PLS 505 – Introduction to Public Policy Analysis
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Topic: The Policy Process

▪ **Some basic terms and concepts**
  – *Separation of powers*: federal constitution grants each branch of government specific but overlapping legal authority
  – *Federalism*: sharing of authority between a national and subnational level of government
  – *Policy actors*: many different players in the policymaking process
  – *Policy*: purposive course of action that an individual or group consistently follows in dealing with a problem. Various elements of a policy include:
    – Intentions: purposes of government action
    – Goals: stated ends to be achieved
    – Plans or proposals: means for achieving goals
    – Programs: authorized means for pursuing goals
    – Decisions or choices: specific actions that are taken to set goals, develop plans, and implement and evaluate programs
    – Effects: the effects that programs have on society, whether intended or unintended
  – *Public policy* is a course of government action or inaction in response to public problems. It is associated with formally approved policy goals and means, as well as the regulations and practices of agencies that implement programs. It is not made in a vacuum but rather is influenced by
    – Social and economic conditions
    – Prevailing political values
    – Public mood at any given time
    – Structure of government
    – National and local cultural norms
  – *Policy outputs*: the formal actions that government takes to pursue its goals
  – *Policy outcomes*: the effects such actions have on society
  – *Economic rationality or rational actor model*: Assumes that human beings are guided only by the prospect of individual profit or other forms of utility. Political scientists from the public choice perspective often adopt this assumption although many use a loser definition of this utility maximization function. People chose the course of action that yields the maximum net gain.

Stages of the Policy Process
- Initiation/Agenda Setting
  - *Policy cycle* starts when government pays serious attention to an issue
    - Why does government pay attention to some issues and not others?
    - There are always more problems than there is time or political will to address
    - New information does not in and of itself place an issue on the agenda. Often some sort of political propellant that attracts political sponsors and public/media attention
    - Focus at this stage of the process is on problem definition
  - Two types of agendas
    - *Institutional, governmental, or official agenda*: Those that government acts on.
      - Institutional agenda are those problems that legislators or public officials feel obliged to take appropriate measures
      - Congress, the President, or Courts can initiate official agendas at the federal level
      - Policy makers respond to popular demand (pluralist model) or it is set by those at the top of political/economic hierarchies (elitist model)
      - The governmental agenda can also be a graveyard for public problems – relatively few issues survive this stage of the process
    - *Systemic or noninstitutional agenda*: Those on which action is often delayed.
      - Systemic agenda are the set of issues that the political communities see as meriting attention by the public.
      - These issues don't always get acted upon. This involves moving an issue to the governmental agenda – the set of items up for active and serious consideration by decisionmakers
  - Pluralist vs. Elitist models
    - *Pluralist model* argues that policy makers determine the institutional agenda in response to widespread popular demand. More concerned with how policy concerns reach the agenda
      - Issues must have the following characteristics to be elevated on institutional agendas
        - Specificity
        - Social significance
        - Temporal relevance – short vs. long-term relevance
        - Simplicity – easily understood
        - Categorical precedence – matters that are routine are more likely to take precedence than issues that are unique
    - *Elitist model* argues that those situated at the top of political and economic hierarchies set the institutional agenda.
      - Focuses on who sets the agenda. Elites include political officials, corporate representatives, interest groups, and other influential people and institutions
      - Two views of agenda setting
        - Elites can randomly select issues, choose issues they specialize in, or observe hierarchies like congressional committee structure
        - Society's elites select issues that serve their own interests because the public is by and large apathetic

- – *Iron triangle or sub governmental model* of agenda setting
  - – Closely related to elitist model
  - – Political elites sit at the top of the triangle and at the base are those who dominate agenda setting – special interests and administrators
  - – Assumes a stable coalition of players in the policy-making process but obviously others have influence such as think tanks, journalists, academics, etc.
  - – *Garbage can model*
    - – Argues that policy making environment represents more of an organized anarchy where decision makers satisfice (satisfactory and sufficient) rather than seeking optimum decision
      - – Problems looking for decision situations
      - – Solutions looking for problems
      - – Decisionmaker looking for work
- – *Agenda setting* is often aided by "triggering" or "focusing events" (e.g., discovery of the ozone hole, 9/11, tsunami, Columbine, etc.) that are then defined in action terms by policy entrepreneurs
  - – A focusing event or window of opportunity is usually a sudden or unexpected change that may invite media coverage and public concern, excitement, or curiosity
  - – The public and decisionmakers are often moved to the point where immediate action is demanded
    - – The media can play an important role here
  - – Policy entrepreneurs exploit these focusing events to identify problems and propose solutions
  - – Framing the problem and policy response is important to continue attracting media attention and to build coalitions around the policy problem or response
- – A key factor in agenda building is the expansion or subtraction of issues that can be linked to the lead issues under consideration
  - – Add differentially valued, unrelated issues
  - – Add side payments to gain political support or reduce opposition
  - – Add issues to exploit their interdependencies
  - – Add issues to reduce likelihood of agreement if you want to reduce chances for passage
- – *Policy entrepreneurs* can help shape agendas and serve as catalysts for policy change
  - – They can be scientists themselves who personally lobby politicians
  - – They can perform a "cross-pollinating" function by getting scientists and policymakers together
  - – They can be a national political leader (e.g., Al Gore) or symbolic leader
  - – They can be NGOs who skillfully build coalitions and influence public opinion
  - – There are also *policy saboteurs* who work specialize in the formation of blocking coalitions and often seek to manipulate public opinion as well
- – Distribution of costs and benefits helps shape agenda setting
  - – If benefits and costs are diffuse they fall on a large number of people who do not belong to a well defined group
  - – If benefits and costs are specific they affect a single group which bears the favorable or unfavorable outcomes

- Four conditions in this typology
  - Costs diffuse/benefits diffuse (e.g., educational reform) = inaction
  - Costs diffuse/benefits specific (e.g., pork barrel projects) = likely acceptance
  - Costs specific/benefits diffuse (e.g., gun control) = likely rejection
  - Costs specific/benefits specific (e.g., new airport) - Conflict
- Estimation/Policy Formulation
  - Once an agenda attains institutional status, specific policies must be formulated
    - While policy analysts are involved in each stage of the policy cycle, their involvement is most critical in the phases of policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation
  - This involves setting goals, creating specific plans, and selecting the means to accomplish the goals
    - Policies tend to provide positive or negative incentives
    - Policies modify behavior by changing rules or providing information
    - Policies may give rights or take rights away
    - Policies may shift power over the agenda to a specific agency
  - In order to formulate policy we must have a behavior model that makes assumptions about human nature
    - We assume individuals are bounded rational actors who pursue their own self interest
    - This stage is concerned with predetermining risks, costs, and benefits associated with each possible option that emerges from initiation and with new options that analysts discover as they continue their work
    - It also requires coming to grips with the complexity of a system and its consequences
      - Overlapping interactions among numerous elements, positive and negative feedback loops, nonlinear relationships, and continuous structure changes inhere in social systems.
      - Our limited intellectual apparatus prompts us to search for simple and regularly ordered regularity, which arguably doesn't exist. Our images are poor proxies for reality and our analyses frequently reflect these defective images
      - With increased complexity comes increases in the number and diversity of system interpretations in part because of the biased and distorted views affected individuals bring with them to the problem context
      - Because of their complexity, social systems are capable of producing problems neither expected nor results intended
  - A principle focus at this stage is on figuring out ways to reduce complexity
    - This is where rational techniques such as c/b analysis, risk assessment, impact assessments, etc. prove useful
    - Other techniques would include preparing issue papers and other policy relevant forms of information that are more qualitative in nature
  - The problem with most estimation activities, particularly those founded on the rational philosophies, is that these methods require projecting order on a problem
    - This requires that there actually is an optimal solution to the problem
    - It also requires assuming that the problem is constructed properly
  - Policy analysts play a major role during this stage of the process

- Selection/Adoption
  - Policy adoption comes at the end of the formulation process and is a well defined observable conclusion to the policy formulation stage
    - Refers to the fact that someone (or group of people) may eventually make a decision and create "policy"
    - Once the policy analyses are complete, they are sent to official decision making bodies that typically enact legislation or take steps that legitimize the decision
    - In the policy analyst's ideal world, their recommendations would be seriously discussed and policy makers would pick from among the alternatives they identified and analyzed
      - In the real world, this information and recommendation is but one source of information to the process
      - Negotiation and bargaining may lead to quite different decisions
      - Self interest and the ideology of decisionmakers will also influence decisions
  - Legitimation
    - Once created, policies must be invested with authority by formulating statutes, policy documents, plans, executive orders, etc.
    - They also have to be legitimized
      - To obtain public acceptance of new policies you may hold hearings, allow public comment or other administrative procedures, or use voting
- Implementation
  - Policy implementation refers to the connection between the expression of governmental intention and the achievement of results in the world of action
    - Adopted policies almost never specify exactly what is to be done so the impact of a policy often depends on how it is implemented.
      - Policies are frequently reformulated during the implementation process.
      - Sometimes good policies are weakened, other times the policy's defects are corrected
      - The execution of the selected option may only bear a faint resemblance to the analysts orderly recommendations
      - Often this leads to frustration on the part of an analyst who sees the policy transformed by the implementation process
    - It is not until this stage of the process that the world changes or is altered in some way as a result of a policy
    - The formal and informal coalitions or "advocacy coalitions" that shape the institutional agendas are still present and try to shape and influence implementation decisions and the policy changes that occur during the stage of the process

- Evaluation
  - Policy analysts exercise primary responsibility over this stage of the policy cycle where they examine the potential impacts of an adopted policy
    - It asks what policies and programs were successful or unsuccessful on several levels
      - Outputs of a government program
      - Performance evaluations that gauge the impact or outcomes on specific target groups
      - Look at feedback and other measures of a program's processes
- Termination
  - 3 basic options
    - Termination (start over)
      - It concerns the termination of policies, programs, or organizations that have become dysfunctional, redundant, outmoded, or unnecessary
      - Often neglected step of the policy process
        - Variety of obstacles to termination, many of which are institutional
    - Continuation (justification)
      - Evidence is gathered that is used to justify the policies continued implementation
    - Adjustment (policy change)
      - Evidence is gathered that supports some modification in the policy
      - New policies may be added to or subtracted from the existing policies over time and its scope and influence may expand or contract
      - Adjustments will typically occur in the peripheral aspects of a policy rather than in its core
  - Policy change
    - Policy adjustment and change continues beyond policy implementation
      - Adopted policies confront real world problems or interest group pressure, client complaints or demands, legal challenges, and changing financial conditions
        - Once a policy is formulated, it may be continually reformulated.
    - If you look over the life of a single policy it is constantly shaped and reshaped by
      - Incremental changes in society smooth out the rough edges of implementation
      - New statutes contradict or invalidate parts of policy
      - Lawsuits and court challenges
      - New technology changes feasibility
      - New discoveries or revelations change level of public support
      - Political, social, economic circumstances change
      - Elections and changes in political ideology
    - Patterns of policy change
      - Linear – one policy is replaced by another
      - Consolidated – programs with similar goals are combined
      - Split – agency or program grows too large and is broken into smaller components
      - Nonlinear – changes prompt drastic or major policy changes

Questions for Policy Analysts at Each Stage of the Process

Stage of Policy Process	Policy Analysis Questions
Problem Identification	What is the problem? What will happen if we do nothing?
Evaluating Alternatives	What should the goals be? What option or mix of options offers the greatest benefits at the least cost?
Selecting Alternatives	Which option is the most viable? Which is the most cost-effective? Which is the most feasible?
Implementation	What is necessary to obtain successful implementation?
Evaluation	Is it working? Is the program cost effective? Are the outcomes equitable? Are the goals and objectives being accomplished?
Policy Change	Do the current programs need to be changed? Are new policies needed?
Termination	Is the program worth keeping?