolved from the central government to local governments in recent years. Similarly, in the US and the EU, efforts to control global warming have increasingly shifted to regional and urban governments.

Second, the emergence of network or collaborative government practices built on participatory and consultative processes in many countries, especially in Europe and Latin America, has enlarged the scope of influence for public managers. Governance authority is no longer solely top-down, but often incorporates (often parallel) bottom-up processes in which they play a larger, more continuing role.

Third, the customer-orientation in public sector governance adopted in many jurisdictions under NPM rubrics, which has affected virtually every country from Argentina to Korea and Senegal, has also strengthened the voice and leverage of agencies that deliver goods and services to the public. In so doing, it may have strengthened the hand of the public managers who oversee such service delivery.

Through their expanded policy roles, public managers now more than ever can bring a set of qualities to policy deliberations and activities that can help contribute to solving many policy problems associated with fragmented policy practices. The long tenure of public managers in the public sector, for example, helps them not only sustain attention to particular policy issues, but also enables them to take a long-term perspective on public policy, which political executives facing electoral and other shorter-term pressures often lack. In comparison, policy-makers at the top level, such as ministers, legislators and governors, face much shorter tenures in office and find it correspondingly more difficult to influence the direction and content of policy-making over the long term. The job security and expertise enjoyed by public managers, especially career civil servants, also shields them from the political pressures (such as the need to win elections) that constrain political masters when dealing with policy issues. As a result, policy managers are able to both take a longer-term perspective on policy-making and give greater weight to technical considerations when devising and implementing policies. Additionally, the involvement of public managers is more likely to spread across multiple stages in the policy process, whereas the engagement of policy-makers at the top may be concentrated on certain specific stages (for example, agenda setting, decision-making,

or evaluation), again providing public managers with more opportunities than politicians to affect policy content.

### **Public managers in the policy process: a framework for action**

It would, however, be overly optimistic to think that simply expanding the policy roles of public managers will lead automatically to improvements in public sector governance. In Indonesia, for example, some analysts have found that decentralization of essential social services such as health and education has led in some lower-capacity localities to a noticeable deterioration in service quality, due to a lack of budgets and administrative skills, that has especially hurt the poor. Such an expanded policy role can prove overwhelming for ill-prepared public managers who lack either the experience and/or training in public policy-making to be able to anticipate both the threats and opportunities such circumstances might bring.

Proper training is essential for unleashing public managers' tremendous potential in tackling public problems. Unfortunately, the existing literatures in both public administration and the policy sciences provide little guidance on how to cultivate public managers' policy roles. Scholarly works on the policy process, for example, invariably take the perspective of outsiders observing the process rather than that of someone working within the system. The stages model of the policy process (from agenda setting to evaluation), for example, does not resonate with low- and mid-level public officials immersed in a messy and fragmented policy world in which they often see the stages overlapping and issues and problems intertwined. Only a few works in public administration attempt to provide any guidance at all for public managers on how to be more effective in their policy role, and even these are usually restricted to describing specific tools to use and strategies to adopt in specific circumstances related to leadership or human resource issues. And, while there are richer materials in political science, policy analysis, and public management about the nature of the political, technical, and organizational components of political and policy processes, there is no attempt to combine these literatures with a view to providing useful guidance to public managers on how they can integrate or balance these considerations in practice.

This book aims to address these shortcomings by providing public managers an action-oriented framework to guide their participation in the policy process (see Figure 1.1). The framework consists of three layers—policy functions, policy perspectives, and policy competencies

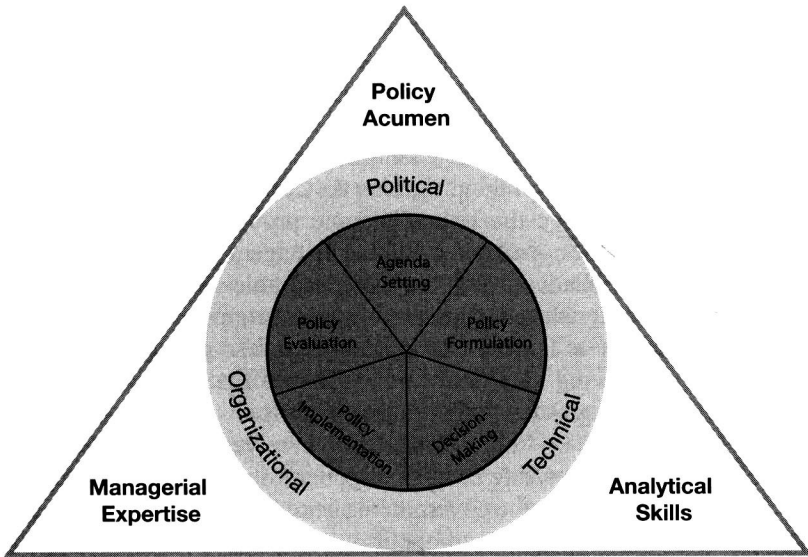


Figure 1.1 Influencing the policy process: an action-oriented framework for public managers

—which public managers must understand in order to exercise their capacity to influence, create, and pursue integrated policies in their spheres of activity.

### ***Policy functions***

The general policy-making functions that public managers can undertake consist of five essential activities: agenda-setting, formulation, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation. In this conception, the policy activities do not occur in “stages” with a linear progression from one to the next. Rather, they are discrete, albeit interrelated, sets of activities that public managers can engage in to achieve their society’s and government’s policy goals. A typical public manager may be heavily involved in some policy-making activities, somewhat more involved in others, and not at all in the rest. Policy managers can make a crucial contribution to all of these policy functions, however, by leveraging on their policy acumen, analytical skills, and managerial expertise.

1. *Agenda-setting.* Each society has literally hundreds of issues that some citizens find to be matters of concern and would have the



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government do something about, of which only a small proportion is actually taken up in policy development. The role of public managers has often been underestimated in this area, as the spotlight has been focussed on policy-makers in executive and legislative branches of government, the media, and the general public. Public managers, however, are in a unique position to identify emerging policy issues through the programs they direct and the people they serve, often before the issues become problematic enough to be considered public problems. Public managers can also serve as a screening mechanism and “gatekeeper” able to substantiate and verify (or not) various claims for attention among policy-makers and the public at large. Most important, public managers can contribute to solving significant policy issues that require sustained attention through their long tenures in office.

2. *Policy formulation.* Policy formulation involves the development of alternatives for possible courses of government activity designed to address problems on the government agenda. Policy-makers typically face short-lived windows of opportunity to come up with actionable solutions due to competition for their attention and/or the urgency of the issues they face, and such pressure can lead to erroneous choices from a long-term perspective, such as when key implementation difficulties or budget implications are not anticipated correctly in the rush to adopt a bill before a legislative deadline. Public managers, through the agencies they serve, can help to foster the development of policy ideas long before these issues reach the policy agenda, so that critical shortcomings have been more fully anticipated and corresponding remedial measures prepared to be put in place. Public managers can also help to ensure that recognition of these policy issues is followed up in later stages of the policy-making process, as the attention of both the policy-makers and the public to a particular issue may dwindle as new issues emerge.
3. *Decision-making.* Decision-making involves officially sanctioned or authorized individuals, or groups, deciding to adopt a particular course of action for implementation. Public managers can be involved in decision-making in various capacities, depending on their rank and the type of organization in which they work. Senior-level public managers often share the responsibility for making policy decisions with the political leaders they serve. Public managers in charge of policy development and planning divisions, or departments, at various levels of government are also often asked to make policy recommendations for key decisions, and their expertise on specific policy issues enables them to have a significant