

THE STUDY OF PUBLIC POLICY

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Who is responsible for ensuring public safety? Amusement parks are a big business in the United States, and millions of Americans visit them each year, particularly large facilities such as Walt Disney World and the Six Flags parks. Yet the occasional accident reminds us of the risk and possibly of the need for government intervention to provide adequate assurance of public safety.

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PUBLIC POLICY AND POLITICS

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Define and explain the nature of public policy.
- Identify key concepts associated with the study of public policy.
- Explain the different contexts in which public policy is made.
- Examine the reasons for governmental involvement in public policy.
- Explore why citizens should understand public policy.
- Describe the reasons for evaluating public policies today.

Every year millions of people in the United States go to theme parks, state and county fairs, and other events that feature thrill rides. According to the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions, in recent years hundreds of millions of people attended the country's approximately 400 parks, with revenues well into the billions of dollars.¹ This is clearly a large industry that includes not only amusement park giants such as Walt Disney World and Six Flags but also a variety of smaller, permanently placed operations. In addition, many traveling operations set up temporary ride attractions at events such as state and county fairs.

While these parks and attractions provide safe entertainment and recreation for most visitors, periodic accidents—some fatal—are reported every year. In March 2022, a person died when riding the Orlando FreeFall drop tower at ICON Park.² These are not onetime incidents, and it shows that things can go wrong with these sophisticated amusement rides. In some cases, there are accidents or deaths, sometimes because malfunctions occur in the equipment and in some instances for no apparent reason other than the specific health of the visitor. Examples include a woman who fell from a roller coaster at a Six Flags park in Texas in July 2013, and a 2015 death that occurred at Walt Disney World's Magic Kingdom Space Mountain roller coaster, where a fifty-five-year-old woman lost consciousness upon exiting the ride and later died, likely due to her medical history.³ When people go to these parks, they intend to have fun, and accidents in such venues can generate a lot of media coverage. No one thinks they can get injured in Disney World, home of Mickey Mouse, Goofy, the Seven Dwarfs, and other beloved characters. So one might ask, what kinds of controls or regulations are in place to ensure individual safety in these amusement centers?

The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) is a regulatory agency responsible for ensuring public safety for a wide range of consumer products. The commission currently regulates thousands of products, ranging from lawn mowers to baby cribs. It also, not surprisingly, has some authority over amusement park rides. Specifically, the CPSC monitors the safety of the “portable amusement rides” that travel from one location to another and are set up for particular events, such as county fairs. What about rides associated with permanent amusement parks such as Six Flags? Government regulation of these rides occurs at the state level, and in some cases, states have no authority. Some states require government inspection of park rides, and others do not. Regulation may even vary within the state itself. Florida is a

prime example. While Florida regulates some permanent parks, those that hire more than 1,000 employees are generally exempt from state regulations. (This includes places such as Universal Studios, Disney World, and Busch Gardens.) Why do you think these differences between and within states exist?⁴

For a number of years, Senator Edward Markey (D-MA) argued that there should be more systematic federal regulation of amusement park rides. To that end, he introduced legislation that would give greater authority to the CPSC to regulate the industry, including “big theme” players such as Disney and Universal.⁵ He was unsuccessful in getting this legislation passed, with opposition coming—not surprisingly—from the major theme parks, which claim that federal intervention is unnecessary, that these accidents occur rarely, and that the risks to public safety are minimal. They often also argue that many of the accidents are attributable to their customers’ health and behavior: “patrons have risk-increasing, pre-existing medical conditions or fail to heed rules like those about staying seated or keeping their limbs inside the car.”⁶

How risky are these rides? The Consumer Product Safety Commission estimated that 37,000 people went to the emergency room in 2015 because they were hurt on an amusement park ride. A report by the Center for Injury Research and Policy cited evidence that “more than 93,000 children under 18 were treated in emergency rooms for amusement-park-related injuries between 1990 and 2010.”⁷ Former representative Cliff Stearns (R-FL) states, on the other hand, that amusement park rides cause fewer injuries than fishing.⁸ So who is right? The answer may be that both are, and it illustrates how policymakers manage information and data to communicate preferred positions. Policy analysts often use risk analysis to examine the extent of a problem and how it can affect a population. In the case of amusement park rides, according to a study by the National Safety Council, in 2015 there were 1,502 reported ride injuries at fixed-site amusement parks—or about 4.8 injuries for every million attendees (or less than one injury for every million rides). The vast majority of these injuries are not considered to be serious; in fact, only about 5.5 percent of them required an overnight stay in a hospital.⁹ Once again, one might ask if this is a significant number. For comparison purposes, the CPSC estimated that in 2021 there were over 238,000 injuries from off-road vehicles, including ATVs, mopeds, mini-bikes, and other such recreational vehicles; over 222,000 injuries playing football; and nearly 400,000 injuries from exercise and exercise equipment.¹⁰ Based on some of these comparisons, should we be concerned about the safety of amusement park rides?

Another question might be whether government needs to be involved at all in the regulation of amusement park rides. It is clear that such accidents do nothing to help the bottom line of the amusement park industry, and it has a powerful incentive to provide safe environments in order to continue attracting visitors. Might the self-regulation that currently occurs, particularly in the permanent parks, be sufficient to ensure safety? Or is this a case where government regulation is needed to protect the public’s well-being? These are the kinds of questions to which elected and government officials must respond when making public policy.

While we are relatively certain that most people do not consider the role of government on their family vacation to Disney World, the previous examples show one might raise a number of questions regarding government policy. The regulation of amusement park rides is an example of the constitutional issue of federalism (defined later in this chapter); how the perception of risk

may affect decision-making; and, ultimately, the role of government in a free-market or capitalist society. Public policy faces these kinds of questions often, and they illustrate the diversity and the complexity of issues that arise. Ultimately, how these issues are resolved can have a profound impact on individual lives.

This account of amusement park ride safety and its regulation speaks to the importance of the process of public policymaking. That process involves many different institutions, people, and groups. The complex policy issues ideally are resolved only after long hours of research and debate that consider the underlying beliefs and assumptions as well as pertinent facts, including in this case the relative risk of accidents and injuries. Sometimes, however, the issues are not resolved, or they arise again in response to new concerns or data. In addition, a policy typically deals with a particular slice of American life, such as the family vacation, although it also may have important effects on the public's general well-being. Across the range of government activities today, it is no exaggeration to say that public policy deals with just about everything, affecting life in ways that are both obvious and sometimes difficult to recognize.

WHAT IS PUBLIC POLICY?

Public policy is what public officials within government, and by extension the citizens they represent, choose to do or not to do about public problems. Public problems refer to conditions the public widely perceives to be unacceptable and that therefore require intervention. Problems such as environmental degradation, insufficient access to health care services, or consumer safety on amusement park rides can be addressed through government action, private action (where individuals or corporations take the responsibility), or a combination of the two. In any given case, the choice depends on how the public defines the problem and on prevailing societal attitudes about private action in relation to government's role.

For the amusement park ride example, governments at both the federal and state levels share responsibility in some cases; in others, responsibility for safety is left to private businesses or individuals. There are ongoing debates over whether or not having the industry regulate itself in these situations is sufficient, and when accidents do happen, those debates become much more public. When it comes to safety issues, government may decide to intervene, such as in regulation of medications, or it may allow for private industry to address the issue. For example, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) may order a recall of tainted meat that could be unfit for consumption. But there are other situations where the company or industry will make its own decision to recall the products, and the government may see no need to intervene to further protect the public's health or safety.

The term "policy" refers in general to a purposive course of action that an individual or group consistently follows in dealing with a problem (J. Anderson 2023). In a more formal definition, a policy is a "standing decision characterized by behavioral consistency and repetitiveness on the part of both those who make it and those who abide by it" (Eulau and Prewitt 1973, 465). Whether in the public or private sector, policies also can be thought of as the instruments through which societies regulate themselves and attempt to channel human behavior in acceptable directions (Schneider and Ingram 1997).

The language used to discuss public policy can be confusing. Analysts, policymakers, and commentators sometimes speak without much clarity about intentions (the purposes of government action); goals (the stated ends to be achieved); plans or proposals (the means for achieving goals); programs (the authorized means for pursuing goals); and decisions or choices—that is, specific actions that are taken to set goals, develop plans, and implement programs (Jones 1984). These elements of public policy can be found in many different legal expressions such as laws, executive orders, regulations, and judicial rulings. They also can be seen in the way that policymakers, such as presidents, governors, or legislators, describe how they view public policy in any given area. Both the legal statements and the actions of policymakers can define what public policy is at any given time. We find it useful as well to distinguish between **policy outputs** (the formal actions that governments take to pursue their goals) and **policy outcomes** (the effects such actions actually have on society).

To pull some of these perspectives together, we offer this definition: 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. Looking at public policy this way emphasizes the actual behavior of implementing agencies and officials, not merely the formal statements of policy goals and means found in laws and other expressions of government policy. As we will stress throughout the book, this view means that students of public policy need to seek out the information that can tell them what policy actually is at any given time.

Any level of government, whether federal, state, or local, may be involved in a particular policy effort because social problems—and the public demand for action on them—manifest themselves from the local to the national level and sometimes to the international level. At the local level, failing public schools, high crime rates, crowded highways, or air pollution might attract enough attention to spur the school board, mayor, or city council to find remedies. At the national level, inequitable access to health care or how a country responds to terrorist threats may galvanize policymakers and lead to policy development. Many other problems, such as threats to national security and climate change, involve multiple actors both within nations and globally.

Whatever the level of government, proponents of policy actions seek a multitude of goals that also affect all members of society. For laws that govern personal conduct, such as speed limits, policies aim to restrict individual behavior as a way to protect lives or prevent injuries and property damage—that is, the goal is to promote the public's welfare or common good. After government enacts the laws, public policies also affect how the mandated services aimed at the **public good**, such as police protection, public education, maintenance of highways and bridges, or national defense, are provided. Direct government payments are another form of public policy, and they affect people's lives on the individual and societal level. Social Security payments for senior citizens, agricultural subsidies for farmers, and research grants to universities sustain long-term individual and collective well-being.

Public policies reflect not only society's most important values but also conflicts among values. Policies represent which of many different values receive the highest priority in any given decision. David Easton (1965) captured this view in his often-quoted observation that politics

is “the authoritative allocation of values for a society.” What Easton meant was that the actions of policymakers can determine definitively and with the force of law which of society’s different and sometimes conflicting values will prevail. Examples can be found in nearly every area of public policy. Should the federal government implement a carbon tax on industry to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases and address health and climate change concerns, even if doing so raises the cost of products? Or should such decisions be left to the marketplace and individual choice? Should the federal government reinstate the mandate of the original 2010 Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) that citizens purchase health care insurance if they are not covered through their employers as one way to ensure that all citizens have access to health care services? Should government continue to recognize a woman’s right to choose to have an abortion, as decided by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1973 in *Roe v. Wade*, or should it restrict the choice and instead promote the rights of the fetus, as many states chose to do following a new Supreme Court decision in 2022, *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, that overturned *Roe*?

Because public policy often deals with tough questions such as these, reflecting conflicts over fundamental human values, the resulting policies are going to affect people’s lives. For these reasons, we designed this book with several goals in mind. The first is to help readers develop a fuller understanding of public policy and the ways governments make policy decisions. The second is to encourage readers to look ahead to the implications of policy choices. The third is to foster critical thinking about public policy and possible alternative courses of action. Because this last goal is so important, we introduce basic concepts related to policy analysis throughout the text. The aim is to equip readers with essential skills in analytical thinking that will enhance their understanding of policy issues and facilitate more effective participation in the policy process.

Developing a critical, analytical approach to policy issues has many advantages over simply learning the details of policy history, understanding the present legal requirements in various programs, or gaining an overview of current policy debates. Such knowledge is important, but it is inherently limited, in part because public policies and debates over them continually change, making earlier accounts less useful. In contrast, those who learn the basic principles of policymaking and policy analysis will have a better grasp of why governments make their decisions and be better able to identify the strengths and weaknesses in present policies as well as in proposals to change them. Individuals can apply these skills to the wide range of problems everyone faces as citizens and in their personal lives and careers.

DEFINING BASIC CONCEPTS

It is useful at this point to clarify several additional concepts in the study of public policy. These include government, politics, and policy analysis. Although these terms are in common usage, no universal definition exists for any of them.

Government

Government refers to the institutions and political processes through which public policy choices are made. These institutions and processes represent the legal authority to govern or

rule a group of people. In the United States, the federal Constitution describes the government's institutions, which include Congress, the president, the various agencies of the executive branch, and the federal court system. Each has specific but overlapping legal authority to act under a system of separation of powers, which we discuss in Chapter 2. At state and local levels, parallel government institutions develop policy for citizens within their jurisdictions, guided by the authority granted in state constitutions and in state and local statutes and ordinances. The American system of governance adheres to the principle of **federalism**, also discussed in Chapter 2; in a federal system, the national government shares authority with the states and local governments. Quite often, national policies, such as those dealing with transportation or environmental protection, are implemented chiefly by the states through an elaborate system of intergovernmental relations in which the federal government grants legal authority to the states to carry out national policies. In other policy areas, such as education, crime control, and land-use regulation, state and local governments play the dominant role.

Politics

Politics concerns the exercise of power in society or in specific decisions over public policy. It has several different but complementary meanings. Politics refers to the processes through which public policies are formulated and adopted, especially to the roles played by elected officials, organized interest groups, public opinion, and political parties. This is the politics of policymaking. Politics can also be thought of as how conflicts in society (such as those over rights to abortion services or gun safety) are expressed and resolved in favor of one set of interests or social values or another. Politics in this case refers to the issue positions that different groups of people (health care providers, health insurance companies, gun owners, gun safety advocates) adopt and the actions they take to promote their values. These collections of individuals with similar interests often become active in the policymaking process. So politics is about power and influence in society as well as in the processes of policymaking within government. It concerns who participates in and who influences the decisions that governments make and who gains and who loses as a result. Harold Lasswell ([1936] 1958) put it this way: Politics is about “who gets what, when, and how.”

In the United States and most other democracies, politics also relates to the electoral processes by which citizens select the policymakers who represent them. In this sense, politics concerns political parties and their issue agendas and the political ideologies, philosophies, and beliefs held by candidates for office, their supporters, and their campaign contributors. The precise relationship of politics to public policy may not always be clear; defenders and critics of specific policy actions may offer arguments based in economics, history, ethics, philosophy, or any number of other disciplines we use to think about what is in the public interest. Still, no one doubts that electoral politics is a major component of the policymaking process.

Politics exerts this strong influence on policymaking, in part because elected officials necessarily must try to anticipate how their policy statements and actions might affect their chances for reelection or the fortunes of their political allies. Policymakers are therefore sensitive to the views of the groups and individuals who helped them win office in the first place, and whose support may be essential to keeping them or their allies in office. These political incentives motivate public officials to pay particular attention to the policy preferences of their core constituencies, especially

the activists, while also trying to appeal to the general electorate. For Republicans, the core constituencies include rural residents, farmers, some business interests, and historically political conservatives, among others. For Democrats, the core constituencies are residents of urban areas, labor interests, African Americans, political liberals, and environmentalists, among others.

Politics is also one of the principal reasons public policy is so riddled with conflict and why it can be so difficult to analyze. Consider the debate over smoking and its health effects. For years, the federal government has sought to discourage smoking out of concern for its adverse effects on public health (Derthick 2005; Fritschler and Rudder 2007). Yet while the Office of the Surgeon General and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) take this position, the USDA has continued its longtime policy of subsidizing tobacco farmers. Tobacco policy today—whether higher cigarette taxes meant to curtail smoking (see Chapter 6), public advertising campaigns to warn children and teenagers about the dangers of smoking, or actions to regulate tobacco as a drug—is both complex and controversial. Decisions are influenced by a public that is divided on the issue, by the actions of interest groups that represent the tobacco industry, and by public health studies that are used by other groups to press for further government action to reduce smoking. These various points of view and studies are parts of the contentious process of setting new policy directions.

It would be wrong to assume, however, that such conflicts merely reflect inconsistencies in government policies or, worse, that they demonstrate bad faith. In fact, the process of resolving conflicts helps to determine where the public interest lies. These conflicts illustrate the different public interests that U.S. policymakers attempt to meet. Promoting a health agenda through decreasing smoking will lead to a healthier society and a reduction in health care costs for both the individual and the nation. But the family farm is revered in the United States, and Congress has enacted many policies to protect it. The tobacco industry has been able to play upon this public interest of protecting farmers in its lobbying efforts, and yet policymakers have been shifting their emphasis away from protecting farmers to one that favors regulation. In 2009, for example, Congress approved broad new powers for the FDA to regulate cigarettes and other forms of tobacco for the first time.¹¹ More recently, this debate has partially shifted to the safety of e-cigarettes. Still, whether the subject is tobacco use, health care, or how to reform the tax code, such conflicts are a key element in policymaking.

In debates over agriculture and food production, state support for colleges and universities, and changes to immigration policy, government officials, interest groups, and citizens promote their views about what to do, and they bring many kinds of information to bear on the decisions. Naturally, the different participants in the policy process can and do disagree vigorously about the kinds of public policies that are needed and the proper role of government in addressing the problems.

The policymaking process within government provides abundant, although not necessarily equal, opportunities for all these participants, or policy actors, to discuss problems; to formulate and promote possible policy solutions to them; and to press for formal adoption by legislatures at the national, state, and local levels. Politics, as we defined it, is evident throughout this process.

Ultimately, executive agencies and departments, such as the FDA, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the Department of Defense, or a local police or public health department, are responsible for implementing what the legislators enact. Here, too, politics is

often evident, as an agency may reflect the political values and priorities of a president or governor or will try to respond to the views of other elected officials or interested parties.

Policy Analysis

Analysis means deconstructing an object of study—that is, breaking it down into its basic elements to understand it better. Policy analysis is the examination of components of public policy, the policy process, or both. Put another way, it is the study of the causes and consequences of policy decisions. Duncan MacRae and James A. Wilde (1979, 4) have called policy analysis “the use of reason and evidence to choose the best policy among a number of alternatives.” Policy analysis uses multiple methods of inquiry and draws from diverse disciplines to obtain the information needed to assess a problem and think clearly about alternative ways to resolve it. The same information also shapes public debate and deliberation over what actions to take. At heart, policy analysis encourages deliberate critical thinking about the causes of public problems, the various ways governments and/or the private sector might act on them, and which policy choices make the most sense. Doing so requires not only knowledge of government and politics but also the ability to evaluate the policy actions. Chapter 6 discusses the major evaluative criteria used to make such judgments.

WHY STUDY PUBLIC POLICY?

As the discussion in this chapter will make clear, the study of public policy occurs in many different organizations and for varied reasons. Policy analysts both in and outside of government have a professional concern for public policy—that is, they work on developing public policy solutions by studying public problems and various policy alternatives or choices that might be made. Scholars at universities and research institutions share some of the same interests as policy analysts, but they may also be concerned with building general knowledge and advancing theory, for example, of the policy process or the performance of government institutions. We will revisit these approaches to the study of public policy, especially policy analysis, in Chapter 4.

For citizens who lack such professional reasons but who have strong personal interest in government and public policy, the U.S. political system affords numerous opportunities to become involved. Such interest alone is a good reason to study public policy, but it is not the only one. Studying public policy may help citizens sharpen their analytic skills, decide what political positions and policies to support, and determine how best to evaluate democratic governance. It may encourage students to consider careers in public policy, law, or government. Two additional reasons are presented here: to improve citizens’ ability to participate in policy processes and their ability to influence policy decisions.

Citizens’ Ability to Participate and Make Choices

The United States is a representative democracy. Its citizens elect delegates to act for them, but that is not necessarily the end of citizen participation. Within democracies, citizens may speak out on policy development and government actions. Lack of knowledge about public

problems, policies, government decisions, or politics does not normally keep people from acting in this way, but they can participate more effectively by improving their understanding of the issues. During political campaigns, candidates for public office state their positions on the issues through speeches and advertisements—and through social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook—in hopes of persuading voters to support them. Voters who study public policy are better equipped to understand the candidates' policy ideas and to evaluate them—that is, to determine what impacts they are likely to have and whether they are desirable. If elections are to turn on informed assessments of the issues rather than how good the candidate looks on camera, policy knowledge of this kind is essential.

Citizens can also join with others in an interest group to learn more about public policy. Scholars often observe that the **logic of collective action** suggests that a single individual would be irrational to join an interest group when almost no personal gain follows (Olson 1971). The enormous growth of citizen lobbies over the last several decades, however, clearly indicates that agreement with a group's goals persuades many people to sign up and participate (J. Berry 1997, 1999). Interest groups operate at all levels of government, and one of their roles is to educate policymakers and citizens about public policy issues. For example, many of them—from the National Rifle Association to the Sierra Club—commission policy studies and use them in the political process to advance their views (Cigler, Loomis, and Nownes 2020; Wolpe and Levine 1996). Nearly all the major groups maintain websites that offer issue briefings and facilitate communication with public officials. The box Working with Sources: Interest Groups on the Web addresses the role of such groups in shaping public policy.

WORKING WITH SOURCES

INTEREST GROUPS ON THE WEB

Interest group websites are treasure troves of policy information, but a word of warning is in order. Visitors to these sites need to be cautious about how they approach the materials and policy recommendations they find. Information on these sites is always selective; it may be limited in scope and biased in ways that a naïve reader may not discern. Policy briefings and reports made available by such groups therefore merit careful and critical reading, and our goal here is to encourage you to be alert to the general political orientation of the group sponsoring the site. We start by asking about the credibility of the studies and reports you find there.

Over the past few years, there has been an increase in calls for school libraries to monitor their collections and to limit the availability of certain books to students. These calls often come from organizations seeking to protect a parent's right to raise their children as they think best. Visit the website for the Moms for Liberty (www.momsforliberty.org), a nonprofit consumer organization that is "dedicated to fighting for the survival of America by unifying, educating and empowering parents to defend their parental rights at all levels of governments." The organization's perspective regarding parental rights has led to its involvement in some of the recent controversies associated with banning books; it believes that parents should be able to engage in such decisions to protect their rights.

For a contrasting view, visit the website for Pen America (www.pen.org); go to the Advocacy and Action tab and then click on Focus Issues. From here, you can click on

Educational Censorship and see some statistics and links to other resources. How credible is the information you found on the two websites? Which group do you think provides less-biased information, and why do you think so?

- Does either supply references to authoritative sources for the information presented, such as government reports or studies published in scientific or scholarly journals?
- How else can you judge the facts and issue positions on these pages? By comparing the different positions and the language used to defend them, can you determine which group offers the most defensible stance on the role that parents should have in the schools?

Note: Websites are changed and upgraded frequently. The sites provided throughout this text are meant to be current; however, design changes may require you to investigate a site more thoroughly than originally assigned.

At state and local levels, citizens may have the opportunity to get more directly involved in policymaking through referendums, initiatives, or participation in public hearings and meetings (Cronin 1989) and perhaps have greater influence. A referendum is a law proposed by a state or locality for voters to approve or reject. An initiative is much the same, but a group of citizens organizes the effort to place it on the ballot. About half the states allow citizen-generated initiatives. Naturally, the voters can better determine whether to support or oppose a ballot measure if they understand the proposal and its possible effects. However, obtaining that information and developing a sound position on the issues is often a challenge for the average voter; it is also one reason critics argue that many initiatives lead to bad public policy, especially when insufficient thought goes into the drafting of the proposals or the public acts emotionally or in response to misleading media advertisements (Ellis 2002).

Public meetings afford perhaps the greatest opportunity to participate directly with other citizens and public officials to learn more about local problems and decide what to do about them. Notices of such meetings and hearings are posted in the local newspaper or on pertinent websites. Of course, such meetings also may involve highly vocal and emotional advocacy on both sides of an issue, as seen in debates in recent years over public schools and the curricula they adopt. The box Working with Sources: The Public's Political Knowledge is an introduction to a primary government source.

WORKING WITH SOURCES

THE PUBLIC'S POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE

As indicated throughout the text, the enormous amount of information available through websites makes citizen activism more feasible than ever before. After all, the potential for activism is facilitated by information as well as by individual motivation to get involved. Reliance on web sources, however, also presents a challenge: how to manage the huge amount of information.

The federal government's site, USA.gov (www.usa.gov), is an official portal to U.S. government websites. The mission of the site is to make government more accessible and seamless and to make it easier for citizens to find the services they seek and to complete transactions online. The search engine developed specifically for accessing such material is capable of sifting through a vast number of pages of information from national, state, and local governments in a fraction of a second.

A simple exercise indicates how useful USA.gov can be. Let's assume you want to write to your senator and need to know their name and address. Go to the site, look under the Government Agencies and Elected Officials link, and then select Contact Elected Officials. Click U.S. Senators, choose your state, and you have the names and contact information for your two senators.

A more challenging illustration of how to navigate through USA.gov involves finding information about a public policy issue or general information. Try entering "Nutrition Facts" into the search field. From here, you can find information on how to use the Nutrition Facts Label.

Try to answer these questions:

- What is the Nutrition Facts Label, and why is it included on packaged food items?
- What is the Percent Daily Value?
- Where can you go to get information regarding food safety (use the search field)? What are the current recalls and alerts?

Citizens' Ability to Influence Policy Decisions

The ability of citizens to participate in decision-making activities can often lead to influence over the decisions that result. Policymakers and others involved in the policy process need information to understand the dynamics of a problem and develop options for action. As we show throughout this text, when examining policy alternatives, policymakers and other actors often make use of policy analysis. The more that citizens are aware of such studies and their implications, the better equipped they are to play an effective role in policymaking and help to shape the decisions that are made. One of the major objectives of this text is to help readers improve their capacity for reading and interpreting such policy studies.

We also want to build understanding of the policymaking process itself and alert readers to the many opportunities they have to make their views known. Most readers may recognize that Congress has chief responsibility for making public policy. However, they may not be as alert to the critical role that administrative agencies play in implementing the laws that Congress enacts. Whether the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services or the Office for Civil Rights in the U.S. Department of Education, such agencies have enormous influence over how programs are run and the services they deliver to citizens. Citizens may be particularly able to influence government decisions at the state and local levels where policymakers and administrators are easier to reach.

Whether at the national, state, or local level, citizens who wish to be effective need to be alert to the politics of any given situation. They need to know who the major policy actors are and the motives behind the positions they take. We provide many examples in the chapters

that follow. A simple one concerns reform of the health care system. Someone who wants to change it must recognize the interests of the American Medical Association, a professional organization and interest group representing the interests of doctors, various health insurance companies and their trade associations, drug companies, hospitals, public interest groups, and others. All these organizations have strong views on health care and its potential reform, can easily be mobilized to contact policymakers, and can also mobilize voters to contact policymakers or vote in a particular way in an election. Not surprisingly, members of Congress and other policymakers tend to pay attention to these entities and take their positions into account.

THE CONTEXTS OF PUBLIC POLICY

Officials do not make public policy in a vacuum. It is affected by social and economic conditions, prevailing political values and the public mood at any given time, the structure of government, and national and local cultural norms, among other variables. Taken together, this environment determines which problems rise to prominence, which policy alternatives receive serious consideration, and which actions are viewed as economically and politically feasible. Some aspects of the policy environment, such as the U.S. system of separation of powers and the nation's free-market economy, are relatively stable. Others, such as which party controls the White House and Congress, the public mood or political climate, and media coverage of policy-related developments, can vary considerably over time. To underscore how these variables shape the policymaking process, we offer a brief description of the social, economic, political, governing, and cultural contexts of public policy.

Social Context

Social conditions such as demographics, or the composition of a population, affect policy decisions in myriad ways, as is evident in controversies over phenomena as diverse as early childhood education, child hunger, the rising costs of Medicare and Social Security, and immigration. Moreover, social conditions are dynamic, not static. The population changes because of immigration, growth in nontraditional households, and lower or higher birthrates. These social changes in turn alter how the public and policymakers view and act on problems ranging from crime to the rising cost of health care. Today, for example, senior citizens make up the fastest-growing segment of the country's population. Their needs differ from those in other cohorts—or age groups—of the population, and they are more likely than younger citizens to demand that government pay attention to them, particularly for programs such as Medicare and Social Security. As the elderly population increases, policymakers face difficult challenges, such as how they can ensure the Social Security system's solvency as greater numbers of people begin to draw benefits and a smaller number pay into it. Fifty years ago, Social Security was a government program that posed no special risk to budgetary resources. Now, however, public officials recognize that they must find politically and economically realistic ways to deal with an aging population and the retirement of the baby boom generation, those Americans born between 1946 and 1964.

How citizens relate to one another in their communities also influences public policymaking. For example, many city policymakers have been trying to reclaim their downtown areas and make them more vibrant and “destination places.” These efforts have had considerable success as more people have sought to work and live in urban communities. Even so, do efforts aimed at urban renewal and reclamation force out lower-income people who can no longer afford housing in these areas? Do cities provide adequate services for these communities, including easy access to fresh food, or do residents need to drive out to the suburbs to purchase groceries? What is the appropriate balance between residential and commercial development, and should tax incentives be used to encourage businesses to locate in these areas? These perspectives can also affect public transportation and environmental policies as questions are asked about the need for mass transit (such as light-rail systems that serve cities and their suburbs) or whether to build new highways or further expand existing ones. Some of these trends have prompted public officials at all levels of government to think more about the “livability” or sustainability of their communities over the next few decades (K. Portney 2013; Hughes and Deslatt 2025).

Economic Context

The state of the economy also has a major impact on the policies governments adopt and implement. Economic policy deals with inflation and unemployment, but the economy itself affects the development of many other programs. For example, a strong economy often leads to lower unemployment, which in turn reduces the need for unemployment benefits, job training programs, and comparable assistance. Weaker economies often lead to different kinds of decisions. For example, in response to a weak economy and limited revenues, state governments made difficult decisions regarding their financial support for public higher education. The example illustrates how a change in economic conditions can affect the dynamics of public policymaking.

Another way to appreciate the influence of the economic context is to consider budgetary politics. The United States often has a deficit, with the government spending more money than it collects in taxes and other revenues in a given year. Congress tried for many years in the past to control or reduce the deficit, including a proposed constitutional amendment mandating a balanced budget. Hypothetically, deficits are a concern because there would be no money to pay for new policy initiatives. Nor could government continue to fund programs at their existing levels without increasing taxes, always a politically unattractive option.

The deficit decreased toward the end of the Clinton administration but increased again due to policies of the George W. Bush administration, which saw a major tax cut combined with a broad economic slowdown in 2001 and 2002, as well as the economic toll of the September 11, 2001, attacks. By 2009, the deficit had risen to over \$1.4 trillion, although by fiscal year 2015 it fell to \$438 billion, partially due to policies to reduce spending and raise revenue and to the slow economic recovery at the time. Deficits increased again during the Trump administration, with fiscal year 2020 showing a deficit of \$3.1 trillion. Deficits fell in the first years of the Biden administration to about \$945 billion by August 2022.¹² At both the federal and state levels, policymakers consistently struggle with tough decisions on spending priorities and budget cuts, a challenge that is certain to continue for years.



Social contexts influence policy development. Among the social contexts that influence public policy development is the diversity of the American population, which has been enriched by immigration over the years. Immigration became a key issue in the 2016 presidential campaign, with little agreement between the two parties. The photo shows Rutgers University students at a rally in opposition to Republican president-elect Donald J. Trump's proposed policy initiatives regarding immigration and the deportation of criminal undocumented immigrants.

Albin Lohr-Jones/Pacific Press/LightRocket via Getty Images

Political Context

It is impossible to understand public policy without considering politics, which affects public policy choices at every step, from the selection of policymakers in elections to shaping how conflicts among different groups are resolved. To appreciate the political context, one must be aware of the relative strength of the two major parties; the influence of minor parties; ideological differences among the public, especially the more attentive publics such as committed liberals and conservatives; and the ability of organized interest groups to exert pressure on policymaking. It is equally important to consider how much interest the public takes in the political process, its expectations for what government ought to do, and the level of trust and confidence it has in government. For example, the United States has seen a notable erosion of public trust in government over recent decades, typically because of historical events such as the Vietnam War in the 1960s and early 1970s, the Watergate scandal of 1972 to 1974, and the inability of government to act adequately to resolve contemporary public problems.¹³ The issue of trust came to a head on January 6, 2021, when thousands of supporters of former President Trump stormed the Capitol because they believed that the 2020 presidential election had been stolen from him. Many continued to believe so despite the conclusions of numerous federal and state investigations showing no evidence of mass fraud in the election (see Chapter 13).

This decline in trust affects not only the way people are likely to judge government programs and what public officials do but also the way the press covers public policy debates and actions. It leads as well to unconventional candidates attracting considerable public support in their campaigns for the presidency; examples include Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders in both 2016 and 2020.

In addition, it is increasingly evident that Democrats and Republicans, and liberals and conservatives, hold sharply different views about the legitimacy of government action as well as which policies are acceptable to them. Since the 1990s, such partisan and philosophical differences have widened, and on many policy issues, ideological polarization between the parties has made government action difficult. This polarization and the seemingly endless bickering among politicians as they try to resolve their differences and find acceptable solutions to society's problems have tended to make the public even more critical of government and the political process.¹⁴ If anything, the polarization has deepened in recent years as the two major parties frequently have found themselves unable to agree on a wide range of policy actions, leading to further public disenchantment with government and politics and record low assessments of the U.S. Congress (Jacobs and Milkis, 2022; Mann and Ornstein 2012; Persily 2015; Thurber and Yoshinaka 2015; Zingher 2022).¹⁵

An example of this polarization and the inability to find common ground was a record-breaking government shutdown that extended into January 2019 over funding for a wall along the nation's southern border with Mexico. Another was the unwillingness of the Republican-controlled Senate to hold hearings on President Obama's nomination of Judge Merrick Garland to replace Justice Antonin Scalia, who died in February 2016. With a razor-thin unified government in 2021 and 2022, many of President Biden's proposals needed significant changes to become acceptable to a majority of Senate Democrats, a few of whom were centrists rather than liberal, and sometimes to a small number of Republicans whose support also was essential. Politics also has become increasingly personal in recent years, with cross-party friendships far less likely in the face of often intense ideological and partisan disagreements.

Ideological terms such as "liberal" and "conservative" are often used by the public to make sense of politics and policy. The student of public policy needs to recognize, however, that these political labels are not always dependable guides to predicting specific policy positions—that is, it is simplistic to assume that conservatives always want smaller government and that liberals always prefer the opposite. Most conservatives argue for less government intrusion into the economy and decision-making within business and industry, but they often favor a strong government role to achieve certain social goals, such as fighting foreign enemies, reducing crime, or banning abortions and gay marriages. Liberals, on the other hand, rally against government threats to civil liberties and individual rights, but they are among the first to call for government regulation of business activity to protect consumers and workers or to advance public health goals. An example of this incongruence was a statement from the Trump administration in August 2018 that perhaps internet sites such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter need to be regulated because of allegations, largely unproven, that they suppressed conservative views and news supportive of the administration.¹⁶ This apparent embrace of regulation would seem to run counter to previous statements and policies seeking to reduce federal regulation and limit intrusion into private business decisions.

Party labels themselves are not always the best indicators of the positions elected officials take on policy issues, yet they remain a powerful predictor of how those officials are likely to vote on a wide range of issues. Although much less common today than historically the case, within the major political parties one can find ideological differences among members: some Democrats may be moderate to conservative, and some Republicans may be much more moderate or centrist than most in their party. By 2022, for example, there were striking differences within the Republican Party between traditional conservatives and supporters of former President Donald Trump (Jacobs and Milkis 2022; Skocpol and Tervo 2020). Nonetheless, today both parties, particularly in the U.S. Congress but often in state legislatures as well, tend to be much more ideologically cohesive than was the case several decades ago, and the two parties stand far apart on most of the leading public policy issues, from health care, regulation, and taxation to education, civil rights, and climate change.¹⁷

Third or minor parties such as the Green Party or the Libertarian Party are also showing more cohesion, even though they rarely do well in elections. Whether at the national or state level, it is entirely possible that voter disapproval of the two major parties might lead to the rise of alternative parties and movements. The Tea Party movement of the late 2000s, for example, reflected a strongly conservative stance, chiefly within the Republican Party, and it did very well in the 2010 elections and perhaps changed the direction of the Republican Party. More recently, supporters of Donald Trump moved the Republican Party further to the right, and many progressive Democrats have sought to move their party to the left on a number of key issues.

Because the United States has a weak party system, individual politicians not only run their own campaigns for office but also promote their own ideas. Many feel little obligation to support the official party position on policy issues, especially when electoral forces in their constituencies differ from those influencing the national party. In the same vein, the political context can vary greatly from one state to another, or even from one community in a state to another. Some states and cities tend to favor conservative policies, while others support liberal policies. Much depends on the alignment of party and ideological forces in the particular jurisdiction, in addition to the social and economic contexts.

Among the policy implications of the prevailing political context in the United States is the continual challenge of reconciling partisan and ideological differences. Policy actors who cannot agree on what action to take may decide to do nothing, allowing social problems to continue unchanged; or they might reach a temporary compromise that falls short of an ideal solution. It is not at all unusual in the U.S. political system to see enactment of such policy compromises, which may contain broad or vaguely worded components. The details, where the greatest conflicts often occur, are worked out later, typically by the rulemakers and managers in the executive branch agencies.

Governing Context

The U.S. government is extraordinarily complex, and its structure has a major impact on public policymaking. The authority to act is widely dispersed among institutions and policy actors. As a result, the time needed to resolve differences can be lengthy. In addition, the inevitable compromises lead to policies that may be less focused or coherent than many would wish.

The separation of powers mandated by the Constitution requires that any policy developed at the national level be acceptable to a majority of Congress and to the president. Policymakers in both institutions must therefore find common ground. In recent decades, the search for consensus has been difficult because of divided government, with one political party in control of the White House and the other in control of one or both houses of Congress. Strong philosophical differences among policymakers over the role of government and the need to satisfy differing political constituencies often make them unwilling to compromise. Even with unified government, as the United States had in 2009 and 2010, in the first two years of the Trump administration, and in the first two years of the Biden administration, it can be difficult to reach a compromise. Pundits often talk about the need for a filibuster-proof Senate, which would require a sixty-seat majority of the president's party. If policymakers dig in their heels and do nothing, outdated and ineffective policies may continue in force, and consideration of new and possibly more effective policies will not progress.

Under the U.S. political system, the federal government and the fifty states share governing responsibilities. Prior to the New Deal in the 1930s, these institutions had defined areas of governance. The situation is less clear today; more often than not, state and federal government responsibilities overlap. For example, state governments traditionally were responsible for education policy, but since 1960, the federal government has become more involved in education. It provides billions of dollars in education grants to state and local governments and subsidizes student loan programs in higher education, but the funds can come with many strings attached. More recent legislation, such as No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, increases federal involvement in education policy by pushing for evaluation of success in the nation's schools, including setting standards for what students should know and providing incentives to reform state educational systems. Efforts to adopt the Common Core State Standards highlight concerns about standards being set centrally and for all states to follow.

In addition to overlapping responsibilities, the states and the federal government face other problems of divided authority that arise when federal and state agencies try to determine what they need to do to put a policy into effect. Sometimes, the federal government is willing to share governing responsibility, but not money. For example, the federal government has granted authority to the states to implement many environmental programs, such as those falling under the Clean Water Act, but the states say that the funds from Washington are insufficient to cover the costs of their new duties, creating what many call unfunded mandates. It is clear that the states have a larger role today in the development and implementation of public policy. State and local governments often step in to fill the gap left by a shrinking or inattentive federal government. This devolution of authority to the states provides opportunities for innovation; however, it may also produce a "race to the bottom" as states compete with one another to save money. The evidence on the effects of such devolution is mixed to date (Donahue 1997; Rabe 2025).

Americans sometimes complain that "government can't get anything done." In light of the complexity of the U.S. governance structure, with its overlapping responsibilities and political disagreements, a more accurate statement might be that it is a minor miracle that policies get enacted and implemented at all.

Cultural Context

Political culture refers to widely held values, beliefs, and attitudes, such as trust and confidence in government and the political process, or the lack thereof. Political culture also includes commitment to individualism, property rights, freedom, pragmatism or practicality, equality, and similar values, some of which are distinctly American. Citizens acquire these values through a process of political socialization that takes place in families, schools, and society in general, and that at times seems to reflect popular culture and television (Putnam 1995, 2000). Scholars have found that such political cultures vary not only from nation to nation but from state to state within the United States—and even from one community to another, as one might expect in a diverse society. These cultural differences help to explain the wide variation in state (and local) public policies across the nation (Elazar 1984; Lieske 1993) and account for some of the differences in voting between “red” states (Republican) and “blue” states (Democrat). Differing political cultures, particularly in rural areas, were one reason given for Donald Trump’s presidential victory in 2016 and later his defeat in 2020. You can see how political culture leads to different policies and perspectives in gun control policy. Some states, such as Texas and Wyoming, have somewhat limited gun control policies compared to states such as New York. Another example includes policies regarding abortion services, where certain states have significant restrictions on abortions (e.g., Alabama, Texas, and Mississippi) while others are more open to allowing the procedure (e.g., California, New York, and Massachusetts).

Recurring battles over family planning programs, immigration, abortion rights, and international population policy reflect cultural conflicts, especially over the role of women in society, which have yet to be resolved. These kinds of value conflicts have translated into constraints on policymaking. While not a new issue, partisanship is more apparent than before at both the state and national levels. Members of Congress have observed that partisan rancor, ideological disputes, and decreased willingness to compromise on policy issues have made policymaking far more difficult than it was only a decade ago (Davidson et al. 2022). As a result, government often finds itself deadlocked, completely unable to deal effectively with issues. The inability to solve public problems further erodes the public’s trust in government and diminishes its willingness to get involved in the political process.¹⁸

THE REASONS FOR GOVERNMENT INVOLVEMENT

When the public and policymakers believe that government needs to intervene to correct a social problem, they create or alter policies. But this does not mean the matter is settled permanently. The rationales offered for government involvement in public policy were highly contested in the past, and they continue to be today. The arguments for and against government intervention in the economy and in people’s lives draw from political philosophies and ideologies, specific beliefs about policy needs, and the positions that are advocated by political parties and interest groups. These arguments often are advanced during the processes of agenda setting (to discourage or encourage action), policy formulation (where the specific form of intervention

is designed), or policy legitimation (where the rationale for intervention may be debated). The three leading, and somewhat overlapping, rationales for government intervention are political reasons, moral or ethical reasons, and economics and market failures.

Political Reasons

The public and policymakers may decide that government should intervene to solve a problem for political reasons. The reasons vary, but often they reflect a notable shift in public opinion or the rise of a social movement pressing for action. After the 1954 Supreme Court decision on public school segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* and the rise of the civil rights movement, for example, the federal government began to act on civil rights. President Lyndon Johnson persuaded Congress to adopt new policies to prevent discrimination against minorities, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In the 1960s, the federal government began the Medicare program after more than twenty years of public debate in which critics argued that such actions were not legitimate for government and that they constituted a step toward “socialized medicine.” During the 1960s and 1970s, the federal government also substantially increased its involvement in consumer protection, automobile safety, and environmental protection because of rising public concern about these issues. More recently, sensing a shift in the political environment regarding concerns about same-sex marriage, many states (e.g., Washington, New York, and Vermont, among others) enacted legislation legalizing such marriages. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 2015 that same-sex marriage was constitutionally protected, and by that time, some thirty-seven states had legalized it. To secure those and related rights in the future, in late 2022 Congress enacted and President Biden signed the Respect for Marriage Act.¹⁹

Moral or Ethical Reasons

In addition to the power of public opinion or a social movement, certain problems and circumstances may dictate that government should be involved for moral or ethical reasons. In other words, government action is seen as the right thing to do even without public pressure. Some portion of the population or members of an organized interest group may be unwilling to witness suffering from poverty, hunger, or human rights abuses, either at home or abroad, and want the government to do something about it. They may join groups to lobby policymakers or contact them directly to persuade them to act.

There are many examples of government acting primarily for moral or ethical reasons. As we discuss in Chapter 9, the United States adopted Social Security to ensure that the elderly, the disabled, and the minor children of deceased or disabled workers had sufficient income and would not suffer from the ravages of poverty. Debate over the future of the Social Security system continues this moral argument. Similar moral values lie behind the long-standing U.S. support of family planning programs and economic assistance in developing nations. Many defend these operations as essential to promoting much-needed economic development that could rescue people from desperate poverty. The Biden administration offered many different reasons for its decision to support Ukraine in its war against Russia, but here, too, parallel moral arguments were advanced, including the need to protect a democratic nation from a neighboring country

trying to expand its borders. The moral imperative of ensuring health care for all was a primary reason offered by supporters of the Affordable Care Act, or Obamacare. Natural disasters often spark such an interest for government to step in to help people affected by floods, tornadoes, or other events, as was particularly evident following the devastation of communities such as Puerto Rico from hurricanes in 2017 and 2022.

Economics and Market Failures

In a pure capitalist or market system, most economists would not consider the plight of family farmers who cannot compete with large agribusiness or the challenges that face many other small businesses a legitimate reason for government intervention. They would argue that government intrusion into the marketplace distorts the efficiency with which a competitive market economy can allocate society's resources. In such a market, voluntary and informed exchanges between buyers and sellers allow them to meet their needs efficiently, especially when large numbers of people are involved, so that the market operates fairly. In this world, competition sets the fair market value on houses, cars, and other goods.

Economists acknowledge, however, that a situation known as **market failure** warrants government intervention. A market failure occurs when the private market is not efficient. Market failures fall into four types: the existence of monopolies and oligopolies, externalities, information failure, and inability to provide for the public or **collective good**.

A monopoly or oligopoly exists when one or several persons or companies dominate the market and can control the price of a product or service. Examples abound. For many years, communities were limited to one cable television operator or electric power company. Monopolies of this kind are called “natural” or “technical” because they are essentially unavoidable. There would be little sense in having multiple cable TV operators or power companies in an average-sized city if the economy can achieve greater efficiency by having a single company invest in the necessary infrastructure. Governments usually accept this kind of monopoly but institute regulations to ensure the company treats the public fairly. Yet the balance between government regulation and economic freedom for the monopoly is the subject of ongoing debate.

Externalities are the decisions and actions of those involved in the market exchange that affect other parties, either negatively or positively. A **negative externality** occurs when two parties interact in a market and, because of that interaction, a third party is harmed and does not get compensation. Pollution is a negative externality. For example, consumers enter into an agreement with the utility to provide electricity. In the absence of government regulation, the utility may decide to use the least expensive fuel, previously coal. When companies burn coal, it sends pollutants into the atmosphere, which settle downwind and may cause health problems to a third party. The third party, not the two parties interacting in the electricity market, pays the costs of those health problems. Ideally, companies would consider the health care costs associated with electricity production as part of the cost of production, and government intervention may ensure that this happens. Through environmental regulation, the government requires utilities to install pollution control technology on their plants to limit the amount of pollutants emitted.





A **positive externality** occurs the same way as a negative externality, but the third party gains something from the two-party interaction and does not have to pay for it. Higher education is a

positive externality. Some policymakers argue that, because society benefits from a well-educated population, it should be willing to provide financial support to encourage people to continue their education. Many state governments subsidize higher education tuition for their local institutions—admittedly at a significantly lower level now than in the past. For example, New York implemented its Excelsior Scholarship program, which provides “tuition awards to eligible students attending New York State’s public colleges and universities (SUNY and CUNY).” Along with other financial aid programs, the scholarship allows qualified students to attend college tuition-free. Students qualify for Excelsior if their family’s combined federal adjusted income falls below \$125,000 (in 2022).²⁰ Students must maintain good standing in school and complete at least thirty credits a year.²¹ In essence, this benefit increases students’ incomes and enables them to afford more schooling.

Information failure is the third kind of market failure. According to the theories of market operation, to have perfect competition, willing buyers and sellers must have all the information needed to enter into a transaction or exchange. When the information is not fully or easily available, a market failure may occur. At times, the consumers’ lack of complete information about a product or service does not present a major problem: consumers can adjust their buying behavior if they believe there is something wrong with the goods or services they purchased. However, when the lack of information leads the consumer to suffer significant financial or personal loss, the government may step in. A clear example of such government intervention is its regulation of prescription and over-the-counter pharmaceuticals. Without government, consumers would find it impossible to figure out whether medical drugs are safe and effective. The federal Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906 established the modern FDA and authorized it to evaluate proposed drugs to ensure their safety and efficacy. The FDA and USDA may issue public warnings or recalls of food items that may cause sickness, such as alerts provided for certain varieties of cookies sold by Trader Joe’s in 2023 that may contain rocks.²²

A fourth kind of market failure occurs when markets cannot provide for the public good, also called the collective good. Economists define a public or collective good by two criteria: the ability to exclude someone from getting the good and the ability to jointly consume the good. Exclusion within the U.S. economy typically occurs through pricing. If an individual can charge for a good or service, then they can exclude someone from getting it. Goods that can be jointly consumed are those in which one person’s consumption does not prevent another from also consuming it. Figure 1.1 displays the two criteria as a typology (see Figure 1.1) of private goods and public goods that clarifies the range of what analysts call collective goods.

FIGURE 1.1 ■ Private Goods and Public Goods

| | NO JOINT CONSUMPTION | JOINT CONSUMPTION |
|---|---|--|
|  <p>Exclusion Is Feasible</p> | <p>1 Pure private goods Examples: computers, automobiles, houses</p> | <p>2 Toll goods Examples: cable TV services, electrical utilities</p>  |
|  <p>Exclusion Is Not Feasible</p> | <p>3 Common pool resources Examples: air, water, grazing land, oceans, fisheries, wildlife</p> | <p>4 Pure public goods Examples: national defense, public parks</p>  |

A **pure private good**, as defined in the figure, refers to a good that is private and for which there is no market failure. It represents the normal, day-to-day interactions between the private sector and consumers. The other three kinds of goods refer to nonprivate or public goods, and they signal conditions that may require government intervention to alleviate the market failure.

Toll goods can be jointly consumed, and exclusion is feasible. An obvious example is a utility such as electricity or cable services. One person's use of cable services does not preclude another person's use, but a cable company's charges may exclude low-income individuals. Earlier, we identified such goods as natural monopolies. To keep essential services affordable, government intervenes by regulating prices. For years, public utility commissions regulated prices that electric companies could charge their consumers. Experiments in electricity market deregulation have tried to create more competition and choices for consumers, but they have not always succeeded.

Common pool resources are goods that cannot be jointly consumed and for which exclusion is not feasible. For example, environmental scientists write about a "tragedy of the commons," which comes about from use of natural resources such as air, water, grazing land, fisheries, and the like. The tragedy is that each individual seeks to maximize their use of the common pool resources without regard to their degradation or depletion because no one owns them. Such individual behavior may lead to the loss of the resources for all, even when each person would benefit from their continued use. To ensure the preservation of these shared goods, government intervenes. It requires individuals to have a license to fish, which may preclude some from partaking in the good, but the funds raised through the licensing fee can be used to restock the fishery. Government may also set catch limits on different species to prevent overfishing, and it requires ranchers to pay a fee to allow their cattle to feed on public grazing land. For common pool resources, government's role is to develop policies to ensure their continuance or sustainability. Without government, the public would likely deplete these goods.

Finally, **pure public goods** can be jointly consumed, and exclusion is not feasible. They would not be provided at all without government intervention because the private sector has no incentive to provide them. National defense and public parks are examples. For these kinds of goods, government intervention is necessary to ensure the general public has them.

These three reasons for government intervention—political, moral and ethical, and economic or market failure—are not exhaustive. Other reasons may present themselves, and these three may not be mutually exclusive—that is, policymakers may favor government action for one or more reasons at the same time. The reasons also may change over time: government adopts and changes policies in a continuous cycle, which is part of society's response to public problems and efforts to find solutions. Government intervention is simply one of these options. When such intervention no longer works or no longer makes sense, government may change policies in favor of private action or free markets once again. Much of the movement toward deregulation of financial markets in the 1980s and of energy markets in the late 1990s reflected such views. The adverse consequences of deregulation surrounding the financial markets prompted a new round of public debate in the late 2000s over what kind of government intervention best serves the public interest. Congress enacted the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act in 2010 as a result of diminished faith in the ability of Wall Street financial institutions to limit the kinds of risky investments that contributed heavily to the national and global economic turmoil of 2008 and 2009.



Market failure and food safety. The United States experiences an unusually high number of food contamination scares. The photo shows romaine lettuce sitting on produce shelves following a November 2018 warning from health officials in the United States and Canada telling people to stop eating romaine lettuce because of a new *E. coli* outbreak.

Juanmonino/iStockPhoto

THE PRACTICE OF POLICY ANALYSIS

There is one last topic we would like to introduce in this chapter. This is the value of policy analysis as a way of thinking about public policy. As we noted earlier, policy analysis is usually described as a systematic and organized way to evaluate public policy alternatives or existing government programs. Often, it involves applying economic tools and other quantitative methods or measures (Bardach and Patashnik 2020). Policy analysis may therefore seem to some students of public policy to hold little relevance to anyone except policy specialists, but in reality, everyone uses such analysis in many day-to-day activities. Buying a car, selecting a college course, or deciding on a restaurant for dinner all require thinking about the pros and cons associated with the available choices, including how to spend money.

The Many Uses of Policy Analysis

Policy analysis can be used throughout the policy process, but it becomes especially important in the formulation of policies and evaluation of programs after they are implemented. In assessing a public problem, policy analysis may assist in describing its scope, such as the percentage of public schools that are failing. When developing alternatives and choosing a direction, a decision-maker can use analysis to assess the feasibility of the choices based on economic, administrative, political, and ethical criteria. The same methods can be used to evaluate a program to determine its effectiveness or whether it has achieved its expected results.

In short, policy analysis represents an attempt to dissect problems and solutions in what is usually described as a rational manner. By this, practitioners mean that they bring information and systematic analysis to bear on policy issues and try to show how a given set of goals and objectives might be achieved most efficiently or effectively. Some analysts refer to this as “evidence-based policy” (Cartwright and Hardie 2012; Hassel and Wegrich 2022; Stoker and Evans 2016). Public policy goals and objectives are usually determined in a political process—for example, how much the government is willing to pay for health care services for the elderly—but analysis can help policymakers weigh competing ideas about how best to deliver such services.

Policy analysts argue that their systematic analyses should be given serious consideration as a counterweight to the tendency of public officials to make policy choices based on their partisan positions, ideology, or support from important constituencies and interest groups. They point to inconsistencies in public policy or to what some would describe as unwarranted or inefficient policy actions. For example, why does the federal government give subsidies to farmers growing tobacco while it also tries to reduce smoking? Why does Congress continue to subsidize mining and timber harvesting on public lands, which causes environmental damage and costs taxpayers more than the revenues these activities earn? Why do members of Congress vote to spend public money on projects they favor (such as a highway or bridge in their district, or defense installations) and at the same time complain about the government’s wasteful spending? The answers lie mostly in interest group and constituency pressures that elected officials find difficult to resist, particularly when the public fails to take an interest in such decisions.

Citizens’ Use of Policy Analysis

Ordinary citizens and organizations also can benefit from policy analysis. Citizens with an interest in public policy or the political system may make decisions based on their general political views; for example, liberals usually favor government regulation to improve the environment. But most people would understand the benefit of a focused study of a particular program or proposal that put aside personal political views. Perhaps the liberal environmentalist will come to question whether regulation is the best way to achieve environmental goals. A conservative might be moved to reassess whether stringent laws that put first-time drug offenders in prison for years make sense given the extremely high cost of incarceration.

It is not unusual for individuals or interest groups to use information developed through policy analysis to reinforce the arguments they make to government policymakers. An organization will often dangle its latest research or analysis to convince policymakers that the group is correct in its beliefs. For example, the following points come from the website of the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF; www.edf.org), discussing undeniable climate change facts. In each case, these facts note research and findings from other organizations:

- Climate change is real and human-made, and there is overwhelming scientific consensus that this is true (cites NASA and the National Academy of Sciences).
- All major climate change reports are thoroughly researched and based on the most accurate, up-to-date science (cites the National Climate Assessment report).
- Addressing climate change will strengthen the economy (cites information from Citibank).

By citing these presumably objective statistics, the EDF hopes to move the direction of climate change policy toward more direct action to reduce greenhouse gases.

The EDF's opponents in the business community or the fossil fuel industry will circulate information, sometimes from the same studies, which bolsters their arguments about the uncertainty of the climate change science and the high costs imposed on society if policies and regulations are overly restrictive. It is not unusual for groups opposed to climate change policy or other environmental issues to question the scientific basis of the studies or raise the issues of costs to comply and thus call into question the need for restrictive action.

Presented with conflicting assumptions and interpretations, students of public policy need to be aware of the sources of information and judge for themselves which argument is strongest. This book provides the tools and techniques to help students make informed judgments. In particular, Chapters 4 through 6 cover the major approaches to policy analysis and some of the methods, such as cost-benefit analysis and risk assessment, which make clear what the studies say and how the findings relate to policy choice.

For policymakers, policy analysis is an essential tool for the development of public policy and its evaluation. For citizens interested in public affairs, it provides a way to organize thoughts and information to better understand the alternatives presented and the possible implications of these choices. Individuals do not have to know how to conduct complex economic analysis to recognize the importance of using a wide range of information when making decisions; they just need to be able to think about problems and solutions from different perspectives. The box *Steps to Analysis: How to Interpret Policy Studies* offers some suggestions for how to interpret the policy studies you encounter.

STEPS TO ANALYSIS

HOW TO INTERPRET POLICY STUDIES

Policy analysis is pervasive and critically important for the policymaking process at all levels of government. To determine which studies are credible and which are not and which might be used as a basis for making policy decisions, students of public policy need to hone their analytical skills. How to do this? One way is to ask questions such as the following:

- What is the purpose of the study, and who conducted it?
- Does it seek and present objective information on the nature of the problem and viable solutions?
- Does the information seem to be valid, and what standard should you use to determine that?
- Is the report's argument logical and convincing?
- Does the report omit important subject matter?
- Does the study lay out the policy implications clearly and persuasively?

We will address these kinds of questions throughout the book when summarizing studies.

How to Decide Which Policy Is Best: Using Multiple Criteria

As the examples cited in this section suggest, much of the controversy over public policy, from international affairs to protection of public health, reflects conflicts over which values are most important. Does protection of national security warrant some infringement on individual rights? If so, to what extent? Should we continue or expand public programs (such as support of health care services under Medicaid) even when they become very costly? Should we build a wall on the U.S. border with Mexico as a way to limit immigration even if significant concerns arise over its cost and likely effectiveness in preventing illegal entry into the nation? Or should cost and effectiveness play no role in such a decision? When programs in any area (such as national defense, agricultural subsidies, environmental protection, or the war on terrorism) are not as effective as they should be, should we end them, or at least change them so they are likely to be more effective?

All these questions suggest that citizens, analysts, and policymakers need to be aware of the multiple criteria that one can use to judge the merit or value of government policies and programs and of proposed policy alternatives. We suggest that four criteria in particular deserve serious consideration: effectiveness, efficiency, equity, and political feasibility.

Effectiveness refers to whether a current policy/program or one being considered is likely to work—that is, how likely is it that the policy’s goals or objectives will be achieved. In many policy areas, such as the environment, national defense, and energy, a proposal’s technical or administrative feasibility affects its effectiveness—that is, it makes a difference whether a proposal is technically possible (for example, cheap, abundant, and clean energy sources) or whether an agency can adequately implement it.

Efficiency refers to what a policy or policy proposal costs in relation to its expected benefits to society or realize the greatest possible benefit out of the dollars that government spends. Thus, considering a policy proposal’s economic feasibility means asking whether it is “affordable” or considered a good use of public funds in an era when all programs compete for such funds. Many conservatives opposed the Affordable Care Act of 2010 because of its high costs, and many liberals challenged the significant tax cuts from the Trump administration in part because of their high costs in lost federal revenue. More recently, there have been challenges even to federal support during times of natural disasters.

Equity refers to the consideration of what constitutes a fair or equitable policy choice. It may be a way to consider how a program’s costs and benefits are distributed among citizens (that is, fairly or not). Think of who benefits or gains from decisions to raise or lower taxes, whether it would be fair to have taxpayers pick up the full bill for college tuition at public colleges and universities, or who would be most affected by a decision to reinstate a military draft. The criterion of equity is also a way to think about who may participate in policymaking processes, such as who gets to vote or who gets to speak at a public hearing—that is, it is about whether the process is open and fair to all citizens. Concerns about businesses or interest groups having undue influence on policy decisions because of their campaign contributions often raise these kinds of questions about fairness and equity.

Political feasibility concerns how government officials and other policy actors appraise the acceptability of a proposal. Most often, references to political feasibility reflect a judgment

about whether elected officials (e.g., members of Congress or state legislators) are willing to support a policy proposal. In a democracy, policymakers must consider the preferences and potential reactions of the public, interest groups, and other government officials when developing policies.

These criteria are not exhaustive. Others, such as ethical acceptability or consistency with political values such as individual freedom or civil liberties, may also be relevant, depending on the issue at hand. In addition, these criteria may not have equal weight in the decision-making process. Public officials acting on national defense and foreign policy issues, for example, rarely consider economic costs as paramount in reaching decisions. Personal freedom might be the primary consideration for some when considering policies in areas such as abortion rights, gun control, crime, and the privacy of email and cellular telephone communications. Chapters 4 through 6 more fully examine these criteria and the tools used to evaluate them.

CONCLUSIONS

The basic concepts of the study of public policy and policy analysis introduced in this chapter provide the foundation for understanding how and why officials make public policy. Through these concepts, you will grasp both the actors involved in policymaking and the actions they take. Understanding the distinction between government and politics, for example, will help you to understand how these terms interact and interrelate. Government officials do not make public policy in a vacuum. There are many variables that can affect how one defines a problem and the choices examined to solve it. Knowing, for instance, the political party makeup of Congress or your state legislature will provide some information regarding what type of government activity may be deemed acceptable. Understanding changing demographics within your community can provide insight into what issues officials will bring forward for action.

There are many reasons why governments at any level decide to intercede. These reasons, such as the existence of a market failure or concerns about the ethics of a situation, allow us to better understand the rationale for government action. Ultimately, as citizens who are affected by multiple public policies every day of our lives, we should not only want to know more about the how and why of their development, but we should also be able to actively participate if we choose to do so. This chapter provided some of the basics to begin this journey.

The remainder of Part I continues an analysis of the big picture: the institutions involved and ways to approach public policy. Chapter 2 introduces the government institutions and actors involved in policymaking and how they interact. Chapter 3 explains the prevailing models and theories used to study public policy, focusing on the policy process.

Part II is a departure from other policy texts in its thorough coverage of policy analysis. In addition to an overview of policy analysis, Chapter 4 presents the different ways practitioners carry it out. Chapter 5 stresses problem analysis, or understanding the nature of public problems, their causes, and solutions. It also considers the various policy tools available to governments and how to think creatively about policy alternatives. Chapter 6 describes the leading

methods of policy analysis and summarizes the most frequently used criteria to judge the acceptability of policy proposals.

The six chapters of Part III combine the material from the first two sections to delve into substantive policy topics. Each chapter follows the same format to illustrate how to think critically and constructively about public policy. These chapters highlight the nature of the problem, provide background on policy development, discuss different perspectives on policy change, and indicate how students might think about and assess the issues. The conclusion, Chapter 13, emphasizes the role of citizen participation in policy choices.

The end of each chapter includes discussion questions to assist students in examining the implications of the material, short lists of suggested readings and useful websites, and keywords. Because of the transitory nature of the internet, readers should expect that some web addresses will need to be updated. At the end of the book is a reference list for all the works cited in the individual chapters.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever joined an interest group? If so, why did you do so? What benefits did you expect to reap from joining? Do you agree with the “logic of collective action”? What do you think people get from participating in interest groups like the American Civil Liberties Union or the National Rifle Association?
2. Consider the actions taken by certain Republican governors on the southern borders to bus or fly immigrants from their state to northern cities and areas often controlled by Democrats. Is this an acceptable or an unacceptable way to address immigration in the United States? How should moral arguments be weighed in such decisions? How might one define what is moral and what is not?
3. Of the various evaluative criteria discussed in the chapter, effectiveness and efficiency are most often discussed. Why is equity not considered as often? For what types of policy issues should equity be a primary concern? Using these examples, how would you evaluate equity concerns?
4. Consider state government funding for public higher education. Should it be increased or decreased? Why? Discuss the economic, political, and moral reasons behind a state government’s decision to do this.

KEYWORDS

collective good
common pool resources
effectiveness
efficiency

equity
federalism
information failure
logic of collective action

market failure
 negative externality
 policy outcomes
 policy outputs
 political culture
 political feasibility
 politics

positive externality
 public good
 public policy
 pure private good
 pure public goods
 toll goods

SUGGESTED READINGS

James E. Anderson, with Jeffrey Moyer and George Chichirau, *Public Policymaking: An Introduction*, 9th ed. (Boston: Cengage, 2023). A leading text on the policy process that describes multiple perspectives on politics and policymaking.

Thomas A. Birkland, *An Introduction to the Policy Process: Theories, Concepts, and Models of Public Policy Making*, 5th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2019). Another concise and readable text on the policy process, with concrete cases and illustrations.

William Ker Muir Jr., *Freedom in America* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2012). A unique, perceptive, and well-written analysis of the concept of power and how it affects the ways American political institutions work.

Deborah Stone, *Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making*, 3rd ed. (New York: Norton, 2012). An original and provocative assessment of the role of policy analysis in the political process.

SUGGESTED WEBSITES

www.appam.org. Home page for the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management, with useful links to the study of public policy and management, graduate education in the field, and public service careers.

www.apsanet.org. Home page for the American Political Science Association, with information on academic study of public policy and related fields in the discipline.

www.ipsonet.org. Policy Studies Organization home page.

www.policylibrary.com. Policy Library home page, with links to worldwide policy studies.

www.publicagenda.org. A guide to diverse policy issues and public opinion surveys.

www.usa.gov. The federal government's portal to government sites.