

Chapter 1

The Foundation

Learning Objectives

- 1.1 Explain how personal stories shape our understanding of public policymaking, who is included and who is left out
- 1.2 Identify the variety of institutional and noninstitutional actors who drive how and why policies are adopted
- 1.3 Review how the public policymaking process is devised by a series of stages more complex than “how a bill becomes a law”
- 1.4 Analyze how public policy is a profession driven by expertise
- 1.5 Discuss the difference between policy analysis and policy process
- 1.6 Explain how public policy impacts your daily life

Public Policy and Our Everyday Lives

A personal experience can be the starting point to understand public policy. Think about how you encounter “government.” For example, in 2025, you used an AI chat bot to contact the student loan expert at the Department of Education (DOEd) to ask questions about your student loan status, but you kept receiving an error message because more than half of the staff were laid off. While you were refreshing your phone, you drank water from the faucet in your dorm room and did not think twice about its safety since drinking water in the United States is monitored by experts that majored in environmental science (and related areas) at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). As you continued to wait, you saw the snowplow drive past your window, plowing the snowy and icy roads in front of your apartment driven by your local government’s snow removal team of drivers. These examples demonstrate our experiences with government and often those experiences with government are not with elected politicians but rather with experts who are employed by governmental agencies at the federal, state, and

local level. Additionally, we share our own stories to demonstrate how we have connected with government and public policy across our own lives.

Professor Rinfret: Rural Perspective

I grew up in a rural, small town in northeast Ohio—population 3,000. When I was ten, my father ran for county prosecutor. As a result, I spent my evenings and weekends knocking on doors and stating, “Please vote for my dad.” In addition to nightly door knocking, I attended local meetings and pancake breakfasts with my dad. I still remember one rainy evening; we drove up to a local township building within the heart of our Amish community. Yes, I grew up in one of the largest Amish counties in the United States. I got out of our family minivan, but my dad stopped me and said, “Hey, you need to sit in the car tonight and work on your homework.” I did not complain, but on the car ride home I remember asking, “Why wasn’t I allowed to go inside tonight?” My dad’s response was, “Because you are a girl. Women do not attend Amish community meetings.” This response invoked constant “why” questions to my parents, teachers, and friends. It also prompted a career in public service as an educator where I could assist rural kids, like me, to ask “why” questions.

Professor Scheberle: A Roundabout Route to Public Service

As an undergraduate majoring in journalism, with a marketing emphasis, my first two jobs were eye-opening experiences. My first “real” job was to write the monthly newsletter and press releases for the Wyoming Wool Growers Association, an organization that represented the interests of sheep ranchers or farmers. The organization took strong positions on public policy matters. For example, the organization opposed the listing of the gray wolf as an endangered species, as sheep herders argued that wolves were attacking the sheep. My second job was as an officer of the bank. Officers were strongly encouraged to contribute to the American Bankers Association Political Action Committee (PAC), an organization pressing hard for deregulation of banks. These experiences increased my awareness that organizations try to sway policymakers’ actions on public policies designed to protect their perceived interests, but it also left me feeling that my life’s work should involve trying to help people more broadly. I began teaching government classes part time at a state community college. My conversations with students about what government should be and what public policies mattered to them propelled me to take the next step and earn a PhD, where I developed an interest in environmental and natural resource policies. My journey has taught me the importance of education in advancing the public good.

Professor Pautz: Marine Mammals

In middle school, I became fascinated by politics and government and how things got done to make society better. I was an eager consumer of the nightly news because I wanted to understand how things worked and how government did what it did. When I entered college, I did not think politics would be a viable career path for me, so I declared economics as my major thinking that was closely related to studying government. In the fall of my sophomore year, I took

environmental economics and environmental policy, and I began to see lots of ways that I could learn how things worked in an effort to make society a better place without having to go into politics. I signed up for these courses because growing up in the coastal city of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, I became fascinated by marine life, and especially whales and sea turtles. When the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill happened and severely devastated the ecosystem and killed marine life, I did not understand why these tragedies could not be prevented. I was able to connect the tragedy years later with my course work, and that deepened my interest in environmental issues and government more broadly. Needless to say, I was mortified by the images from the *Exxon Valdez* disaster. It upset me to see how the oil spill damaged the ecosystem and habitat for wildlife such as whales. Because of my own appreciation for marine mammals (which persists to this day, just see the picture I took while in Antarctica of a humpback whale) (see Photo 1.1) and the heartbreak caused by *Exxon Valdez*, my college classes enabled me to understand the role of public policy and politics in these issues and to understand how to do something about them.

As you begin to read this book, consider how your own story presents policy questions: How do I pay for college? How do I register to vote? How do I pay my taxes? Put simply, how do you answer these questions through a **fact-based lens**? Is this even possible? Importantly, our experiences shape our perspectives, but it is important in studying and practicing public policy that it is informed by fact-based analysis.

The purpose of the third edition of *Public Policy: A Concise Introduction* is simple—to

provide students with the necessary skills and tools to understand how and why public policy is created. Our goal is to provide connections between our own everyday experiences with the “doing” side of policy: **implementation**. In our third edition, this approach is examined through how we can collectively recognize our own biases and decipher fact from fiction, recognizing how our own experiences effect the lives of our neighbors. Our collective goal is for the reader to merge theory and practice, providing clarity about how policy gets made and implemented. After all, public problems abound, and no one solution will solve public problems, but we can work toward making life better.



Photo 1.1 ■ Humpback Whale off the Coast of Antarctica

Michelle Pautz

This chapter establishes the foundation as we define public policy, the process, key actors, theories involved, and how it all applies to you.

Starting With a Definition

The word **public** encompasses ordinary people, or community. **Policy** is a course of action adopted or created by the government¹ in response to public problems. When the terms are put together, public policy is a “confusing game of players, dynamics, processes, and stages” (Theodoulou and Kofinis 2004). Public policy is “a relatively stable, purposive course of action followed by government in dealing with some problem or matter of concern” (Anderson 2003, 3). Reading these definitions of public policy serves as a reminder that “Every day the intended and unintended consequences of public policy intimately touch the lives of everyone within the United States” (Theodoulou and Kofinis 2004, 2). Public policy is government action to solve a public problem.

Power and Politics

Related to government action to solve a problem are power and politics. **Power** represents the ability to alter or influence a course of action (Theodoulou and Kofinis 2004, 3). Power is a person or group’s ability to persuade or alter perceptions. For instance, in spring 1970, Senator Gaylord Nelson created Earth Day with more than twenty million Americans demonstrating in cities across the United States to protect the environment (see Photo 1.2). As a result, the U.S. EPA (a new federal agency at the time) was created to tackle environmental issues. In another example, Goldman Prize Winner, Judy Bonds, spent a lifetime combatting mountain top mining removal, working tirelessly for her community and reminded us, “You are the one you have been waiting for” (Goldman Environmental Prize 2011). The media portrayed both Gaylord Nelson and Judy Bonds as symbols of positive change, impacting our perceptions about societal issues like the environment or racial justice, using the American people to usher policy pathways forward for change. It is also worth noting that not all individuals in a position of power seek to influence fact-based public policy but instead seek to solely advance their own self interests.

Politics, as Lasswell (1958) describes, is “who gets what, when, and how.” However, politics is a broad concept—it defines the communication between branches of government and levels of government. Moreover, “Politics, at its essence, captures the competitive communication, exchange, discussions, and debate that emerge between competing ideas and groups within a state” (Theodoulou and Kofinis 2004, 8). Politics is part of policymaking and allows us to have a discussion and debate the merits of possible solutions to public problems.

As we define public policy and discuss the roles power and politics play within this definition, who in society controls policymaking? Pluralism and elitism help us to understand this question. **Pluralism** is the notion that we all have equal access to influence policymaking (Dahl 1961; Truman 1951). However, **elitism** suggests only a select few, the elite, have the power to influence policymaking in a Democratic society (Mills 1956). Although these two conceptualizations offer

Photo 1.2 ■ Earth Day



Santi Visalli/Getty Images

different theories, “In general, each perspective helps to identify that the concept of power should not be measured solely as an explicit consequence, but as a complex interrelationship between the ability of certain actors to influence what actions are taken” (Theodoulou and Kofinis 2004, 4).

The prominent legal scholar, Kimberly Crenshaw, pushes us to question if the concepts of politics and power recognize who does not have a seat at the table and why. Specifically, Crenshaw argues we should closely examine who benefits and why in public policy. She states,

Self-interrogation is a good place to start. If you see inequality as a “them” problem or “unfortunate other” problem, that is a problem. Being able to attend to not just unfair exclusion but also, frankly, unearned inclusion is part of the equality gambit. We’ve got to be open to looking at all of the ways our systems reproduce these inequalities, and that includes the privileges as well as the harms. (Steinmetz 2020)

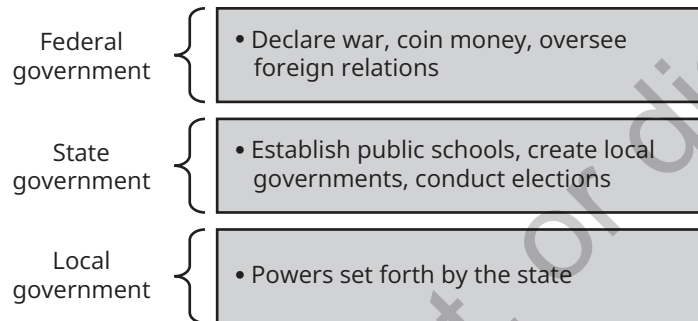
Public policy is not created by one person; nor does it happen overnight. There are myriad actors involved. Each year, hundreds of laws and ordinances are created at the national, state, and local level. More specifically, U.S. public policy is guided by a system of **federalism** in which power is divided between national government and the states.

A Federal System

Figure 1.1 illustrates a brief overview of our federal system, and Chapter 3 delves into the details more fully. For foundational purposes, each level of government has separate and overlapping functions to execute public policy, but as indicated in later chapters, our concept and practice of federalism is being challenged. Most commonly, the federal government is responsible for

overseeing relationships with other countries, deciding whether to go to war, and creating money. Under the Tenth Amendment, anything not specified in the U.S. Constitution is within the scope of state governments, such as public schools. Within this federal system, there is a lot of overlap, or shared responsibility, in carrying out policy. For instance, environmental policy standards are created by the federal government and carried out by state and local governments. Nonetheless, policy spans across governments and topics ranging from pollution control, business regulation, energy, welfare, and transportation, to name a few.

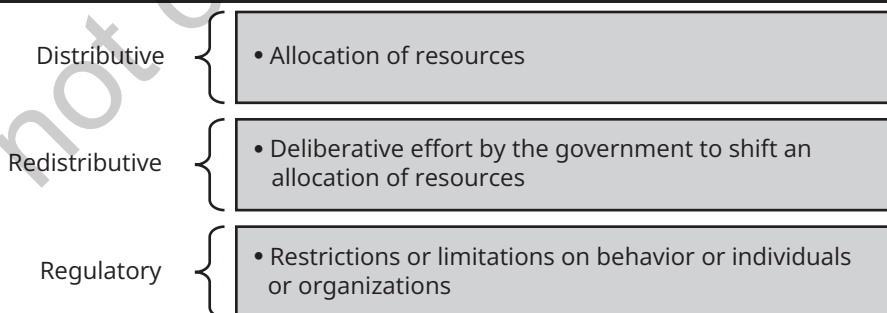
Figure 1.1 ■ Levels of Government



Categories of Public Policy

Scholars have attempted to categorize public policy into three broad categories. As Anderson (2003) suggests, “These typologies will prove much more useful in distinguishing among and generalizing about policies that have some of the more traditional and widely used categorization schemes, such as by issue area” (10). Figure 1.2 defines the three categories of public policy.

Figure 1.2 ■ Policy Typologies



Distributive public policy involves the allocation of resources to individuals, groups, corporations, or communities. This type of policy benefits a segment of the population. An example of a distributive public policy is a farm subsidy. In this example, the federal government provides financial support each year to farmers to manage their crops (e.g., cotton, corn, rice, soybeans) because of inconsistencies due to weather or disease.

The purpose of a redistributive public policy is to promote equality or occurs when the government allocates support from one group to another through social programs. However, consider the difference between *equity* and *equality*. **Equity** is the quality of being fair and impartial. **Equality** is the state of being equal, in status, rights, and opportunities. The financial aid you receive to attend college is an example of a redistributive public policy. It is based on your parents' annual earnings.

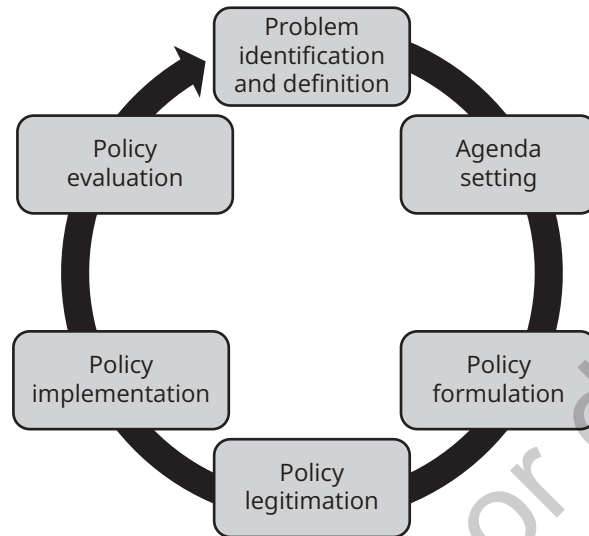
Regulatory policy imposes restrictions on the behaviors of individuals or organizations. This type of policy is exemplary of U.S. environmental policy because regulatory policy limits the behaviors of businesses or organizations. For instance, a coal-burning power plant is only allowed to produce a set limit of pollution into the air because of the Clean Air Act. If a company exceeds its limits, a fine ensues. Although there are different categories of public policy, how does a policy come to fruition? Who are the actors involved? Is public policy made through the “how a bill becomes a law” steps you learned in your high school government class?

We offer these brief policy typology definitions here and encourage you to consider how each, in turn, may create a system of winners and losers. For example, what demographic benefits from each typology? How does this link back to the role of power and access to public policymaking?

The Process

The public policymaking process, coined as the **stages heuristic approach**, helps address the aforementioned questions. U.S. public policymaking occurs across a variety of stages and includes several actors. Figure 1.3 provides a brief explanation and foundation of this process, with Chapter 2 delving deeper into specifics.

Stage One: Problem Identification and Definition. The first phase of the policymaking process is to determine whether there is a problem. This is not an easy endeavor. A problem or an issue can be defined by the public or lawmakers. For example, postgraduation, many students have student loan debt, taking years to pay off. Although a problem has been identified by current college students and graduates, the question then becomes how to define the problem. Some elected officials (e.g. President Joe Biden) claim college is unaffordable and student loan debt disproportionately impacts marginalized communities, arguing for free tuition or cancelling student debt. However, other elected officials (e.g. President Donald Trump) define the problem differently—taxpayers should not be responsible for paying student debt. As such, problem identification and definition are inherently political. This stage can be driven by **value-laden** (biased) perspectives shaped by our own experiences. In this case, a proponent of cancelling student debt uses statistical evidence or their own personal experiences in which students from

Figure 1.3 ■ Policymaking Process

underrepresented communities have fewer resources to attend college or high levels of student loan debt. Opponents define the problem as a privilege to attend college, not a right.

Stage Two: Agenda Setting. After determining a problem exists, the second phase is how to place the problem on lawmakers' agenda. This can also be a difficult endeavor. Focusing events and policy entrepreneurs are two explanatory factors to determine what gets placed on their agenda. First, a focusing event is a sudden event that can reshape the nation's attention. An example of a focusing event is the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. This invasion in February 2022 quickly catapulted to the top of lawmakers' agendas and resulted in the U.S. government, under the Biden administration, sending military supplies and funding to Ukraine. However, as the conflict continued and a new administration took office, this conflict fell from atop the agenda of lawmakers. Another example is the COVID-19 pandemic, when more than a million Americans lost their lives to the deadly disease, and in response, the U.S. Congress passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act or the CARES Act.

Second, a policy entrepreneur could be a congressperson, governor, member of an interest group, or policy champion. This person fixates on a problem and calls for action. An example of a policy entrepreneur is Shannon Watts, who in 2012 was moved by the Sandy Hook school shooting that took the lives of 20 children and six adults (discussed in Chapter 6). A day after the tragedy, she started a Facebook page to address gun violence and work toward better public policies. Her efforts turned into a grassroots movement and eventually became the national "Moms Demand Action."

Stage Three: Policy Formulation. Once a problem has been recognized or reached the agenda of lawmakers, policy formulation or design occurs. As Schneider and Ingram (1997) suggest, "Policy design is inherently a purposeful and normative enterprise through which elements of

policy are warranted to serve particular values, purposes, and interests”(3). It is at this juncture that lawmakers consider the pros and cons of a particular policy and potential solutions. For example, for health care policy, lawmakers would consider the benefits and drawbacks for the public, hospitals, doctors, and insurance companies. The views of different groups allow policymakers to determine a viable pathway to move forward.

Stage Four: Policy Legitimation. This stage is the one with which we are most familiar, or “how a bill becomes a law.”For the sake of brevity, Congress (U.S. House of Representatives or U.S. Senate) assigns a piece of legislation to a committee. The committee determines if the bill should move to the floor for deliberation, debate, and a vote. If the vote passes both chambers of Congress, the president can sign or veto the legislation. If the president signs the bill, it becomes law. As Chapter 8 presents with an examination of immigration policy to date, legislative lawmaking is a complex and arduous process. However, on average, Congress introduces 4,000to 9,000 bills per year, and less than 5 percent become law.

Stage Five: Policy Implementation. The fifth stage of the process is important yet often overlooked. This stage addresses what happens after a law goes into effect. Do members of Congress carry out every piece of legislation? There is no way for members of Congress to implement all of the policies it creates due to lack of time, expertise, and resources. This stage is where the “doing side”of policy occurs via implementation by administrative agencies. For example, the doers or implementers of public policy in Professor Pautz’s vignette are agency officials who work for the U.S. EPA or the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). These agencies were created by Congress to carry out laws that not only protect the public’s health but also species. This is often where a lot of stress for many federal employees occurred in 2025 due to Elon Musk’s Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), and why we focus Chapter 4 entirely on this stage in the process.

Stage Six: Policy Evaluation. Policymaking would not be complete without the final stage: evaluation. Within this phase, policy evaluators measure and assess the effectiveness of programs and policies. For example, **policy evaluators** will determine if the Affordable Care Act has increased health benefits for the public. A policy evaluator researches the intended outcomes of programs and policies and provides recommendations to members of Congress. Such recommendations could include that Congress provides more funding for a program or that a program should be eliminated. The goal is for a policy evaluator to use data-driven evaluations (scientific facts) in their assessment, not their personal opinion (fiction) to document the viable options moving forward.

This description of the policy process model provides a brief introduction to how policy is made in the United States. Inevitably, there are flaws to this model. A policy might not occur in a linear fashion as described, might not make it all the way through each of the stages, or might fail to consider the role of equity (e.g., effects on underrepresented groups). Despite these shortcomings, Chapter 2 addresses these concerns and offers additional policy models for exploration. Regardless, these steps are the foundation to understand the creation of public policy, from start to finish. The third edition of this book continues to question how public policy implementation determines whether the goals of the public policy created are realized. This is where the rubber meets the road, or as we define it, the **doing side of policy**.

A Motley Crew: Institutional and Noninstitutional Actors

The policymaking process would not occur without the work and involvement of policy actors—institutional and noninstitutional. Table 1.1 highlights how the institutional actors (the three branches of government, the bureaucracy) and the noninstitutional actors (the media, interest groups, and us) are all drivers in U.S. public policymaking processes.

Table 1.1 ■ Actors and Involvement in Process

Actor	Role within Policymaking Process
Congress	Agenda setting, policy formulation, policy legitimization
President	Agenda setting, policy formulation, policy legitimization
Courts	Policy evaluation
Bureaucracy	Policy implementation, policy evaluation
Interest groups	Agenda setting, policy formulation, implementation
Media	Agenda setting
Us	All stages of the process

The Three Branches of Government

Congress, the president, and the Supreme Court are all involved in U.S. public policymaking. Article I, Section I, of the U.S. Constitution clearly notes that Congress has the lawmaking authority to create or develop legislation. A total of 535 elected individuals comprises Congress: 435 in the U.S. House of Representatives and 100 in the U.S. Senate. In 2020, 126 out of the 535 members of the U.S. Congress were women, with 48 women of color. Members of Congress determine what reaches the policymaking agenda and how these policies are formulated and adopted.

Specifically, within the stages of how a bill becomes a law, a policy can move forward or cease to exist within a committee. The committee determines which bills are heard and make it to the floor for deliberation for a vote. For example, in 2021, the House of Representatives proposed the Equality Act to prohibit discrimination based on sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity in public accommodations and facilities, to name a few. The fate of this legislation has been halted due to change in presidential administrations.

Remember, even if a bill reaches the policymaking agenda and makes it out of committee, it needs to be passed in both the House and Senate. Nonetheless, Congress is a powerful power broker in setting the tone for U.S. policymaking (Mayhew 2004).

This is not to say that the president does not play a role in policymaking. The president can and does shape public policy. Presidents are elected every four years and can serve two consecutive

four-year terms. Popular presidents can use the **bully pulpit**—speeches, social media, podcasts, TikTok, or YouTube—to engender public support for a position. The term “bully pulpit” was coined by the larger-than-life president Teddy Roosevelt, who believed that he could reach people best by using the media, which were newspapers in 1901, and delivering his message with flair and passion. He traveled the country hoping to call attention to what he called his “Square Deal” of fairness for all Americans and regulating economic monopolies.

The U.S. Supreme Court is typically not an active participant in public policymaking like Congress or the president. The courts are reactive. Simply put, the courts do not initiate public policy, yet their decisions can have profound public policy implications. Consider, for example, the Court’s decision in *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* (1954) that declared segregated schools unconstitutional. More recently, the Court declared in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* (2022) that no right to an abortion could be found in the constitution, opting to return the issue of abortion to the states. Both examples prompted massive changes in policy. We have a dual court system in the United States, guided by three types of law: public, criminal, and civil.

Public law deals with constitutional and administrative questions related to government actions, **criminal law** regulates the conduct of individuals, and **civil law** deals with disputes between individuals or organizations. Also, there are differences between federal and state courts. For instance, the entry point for all federal criminal cases (such as robbing a bank) or civil cases (disputes between states or individuals, such as divorce) is the U.S. district court. If convicted at the U.S. district court level, the accused have the right to appeal the case. If the appeal is heard, this would take place at the U.S. court of appeals (thirteen total, eleven geographically located, and two specialty circuits for bankruptcy and patents). If again convicted, cases can be appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court. However, on average, the US Supreme Court hears about seventy to eighty cases per year; this is about 1 percent to 5 percent of all cases appealed to the Court.

The U.S. Supreme Court typically includes nine justices² who are appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate. The justices can serve for life, providing they maintain “good behavior.” The Court impacts policy by how the justices choose to interpret the law. If a business decides to sue the government because the business believes a law placed unwarranted economic burdens on it, then the Court would need to interpret the intent of the law.

For example, the Affordable Care Act was challenged by the arts-and-crafts chain Hobby Lobby in 2013. Hobby Lobby executives did not think they should have to cover restrictive contraception options for female employees, such as Plan B, also known as the morning-after pill. Company founders believed that life begins after conception, and therefore Hobby Lobby did not want to provide coverage for female employees. Hobby Lobby noted that its religious preferences were protected under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act as the rationale for the suit. In *Burrell v. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc.*, the Court found in favor of Hobby Lobby and concluded that for-profit companies do not have to provide employees restrictive contraception coverage due to religious reasons. However, the company would still have to provide less restrictive coverage, such as birth control pills, for its employees. This case demonstrates how the Supreme Court impacts public policy, or how the Affordable Care Act is interpreted, which affects the lives of individuals

who work for organizations like Hobby Lobby. This issue is explored more in Chapter 9 (Oyez 2016).

The Implementers

We often forget about the heavy lifters in the process: bureaucrats or the bureaucracy. There are a variety of ways scholars have defined “bureaucracy.”³ According to William Niskanen (1971), “the original use of the term, I understand, referred to cloth covering the desk (bureau) of eighteenth-century French officials” (23). The bureaucracy, as defined by James Q. Wilson (1991), is “a complex and varied phenomenon, not a simple category or political epithet” (10). Armies, schools, and prisons, as Wilson (1991) notes, are all bureaucracies. The seminal approach to define the bureaucracy originates from the work of Max Weber (1947). For Weber, the bureaucracy is synonymous with defining all large organizations.

However, in 2025 the bureaucracy is mentioned in pejorative terms—lazy, inefficient, incompetent employees, or paper pushers. However, consider how these nonelected civil servants ensure we have school lunches, clean air to breathe, and safe water to drink; our trash is collected; and our social security benefits are dispersed. Anthony Downs’s *Inside Bureaucracy* (1964) also reminds us:

It is ironic that the bureaucracy is still primarily a term of scorn, even though bureaucrats are among the most important institutions in every nation in the world. Not only do bureaus provide employment for a very significant fraction of the world’s population, but also they make critical decisions which shape the economic, political, social, and even moral lives of nearly everyone on earth (130).

The bureaucracy and a bureaucrat’s role in society are much more than the common stereotypes. These individuals are your next-door neighbors and ensure you have clean drinking water or aid when paying your student loans. Yet, are these individuals allowed to do this? Are bureaucrats doing Congress’s job? What about Elon Musk, a private citizen?

The bureaucracy was created by Congress to translate vague congressional statutes and to implement public policies. It is the people within the bureaucracy, the bureaucrats or civil servants—police officers, teachers, or environmental inspectors—who carry out legislation on a daily basis (Niskanen 1971). The bureaucrats are the individuals who work within the bureaucracy to implement public policy. Put succinctly, policy implementation “[r]epresents the state where government executes an adopted policy as specified legislation or policy action” (Theodoulou and Kofinis 2004, 166–167). The bureaucracy was created to implement public policy in the United States because members of Congress do not have the time or expertise to carry out the laws they pass.

Thus, agencies, including the Human Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), EP, and USFWS, to name a few, fulfill an essential role in ensuring that landmark legislation such as the Clean Air Act, the Endangered Species Act, or the Affordable Care Act are carried out and implemented. The HRSA determines what contraceptive plans should be covered for women under the Affordable Care Act. The EPA protects the public’s health by making sure the air we

breathe and the water in which we swim is clean. And the USFWS ensures that species like whales are protected from oil spills. This introduction on the bureaucracy sets the tone for bureaucratic decision-making discussions in Chapters 2 and 4.

Although the aforementioned examples for Congress, president, Supreme Court, and bureaucracy are not exhaustive, the point is to begin to understand how each affects public policy. The remaining chapters of our text fill in the details.

The Media, Interest Groups, and Us

Noninstitutional actors—the media, interest groups, and us—play a pivotal role in public policymaking. There are three ways to classify media in the United States—**broadcast**, **print**, and the **Internet**. Broadcast media include radio and television, print encompasses newspapers and magazines, and the Internet is an online resource that incorporates cyber versions of the more traditional media sources (Ginsberg et al. 2013). In 2025, from whom we receive information is primarily dominated by the Internet (e.g. social media influencers on TikTok) or a podcast. Think for a moment, when is the last time you read a physical newspaper or listened to the radio? Where do you obtain your information from, and how do you know if it is factual?

Another noninstitutional actor is interest groups. There are several types of interest groups in the United States, ranging from businesses and professional associations to public interest and ideological interest groups. A **business interest group** wants to protect economic interests and includes groups such as chambers of commerce, which represent small and large businesses in the United States. **Professional interest groups** include organizations such as the American Bar Association (lawyers) or the American Medical Association (medical professionals). Public interest groups include organizations that advocate for causes, such as consumer or environmental protection. One such example is the Wool Growers Association from Professor Scheberle's vignette.

The Wool Growers Association wants to advocate for policies that protect livestock or the economic interests of ranchers. This group would be in contrast with another public interest group—the Sierra Club, a large environmental organization that advocates for environmental and species protection. In this case, the Sierra Club would promote the protection of species like wolves to counter the arguments of the Wool Growers Association.

The final type of interest group, ideological groups, provides individuals with an organization to promote their broader political perspectives or government ideologies. For instance, individuals from a religious perspective might be attracted to the Christian Coalition. The purpose of the Christian Coalition is to allow individuals of faith a pathway to be involved in policymaking.

Shaping Policy

The media and interest groups can and do shape public policy. For example, the media coverage about a topic can impact Americans' perceptions about public problems. Journalists interpret or frame the story to the public. Framing is a powerful mechanism because it shapes a person's preferences regarding policy priorities. Moreover, framing can and does set the policymaking

agenda (Guber and Bosso 2013) because when a journalist uses images (e.g., photos or video), priming occurs. For instance, think about how the following image (Photo 1.3) from the April 2025 Hands Off! protests effect affect our perceptions. Images like this stick in the minds of the American public, and interest groups use them to support their causes and to pressure lawmakers to pass policy.



Photo 1.3 ■ Hands Off!

JOSEPH PREZIOSO/AFP via Getty Images

to interest groups because they represent us, who elect them to office. Also, professional interest groups such as the American Medical Association can offer research on topics—for instance, the effectiveness of programs like Medicaid use per hospital in the United States.

In addition to lobbying, interest groups provide financial support for campaigns. Table 1.2 demonstrates the amount of money provided to members of Congress for 2023-2024. The idea is that if you donate money to a congressional candidate this helps to pass policies on your group's behalf. The top financial contributors to Congress for 2023-2024 were professional interests within the areas of finance, insurance, and real estate. Regardless, millions of dollars are spent to pressure lawmakers to act, and the question becomes whether we can play a role in this process.

TABLE 1.2 ■ Follow the Money

Rank	Interests Represented	Amount Provided to Members of Congress
1	Financial, insurance, real estate	\$2,471,134,833
2	Ideology or single issue	\$2,466,417,148
3	Lawyers	\$348,852,840

More specifically, each type of interest group attempts to advocate for positions to set the agenda for members of Congress. Interest group advocacy occurs through the act of **lobbying**. A lobbyist is a person who is hired by an organization to meet with congressional representatives to persuade them to pass policies to benefit their interests. Interest group advocacy is achievable because we are members of interest groups.

Members of Congress listen

Rank	Interests Represented	Amount Provided to Members of Congress
4	Health	\$384,006,547
5	Communications or electronics	\$470,841,490

Source: Center for Responsive Politics. <https://www.opensecrets.org/industries/>.

What About Us?

Although the media and interest groups can affect our own perceptions about public policy or a policymaker, how can the normal, everyday citizen make an impact on U.S. public policymaking? You can run for office, and if elected, shape the design or formulation of policy. But at the federal level, this only includes 535 individuals within Congress. There are over 300 million individuals living in the United States.

More realistically, you can make more of an impact as a member of an interest group, as a social media influencer, or as an implementer. If you are interested in pay equity, we might suggest you join the League of Women Voters to understand why men and women are paid different wages for the same type of position. You could major in journalism and interpret and present policy facts for us to digest on social media. Or you could major in public administration, wildlife biology, sociology, or forestry and work for a state or federal agency and implement public policy. Through these examples, we can and do shape the public policymaking process more broadly.

But you cannot forget that beyond understanding the process and the actors involved, you consume public policy every day. As you check Snapchat, X, TikTok, LinkedIn, BlueSky, or Instagram, in what ways did you consume public policy today? Did you just skim the headlines that span across your Instagram stories? As you consume public policy, it impacts your judgments about what should or should not be done. However, are judgments and daily consumption driven by facts or fiction?

Policy Analysis

One of the best ways we can become involved in public policymaking is to understand the profession of policy analysis. We consume information, but how do we know if a policy is efficient and effective? Policy evaluators regularly assess the effectiveness of all major laws to ensure they are achieving their goals. An entire field—policy analysis—has been dedicated to the evaluation of policy (Dunn 2008; Quade 1989). We suggest policy evaluation is “deconstructing an object of study—that is, breaking it down into basic elements to understand it better” (Kraft and Furlong 2015, 8).

Policy Evaluation

Policy evaluation, stage six of the policymaking process, is conducted by policy analysts or program evaluators. These individuals have varying skills, expertise, and educational backgrounds depending upon the policy they study (Bardach 2004). Policy analysts may have backgrounds in biology, ecology, political science, engineering, or economics, to name a few. More specifically, a policy analyst is not supposed to inject their values or beliefs into the analysis. Therefore, the evaluator can provide an evidence-based policy analysis that includes all of the relevant factors so policymakers can make changes or modifications based upon that objective information (Dunn 2008).

However, the act of policy evaluation is not this simple (Dunn 2008; Weimer and Vining 2011). Policy analysts do not have unlimited resources to acquire data regarding every single policy problem (Weimer and Vining 2011). Also, how an evaluator structures analyses may elevate some priorities over others, based upon necessity (Dunn 2008). The supporter of the evaluation (the person funding the project) may also sway the overall outcome of the analysis based upon their own values (Bardach 2004; Weimer and Vining 2011). For instance, if a member of Congress does not agree with charter schools, they can pay a private firm in his home district to conduct an evaluation to provide evidence that aligns with his stance.

Since we are all consumers of policy, what sources have been evaluated through **facts**? The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) and the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) assessments of policy are sources of unbiased and accurate analyses, but these are not the only entities that provide policy evaluation (Kraft and Furlong 2015). There are a whole host of other federal agencies, think tanks, trade associations, environmental interests, and other entities that provide policy evaluations, but their assumptions and evaluative criteria (the way a group evaluates a program) can vary greatly, which Chapter 2 delves into more deeply.

Why Studying Public Policy Matters

Public policy is complex, with a variety of actors involved and models to understand how and why policies are made. Without our participation in the policy process, we may get policies we do not agree with because someone from a different viewpoint may press policymakers much more strongly. For example, Chapter 6 explores the power of the National Rifle Association (NRA) to maintain limited gun control in the United States, even though many Americans favor additional controls. As such, understanding the study and practice of public policy is important for you because (1) it helps our communities address problems, (2) it follows a systematic process to provide solutions, (3) it is designed and implemented by countless practitioners, and (4) it is ripe for civic engagement.

Public Policy and Community. Understanding public policy is important because “Public policy is about communities trying to achieve something as communities” (Stone 2012, 20). More specifically, community can be a political or cultural community.

As Stone (2012) succinctly remarks,

A political community is a group of people who live under the same rules and structure of governance. A cultural community is a group of people who share a culture and draw their identities from shared language, history and traditions. (21)

It is within these communities that we define public problems or dilemmas. Simply put, our community defines our own experiences.

Our opening vignettes presented how different communities identify and grapple with public problems. Professor Rinfret's small, rural community allowed her to question more broadly what role women and minorities can, and should, play in society and taught her that it is okay to question societal normalizations that advantage certain segments of the population over others. Professor Scheberle's experiences were first defined by her work community but later by her years as a college professor exploring public service and environmental policy, showing that life experiences of different communities can influence policy positions. Professor Pautz explained how her college community, or the classroom, demonstrated that solutions are available to protect whales from a public problem—oil spills. These experiences identify where we live or with whom we interact shapes how we define what a problem is.

Public Policy and Solutions. To address public problems, public policy is also the practice of a rigorous, systematic process. Answering our questions warrants “designated policy study” (Anderson 2003, 1). Specifically, the policymaking process is a method that is inspired by a series of steps on how public policy develops to tackle public problems. In this chapter we have discussed the stages heuristic approach, but more approaches will be discussed in Chapter 2.

The notion is that most public problems, if they reach the agenda, are addressed through a framework to provide solutions. The stages heuristic approach is invaluable for students of public policy to understand the evolution of the process. As Theodoulou and Kofinis (2004) conclude,

By focusing on each of these phases, and the various additional stages, students may come to understand how policies originate, develop, and grow in a step-by-step process. Although no method is perfect, the policy cycle approach offers students a solid, practical tool with which to understand the dynamics and structure of American policy making. (34)

Public Policy: A Profession. We could not understand public policy without studying the doing side of public policy. In particular, public policy is a profession guided by experts in specific fields (e.g., health, education, civil rights, environment, energy). These individuals not only translate vague legislation into programs to address public problems and evaluate their effectiveness, but they ensure we have clean water to drink or fresh air to breathe. Nevertheless, public policy is multifaceted and messy: it is affected and shaped by our communities; addressed through processes; and designed and implemented by public servants in agencies, nonprofits, or volunteers in local government.

Civic Engagement: Living in the United States, we are citizens within our democracy. However, engagement in local community activities is at an all-time low, especially since the global pandemic. More and more individuals are doing things alone. It is easy for us to spend

hours on social media. Yet, an important element of public policy is civic engagement. Consider our introductory stories—civic engagement varies, but the goal is simple—be active participants in our democracy. Understanding and learning about public policy is also essential to our own approaches to civic engagement.

As you continue to read this book, please consider what you can do with your local community or school to convey facts about an issue important to your local community that will affect public policy (e.g., using your class project to present information at a town hall meeting).

Concluding Thoughts

Public policy is driven by our own experiences, but it is often messy due to the actors involved or the roles that power and politics play. Remember that the work of public policy is a process and does not end with its creation or inception but continues with the doing side of public policy—implementation and evaluation.

Also, we cannot forget the important recognition of *facts and fiction*. We are consumers of public policy every day. For example, when you go to the local gym to workout, what TV station is playing, and why? When you visit your grandparents, what TV station are they watching, and why? What about **artificial intelligence (AI)**, how does this impact your daily reels on Instagram? We cannot forget that our consumption is defined by our communities and intake of information via social media. If we only listen to one side, this can lead to misinformation, affecting how we create public policy. Public policy experts across specialized fields are trained to evaluate information, based upon facts, to offer possible solutions to address public problems, yet we encourage the reader to consider who is left out of policymaking conversations and how our collective work helps individuals at the margins.

In short, this chapter presented a variety of concepts to provide insights into why the field of public policy is far-reaching and essential. This chapter serves as a guidepost for what is to follow. And, by the time you complete this textbook, you will have the skills necessary to engage in the process.

Key Terms

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Broadcast

Bully pulpit

Business interest group

Civil law

Criminal law

Doing side of policy

Elitism

Equality

Equity

Fact-based lens

Facts

Federalism

Implementation

Internet	Print
Lobbying	Professional interest groups
Pluralism	Public
Policy	Public law
Policy evaluators	Stages heuristic approach
Politics	Value-laden
Power	

Discussion Questions

1. The chapter begins with our own, personal stories. What personal experiences have you had that raise a policy question?
2. A variety of policy actors are involved in the policymaking process. Yet, many Americans do not involve themselves in this process. What suggestions would you present to your friends and family about civic engagement?
3. Policymaking can be controversial. Select a current public policy you define as controversial. What facts or data would you use to make your case?

Suggested Resources

Suggested Websites

GovTrack, <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/committees/>.

Oyez, <https://www.oyez.org/>.

U.S. Congress, <https://www.congress.gov/>.

U.S. Supreme Court, <http://www.supremecourt.gov/>.

White House, <http://www.whitehouse.gov>.

Suggested Books or Articles

Bachrach, Peter, and Morton S. Baratz. 1962. "Two Faces of Power." *The American Political Science Review* 56, no. 4: 947–52.

Dahl, Robert A. 1961. *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Lukes, Steven. 1974. *Power: A Radical View* (vol. 1). London: Macmillan.

Stone, Deborah. 2011. *The Policy Paradox*. W. W. Norton.

Suggested Films or Podcasts

All the Way, DVD, directed by Jay Roach (2016: United States), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3791216/>.

Confirmation, DVD, directed by Rick Famuyiwa (2016: United States), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt4608402/>.

Iron Jawed Angels, DVD, directed by Katja von Garnier (2004: United States), www.imdb.com/title/tt0338139/.

Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, DVD, directed by Frank Capra (1939: United States), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0031679/>.

The Suffragette, DVD, directed by Sarah Gavron (2015: United States), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3077214/>.

PolicyCast. <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/policycast>

Notes

1. Institutions (e.g., Congress) and process by which policy choices are made or determined.
2. The U.S. Constitution grants Congress the authority to determine the size of the U.S. Supreme Court. The 1789 Judiciary Act set the number of justices at six, which fluctuated until 1869, when Congress set the number to nine justices; this has remained the same till today.
3. A federal agency is representative of the bureaucracy.

Chapter 2

The Policy Process and Policy Theories

Learning Objectives

- 2.1 Define public policy
- 2.2 Discuss the context of public policy and the challenges that environment presents for achieving goals
- 2.3 Explain the desire for a coherent, universal theory of public policy
- 2.4 Apply the six steps of the stages heuristic model of public policy to a policy issue
- 2.5 Identify strengths and weaknesses of competing public policy models
- 2.6 Discuss alternative policymaking models
- 2.7 Examine the multitude of actors involved in policymaking

Policy Rhetoric and Reality

It is logical to approach the study of public policy thinking that policy is about two choices: for or against a particular issue, since that is so often how policy choices are framed. Indeed, we are taught from a young age that you are either for something or against it. Think about other, long-standing policy issues, such as capital punishment. It would seem that one is either for it or against it. As is often the case, though, reality is far more complicated than policy rhetoric might lead you to believe. After all, consider your own view on capital punishment. Some of you might have clear-cut positions that are absolute; however, you may likely find yourself among the majority of Americans whose views on these issues are far more complex or nuanced. For instance, you might think the death penalty may be an appropriate punishment in certain circumstances, but you may still express trepidation about how it is carried out or the disproportionate representation of minorities that are on death row.

Now think about another, seemingly less politically charged topic: the plight of Antarctic krill (Photo 2.1).

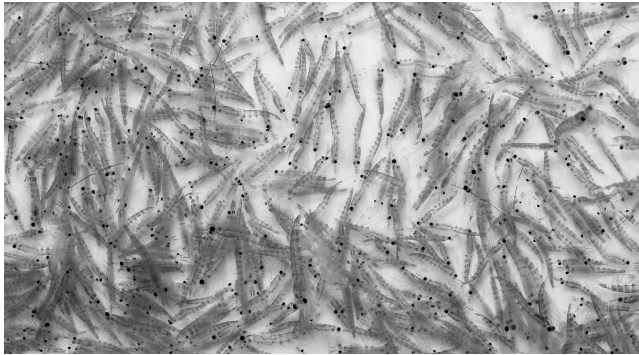


Photo 2.1 ■ Antarctic Krill

Tenedos/iStockPhoto

The term krill refers to dozens of shrimp-like crustaceans that are found in the world's oceans, but Antarctic krill (*Euphausia superba*) is a particular species that lives in the Southern Ocean and the waters off Antarctica. Penguins, seals, whales, and birds all depend on this species of krill, but the rising temperatures of Earth's oceans is melting sea ice (which baby krill live under, protecting them

until they mature), which is resulting in significant declines in krill populations (Kawaguchi et al. 2013; Selig 2023). Not only do krill support the very existence of other species, but they also eat phytoplankton, and the waste that the krill generate traps carbon, pulling it out of the atmosphere. Krill are also increasingly popular for humans because they are good sources of omega-3 and are used in protein powders, pet food, and feed for commercial aquaculture. As a result, the fishing of these crustaceans is growing significantly. Managing this fishery, however, is particularly challenging since it is off Antarctica, and no single country owns or governs that continent and its surrounding waters. At this point, you might be wondering, so what? Who cares about these roughly two-inch crustaceans? Should we try and protect krill because they support the existence of cute and cuddly (albeit stinky) penguins? Should we try and protect krill because they help remove carbon from the atmosphere? Should we try and protect krill because we humans want to have them in our dietary supplements and protein shakes? Are they even worth thinking about in the United States when they are thousands of miles away, and we have so many other problems to think about? How we even think about the issue and determine why this might be an issue we care about has profound ramifications for our collective efforts to respond to it. And with this issue, like nearly all policy questions, it is not as simple as being for or against something.

What Really Is Policy?

The term *public policy* is ubiquitous. Whether it is the discussion of public policy that comes when the president changes, such as when Donald Trump returned to the White House in 2025 or the circumstances that ushered in Franklin Delano Roosevelt's administration in the midst

of the Great Depression, conversations about public policy abound. In particular, discussions of new policy directions and initiatives range from political insiders, elected officials, the news media, to the classroom. But what really is public policy? Is it simply new leadership at the federal level in Washington, DC or in a state capital? Is it the process of how a bill becomes a law? Is it a new regulation? Quite simply, public policy is all of this and much more.

Public policy, as introduced in the last chapter, is a course of action adopted or created by the government in response to public problems. As we will see in the coming pages, public problems are those issues identified by the public and elected leaders as worthy of a coordinated response from the government. A response could entail the passage of laws or may involve an executive, such as the president or a governor, directing a government agency to do something. Just as problems often beget action, it is important to recognize that public policy is just as much what a government decides to do as it is what a government decides not to do. Ultimately, public policy is all about choices.

Government policies are not always easy to spot. Of course, public policy includes the laws passed by legislative bodies, whether they are statutes or local government ordinances, including the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (also known as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law) from 2021 or the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, better known as Obamacare (see Chapter 8 for a discussion of health policy). But policy is much more.

Policy also encompasses the regulations promulgated by executive agencies that translate the often vague statutes into actionable steps, which is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4. Executive orders issued by presidents are also policy, including the flurry of them that President Trump issued on his first day back in office in January 2025, including the shuttering of federal government agencies' diversity, equity, and inclusion offices and programs. More broadly, policy is also the priorities of government entities, since policy is just as much about what a government does not do as what it does. Public policy was manifested in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's MyPlate nutrition guidance, or in the U.S. Forest Service's campaign to prevent forest fires with Smokey the Bear (see Photo 2.2).



Photo 2.2 ■ Smokey the Bear Fire Danger Sign in California

Lisa Werner/Alamy Stock Photo

In this chapter, we introduce the process of government initiating action around public problems and supporting theories. The foundation here is instrumental for the remainder of the textbook and your ability to apply the core concepts from this chapter to various areas of public policy, such as education policy and criminal justice policy. We begin by focusing on the context for policymaking before delving into the realm of policy theories and efforts to explain the often convoluted process that produces public policy. The most common policy theory, the stages model, is discussed, along with some alternative theories to understand policymaking. Finally, the chapter ends with an assessment of whether or not policy theory helps advance our comprehension of policymaking.

Understanding the Context of Public Policy

Before delving into the policy theories that offer insight into the policy process, it is essential to point out that public policy does not happen in a vacuum—it does not happen in isolation. Whether it is health-care policy or reforms to the tax code, public policy happens in a broader context with other concerns, priorities, and issues swirling about. Even though our subsequent chapters deal with particular areas of policy seemingly independent of other areas, this is not how policy exists in real life. What happens in immigration policy, for example, has implications for health care policy and education policy, and vice versa. Policy areas are all interrelated. As a result, policy action on a particular, even seemingly unrelated issue may be competing with action on another issue. Just as you can only deal with a certain number of courses each semester, the government can only handle a certain number of policy options at any given time. What this exact number is varies and is ill-defined, but the point is that all sorts of policies compete with one another to become priorities of the government. Not every issue can be the government's—or society's—top priority.

Additionally, the priorities of a government can change rapidly and dramatically with focusing events. **Focusing events** are significant episodes or experiences that catapult particular issues to prominence on the public's agenda. The rapid emergence of the coronavirus (COVID-19) in 2020 is a clear example of a focusing event and while global pandemics are noted in world history, the prominence of these concerns changed decisively afterward. The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 are a historical example.

More recently, mass shootings in New Orleans on New Year's Day 2025; at a high school in Winder, Georgia in September 2024; during a parade celebrating the Kansas City Chiefs winning the Super Bowl in February 2024; outside a bowling alley and a bar in Lewiston, Maine in October 2023; at a Chinese New Year celebration in Monterey Park in January 2023; and at an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas in 2022 keep alive debates about gun violence. The drinking water crisis in Flint, Michigan that started in 2014 precipitated conversation about access to safe and clean drinking water. Sometimes, focusing events have significant staying power in the national consciousness and result in policy action, such as the terrorist attacks, and other times, there are too many competing priorities, and the nation's attention does not stay focused enough to compel action, as has been the case with the latest mass shootings. It is very difficult

to determine in real time whether or not a focusing event will bring about policy change in the moment, but retrospectively, looking for focusing events can help us understand movement on public policy issues.

With a realization of competing priorities and focusing events, we discuss four factors that affect the context of policymaking: (1) the economic environment, (2) the social and cultural environment, (3) the political environment, and (4) the administrative environment. We unpack what each of these contexts means for creating policy.

The Economic Environment

The condition of the economy is a major factor when it comes to policymaking. After all, we easily understand that money plays a large role in many situations. The health and overall well-being of both the American economy and the global economy can also have a significant effect on policy. When the economy is not performing well, Americans and their elected leaders are often focused on “fixing” the economy, and any other policy priorities are likely to be secondary.

These circumstances were evident during the Great Depression, which saw Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s administration propel policies under the New Deal designed to stimulate the economy. Another example is the Great Recession of 2008 and 2009, when the downward spiral of the automotive industry and the housing crisis brought sweeping policy actions to save major car manufacturers and bolster the financial markets—the explanation being that the health of the economy is paramount. And the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the American and world economies are still being felt years after the pandemic’s onset. During these times, policy conversations about other issues, such as environmental efforts or education policies, were pushed aside.

On the flipside, when the economy is performing well, the nation is willing to engage in other policy issues that may be construed as being more “quality of life.” For example, environmental or social policies are likely to gain more traction when the economy is robust because the thought is that these policies might cost money—regardless of the accuracy of these perceptions—and the public is more willing to entertain such action when perceptions of the economy are positive. Remember, much of the economy is based on faith and perceptions, just like the value of money. If people perceive that the economy is doing well, then it will be a self-reinforcing cycle, and the economy will do well (for more on the contours of economic policy, see Chapter 5). But if people are worried that the economy is trending downward, they will be less inclined to spend money. These realities are related to the social and cultural environment as Americans espouse and their priorities around policy.

The Social and Cultural Environment

A second component of the policy context is social and cultural values. The norms of a society and what is culturally acceptable drive policymaking. Who we are as a country helps set the boundaries of what types of policies are likely to be enacted and successfully implemented. Consider the following scenario to illustrate this point. Perhaps scientists and engineers in the next year determine that in order to protect the planet from carbon emissions the most efficient

and effective course of action would be for all Americans to drive Toyota Priuses. Accordingly, Congress takes up a bill to mandate that all other cars and trucks on the road nationwide have to be phased out over the next 5 years and be replaced with Priuses. Would a policy like this one ever pass? In a word, no. And this conclusion is grounded in an understanding of Americans' culture and social values.

Since the creation of the interstate highway system during President Dwight D. Eisenhower's time in office, Americans' love affair with their cars has only grown. Moreover, nostalgia surrounds the freedom of the open road and even driving Route 66 across much of the nation. Additionally, fundamental to our identities as Americans is a belief in freedom and the free market. Therefore, when it comes to consumption, we value choice. We do not want to be told what kind of car to drive. Among your own friends and families, it is probably safe to assume that there are divergent opinions about the preferred style of car, much less the color selection. Some of us prefer American-made cars; others will only drive foreign cars. Still others like small, compact cars, while others want cars capable of hauling lots of people and their stuff. These realities about who we are as Americans and our preferences lead to the conclusion that there is no scenario—at least not at the present time—that can be envisioned in which Congress stipulates we all drive Priuses. It should be noted that values can and do change over time. These values feed the political environment, which is a third influence in policymaking.

The Political Environment

The political environment, or the politics of it all, deeply affect policymaking. In a polarized and very partisan political climate, the role of politics is significant. More specifically, the priorities of political parties and elected officials play a significant role in shaping the policymaking agenda. For example, at the start of Donald Trump's second administration in 2025, a stated policy priority was for Congress to pass "one big, beautiful bill" that included border security, energy, manufacturing, tax cuts, and the nation's debt ceiling. Even with the Republican Party in control of the White House and both chambers of Congress (albeit with a slim majority in the House), the politics of these issues and the implications for combining all of these highly charged issues into one massive piece of legislation proved politically challenging. Even with the Republic Party in control of the White House and both chambers of Congress (albeit with a slim majority in the house), the politics of these issues and the implications for combining all of these highly charged issues into one massive piece of legislation proved challenging, but such a bill was passed in the summer of 2025.

This case also points to another, but related, dimension of the political environment—the cycle of elections. Politicians coming up on reelection can be more reluctant to take a position on controversial issues that their challengers in the race might use against them. For instance, major bipartisan legislation was agreed on surrounding immigration and the security of the southern border in 2023; however, with the 2024 presidential election nearing, Trump pressed his congressional allies to kill the bill so the issue could feature prominently in the campaign. Also, after an election, the new party in control—and particularly if that political party controls multiple branches of government—will try to work quickly to put into action many of the

priorities its members campaigned on during the election season. The issues that are particularly salient to the electorate, as well, are likely to help shape the priorities of elected officials and influence the policy options that are pursued. In the 2024 presidential election, the salient issues for supporters of Donald Trump included the security of the nation's borders—particularly the southern border, undocumented or illegal immigrants, and inflation and the state of the economy. The early months of the second Trump administration term demonstrate efforts to fulfill those, and other, campaign pledges. Only time will tell the outcomes of these policy efforts.

The Administrative Environment

The final environmental dimension of the policymaking context has to do with the practical, administrative side of policies. Put succinctly, the administrative environment concerns who in government, or the broader public sector, for that matter, will implement the policy; what level of government will be responsible for it? Many of these administrative and implementation details play an important role in public policy. It might be easy to argue at this juncture that these nitty-gritty details are of less significance, but we should recall the mess that was the overhauled Free Application for Federal Student Aid—better known as FAFSA—process that started in the fall of 2023 and extended well into 2024 (see Photo 2.3).

By almost every measure, the implementation of the new process, thought to make it easier to apply for federal student aid, was atrocious. Glitches accessing the site prevailed along with formula errors in the form, and all of these problems led to significant delays for universities and applicants to get information about financial aid packages. U.S. Department of Education officials told congressional lawmakers that at least 30 percent of forms contained errors as a result of the glitches in the application (Messenger and Ruberg 2024).

Although these seemingly less important details are not as pervasive in public debate about a particular policy issue, they are extremely significant as policy ideas are being offered to solve a public problem. Sometimes the debate is less about a government doing something and more about what level of government should do something. A large portion of Americans would concede that much needs to be done about public education in this country, so the policy conversation becomes less about whether something should be done and instead more about who

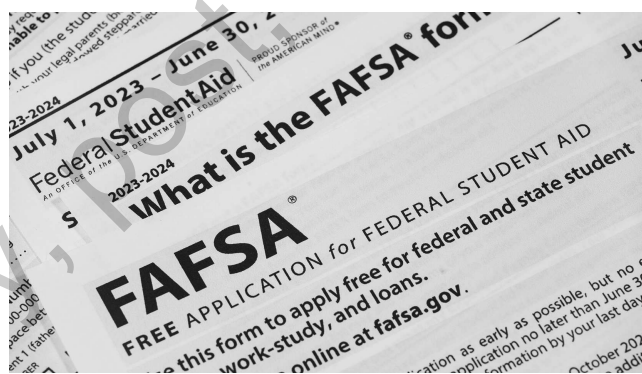


Photo 2.3 ■ FAFSA Forms

Richard Stephen/iStockPhoto

should take action. A particular area of that divide concerns the role of the federal government and fifty state governments in education. Depending on one's viewpoint about which level of government should be at the forefront of education, policy reforms will drive discussions about policy actions. Oftentimes there is consensus that action is needed on a particular issue, but the challenge becomes agreeing on how something should be done; therefore, this context of policymaking is significant, even if it is a bit less glamorous.

The key idea to take away from this discussion of the policymaking context is that policy action does not happen in isolation—many factors affect a particular policy idea that may have little to do with the merit or validity of a policy. At any given time, multiple policies in different areas are always competing with one another for the attention of people and their lawmakers; the politics of the moment are likely to play a role, just as the economic conditions will as well. Finally, questions about the administration of a policy solution are also intertwined with social and cultural values. It is essential to keep these points in mind as we turn our attention to the path a particular policy idea must travel to be created and implemented.

The Quest for Public Policy Theory

With the complexities of the policy environment, it is unsurprising that there is a desire to produce theories that explain when policies will or will not move forward. Indeed, this quest for public policy theories drives many scholars and practitioners throughout their careers. But before we delve into the work of these scholars, we should start at the beginning: what is a theory? According to Google, a theory is “a supposition or a system of ideas intended to explain something, especially one based on general principles independent of the thing to be explained.” Theories help us understand phenomena, conditions, and events that seem to escape explanation. Even with just our brief discussion of what policy is in both this chapter and the last, it is already apparent that public policy is something that craves explanation. Moreover, since public policy can and does have significant effects on our day-to-day lives, it is unsurprising that we want theories to explain it.

More formally, Professor Paul Sabatier (2007) maintains there are five reasons why we seek theories of public policy. First, there are a great deal of people and organizations who are involved in public policy issues. Within this complex array of actors, individuals have various interests, values, perceptions, and preferences that can and do have tremendous effects on the creation and implementation of public policy. After all, if some actors do not even perceive an issue as being a problem, there are significant ramifications to any effort to enact policy to solve that problem. With this complexity, policy theories should help us better grasp the multitude of actors involved and what their impact might be on policy.

Second, policymaking encompasses significant time spans, so theories can help us grasp the timeline for policies. Think about some of the policy issues that have already been mentioned, including health care and air pollution. Neither of these issues is likely to be addressed quickly, and the existing policies about these topics go back decades. Arguably, the role of government in health care dates back to at least the 1930s, and the federal government has been involved

in environmental policy since the 1950s and 1960s. Policy theory can help us account for the timelines of these policy issues.

As is evident in the brief examples in the previous paragraph, health care and environmental concerns are not encapsulated in just one policy. This interpolicy complexity is a third reason why theories are useful in understanding policy. In the previous discussion, there are multiple policies and programs that may or may not align well with one another. It is not just the Affordable Care Act from 2009; there are numerous laws dealing with the creation of Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, the Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (creating COBRA), the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, the State Children's Health Insurance Program, or the Medicare Prescription Drug Act. The point here is that there are lots and lots of policies in any particular policy area, not just one policy, and theories that can help us understand how they fit together.

A fourth reason why theories are helpful is they account for all the different ways public problems are approached and understood. At first glance, it may be fairly simple for you to think about a public issue and what should be done about it. But as you reflect on that topic, you realize that your ideas about that problem are *your* ideas and others are likely to understand the problem differently, think about the problem differently, and offer a range of other solutions. And this leads to the final reason Sabatier (2007) offers about the value of policy theory: theories can help us understand and consider what government should and should not be doing. The debates surrounding public policy are rooted in our varying ideas about the role of government in society, how the government should fulfill that role, and what resources it takes to accomplish its objectives. To put it more succinctly,

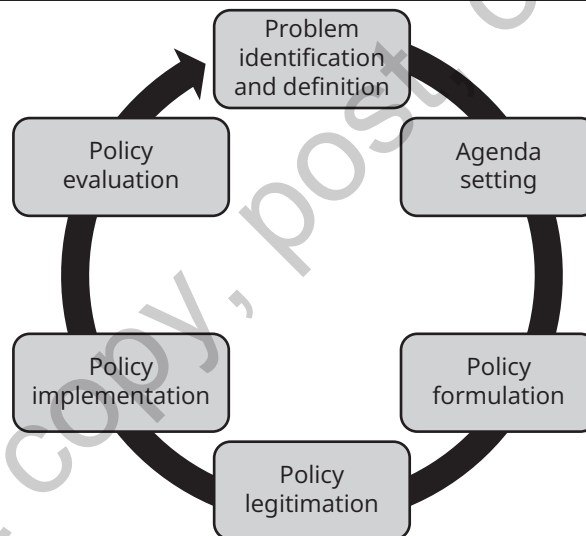
understanding the policy process requires knowledge of the goals and perceptions of hundreds of actors throughout the country involving possibly very technical scientific and legal issues over periods of a decade or more while most of those actors are actively seeking to propagate their specific 'spin' on events. (Sabatier 2007, 4)

Of course, it may be appealing just to apply common sense or take an ad hoc approach to a policy, but that is limited in that you are unable to extrapolate from one particular policy topic at one particular time to any other instance of policymaking. Accordingly, numerous policy scholars have sought theories to explain policy in more than just one case. Theories can help us identify similarities and patterns across multiple cases that enable us to understand what is happening presently and perhaps even predict what might happen in the future. They provide an organizing framework and a vocabulary in which we can talk about policy. With that in mind, we introduce next some specific policy theories, starting with the most common: the stages heuristic model. After a robust discussion of this pervasive policy theory, we also introduce several other theories that have gained traction in the policy community more recently.

The Stages Heuristic Model of Public Policymaking

The stages heuristic model of public policymaking, as described in Chapter 1, is easily the most common theory that endeavors to explain policy. It is worth pointing out that theories to describe policymaking are relatively new, as studying public policy in a formal, academic setting only began in the middle part of the twentieth century. Granted, this may not seem new to readers of this text, but keep in mind that biologists and theologians have been hard at work in their fields for centuries. Political scientist Harold Lasswell was the first scholar to describe a “decision process” for public policy and articulate “policy sciences” (Lasswell 1951, 1956). Although the language used to describe the steps of the policymaking process have evolved over the intervening decades, the steps of making public policy can be thought of in the following terms (as introduced in the last chapter): (1) problem identification and definition, (2) agenda setting, (3) policy formulation, (4) policy legitimization, (5) policy implementation, and (6) policy evaluation (see also Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1 ■ The Policymaking Process



Sugary Drinks

As we consider each of these six steps, it is helpful to have an example to walk through each stage of the process. For our purposes, we have selected a fictitious and somewhat ridiculous example, but it is based in real life and while it may seem outlandish, there are instances where various governmental entities do explore restrictions on drinks (Photo 2.4). Back in 2013, New York City’s mayor, Michael Bloomberg led an effort to limit the size of drinks sold in the city that

were sweetened. The Sugary Drinks Portion Cap Rule, promulgated for New York City, limited the size of drinks that were sweetened (e.g., sodas) to no more than 16 ounces. The thought was that by limiting the size of drinks with added sugar that people could buy, the intake of sugar would decrease. The ban did not survive legal challenges when New York state courts ruled that the city exceeded its authority in instituting the limits. While there have not been additional efforts to limit the ability of citizens to buy large sodas, the government continues efforts to limit the harmful effects of additives in beverages, including proposing a rule by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in 2023 to ban brominated vegetable oil in sodas and sports drinks like used to be found in Gatorade and Mountain Dew (Lovelace 2023). In July 2024, this rule, following similar actions in other nations, took effect (Diaz 2024).

Photo 2.4 ■ Large Sodas/Fountain Drinks



Joe Raedle/Getty Images

Stage 1: Problem Identification and Definition

You have likely heard the old adage, “The first step in solving a problem is recognizing there is one.” This is absolutely essential to policymaking. The first stage of the policy process is to figure out what the problem is and to define it. A key component of figuring out the problem is determining a public problem. Just because you think an issue may be a problem does not necessarily make it a public problem. For instance, not having enough movie theaters nearby or figuring out which pair of shoes to wear might be a problem for you, but it does not rise to the level of a public problem. Accordingly, public problems might include the rise of opioid abuse nationwide, the security of the nation’s borders, or concerns about the proper disposal of batteries and outdated electronics. Of course, it warrants remembering that just because you think any of these aforementioned challenges are public problems does not mean there is widespread agreement among others that they are problems. A particular region of the country or

a state might champion a particular issue, but that may not capture the attention of the nation, for instance.

Over time, issues gain traction and become public problems through a variety of ways, including through the media, advocacy organizations, politicians, and even average citizens. There are many ways we come to understand public problems through these channels. Sometimes it is a new research study that documents the growing abuse of opioids in the country, or perhaps it is cell phone footage capturing police officers using deadly force. Other times a natural disaster and extreme weather events, such as a hurricane (or subsequent hurricanes that struck back-to-back like Helene and Milton in 2024) or the 2023 wildfires in Maui, can galvanize attention on storm readiness, disaster response, and needed revisions to building requirements. And in other instances, it may be a handful of policy entrepreneurs who focus all of their efforts on a particular issue and compel others to address the problem.

Once problems are raised by society, we have to define them. After all, we need to have a common understanding of the problem so we can figure out how to solve it. On the surface, this seems simple enough, but this is where the challenge begins. How you understand a challenge or a problem may be different than how your friend or neighbor comprehends it. Returning to the example of opioid abuse, you might think the problem is a function of physicians too readily prescribing painkillers for people who then become addicted because the medical professional should have better controlled access to the substance. Your friend, however, may think that it is not the medical community's fault because people just need to "toughen up" and cope with pain from an injury or a chronic condition. Similarly, wildfires may just be nature's way of managing the forest, or they may be the result of expecting parents' gender reveal party pyrotechnics, or they be the result of climate change. Of course, the issue is far more complicated, but our understanding of the problem and how we define it could be expressed in these underlying terms. The point is that how we think of a problem and define the contours of that problem can often be a social construction (see Berger and Luckmann 1966 for the theoretical underpinnings).

Simply put, our ideas about problems come from our own experiences, our own perceptions of situations and institutions, and this affects our approach and attitude about public problems (Schneider and Ingram 1997). Given the variability in constructing and defining public problems, it is unsurprising that we end up with many competing definitions of a problem; and with these different conceptions, there are very significant implications for the remaining five steps of the policymaking process.

To see the complexities associated with this very first step of the policy process, let us return to the Sugary Drinks Portion Cap Rule example. In our efforts to understand more fully this part of the policymaking process, let us take this real-life example and go further with it. What actually is the problem with soda and other sugary drinks and concern over Americans' health? One way to look at the issue of extra-large sodas might be that Americans are always thirsty and can never get enough to drink, so portion sizes have to increase. Another way to consider the issue might be that Americans have a sweet tooth and prefer beverages that have added sugar, like soda. Perhaps the government should not care whether Americans drink soda. And who cares what is in soda, whether it is sugar or some poisonous chemical. Or maybe there is concern that Americans' health is declining while obesity rates are climbing, and the major culprit is

sugar—and soda is one of the primary ways Americans absorb extra sugar in their diets. These concerns have prompted a handful of cities, including Philadelphia, Seattle, and San Francisco, to implement a tax on sodas of one to two cents per ounce, which works out to a range of 67 cents to \$1.30 more for a two liter of soda (Godoy 2024). Research has shown that when soda is taxed and people had to pay more for it, their consumption of it decreased (Godoy 2024). While public health officials note the negative impacts on our health of sugary drinks, there has not been much effort to limit our consumptions of them.

Regardless of what one thinks about soda and one's own consumption of sugary drinks, the point is that there are lots of different directions from which a discussion of soda and its consumption can be defined. Accordingly, this is where the importance of definition comes into focus. If we can agree that obesity is linked directly to sugary sodas (which, of course, is a bit more complicated, but let us continue with this intellectual exercise), what should be done? Should sodas be banned for public health concerns? Should there just be limits to the size of sodas that can be purchased? Should Americans be better educated about their beverage choices? Should the government place warning labels on sodas, as it does for many other products, and let consumers decide for themselves? Should nutritional guidance and labels on sodas be changed? Should Americans be able to drink whatever they want, since freedom in consumption is a basic tenet of U.S. society? What you should be gathering from this fictitious example are the complexities associated with even a basic understanding of the public problem. With all these questions, the remaining five steps of the policy process appear all the more daunting.

Stage 2: Agenda Setting

Once a problem has been identified and definitions offered, it moves to the agenda of government for action—or maybe not. It is at this stage of the policymaking process where most policy options never get any further. After all, just because a problem has been acknowledged and defined does not mean anything will get done about it. The problem has to captivate the attention of the government and the public to compel action. And the government only has so much bandwidth in which to consider a problem. Just like you are unlikely to take twelve classes in a particular semester, the government can only handle so much on its agenda.

A variety of circumstances can bring a particular public problem to the attention of the government. Focusing events may be discrete incidents that captivate the attention of citizens and policymakers alike. For example, a focusing event might be the wildfires that ravaged Los Angeles county in January 2025 or the often-cited example of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. They can also be dramatic and evolving changes in society, like the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020. Focusing events do not always galvanize action around a particular topic. To date, there has not been policy action around guns, and access to them, that is directly attributable to the event, but the terrorist attacks in 2001 brought widespread and dramatic change to everything from how security for commercial air travel is conducted to the creation of new government agencies.

Dramatic and often terrible acts of violence are not the only kinds of focusing events, however. Public problems can also come to the forefront and demand attention because the

public demands action or has had enough of a particular circumstance. Interest from citizens may also be accentuated, or even driven, by the work of interest groups and other **policy entrepreneurs** who make it their professional objective to get the public and their policymakers to focus on addressing a particular public problem. It is worth noting that a multitude of actors can and do involve themselves in the policy process. Obviously, our elected political leaders are the individuals who make decisions about public problems, but lobbyists who work for interest groups, advocacy groups, the media, and the general public also can and do call attention to public problems. Additionally, researchers and scientists often help society understand issues that need to be addressed as well.

Oftentimes, it is a combination of many of these factors, and perhaps even a little bit of serendipity, that brings a problem to the agenda of the government. Sometimes it is easy to understand why a problem is now the focus of the government, and other times it is less clear. Regardless of how an issue gets to the agenda, it must get to the agenda and exhibit staying power to progress through the policy process.

Public policy scholar Thomas Birkland (2020) points out that there are different levels of the policy agenda that help us understand how and why some issues do not stay in the public spotlight while others work their way through the layers of the agenda and make it further in the policy process. At the most macro level, Birkland discusses an agenda universe in which all the ideas about all the public problems are discussed in the political arena. Some issues, such as Social Security reform or tax code modifications, often persist at this level and find it difficult to progress to the systematic agenda. This second layer of the agenda constitutes those public problems that policymakers are actually willing to consider as part of their reach and issues that could potentially be addressed. The boundary between the agenda universe and systemic universe is porous, and policy issues flow back and forth.

Beyond the agenda universe is the institutional agenda, which comprises all the policy problems and possible policy options that are being considered and might reasonably stand a chance of action. For a number of recent presidential administrations, and underscored by numerous, tragic events, many constituencies have been anxious for Congress to take up legislation surrounding gun ownership at a national level. But in recent years, the issue has made little further progress toward the final level of agenda: the decision agenda. The decision agenda—as the name indicates—describes those problems for which the government is actively debating a solution and taking specific actions and making decisions, like taking a vote. So far, it could easily seem that defining a problem is the harder of the two steps of the policy process covered, but you can start to see that just because a problem has been identified and is being discussed does not mean it is gaining the attention of policymakers, either.

Returning to our example of sugary drinks helps us further understand the importance of this stage of the policy process. While the health risks of overconsumption of sugar have been well established, and soda has long been a staple of Americans' diets, what might compel the government to discuss action about the issue? With the recognition of the obesity crisis in the United States, pretend that Congress has decided to take action to get Americans to reduce their intake of sugary drinks such as soda. The belief is that if Americans drink less soda, then the obesity crisis will be mitigated. These discussions may come about from a variety of sources.

Professionals in the health community, including government scientists, may release reports that document rising rates of not only adult obesity, but childhood obesity as well.

Additionally, there may be a new docudrama or reality television series that depicts a family's decision to drink nothing but soda for six months to see what happens. There could also be ongoing efforts by juice manufacturers to promote their products over soda as a less sugary option. Or perhaps one state bans soda and sees dramatic improvements in a range of health outcomes. Any of these scenarios are plausible ways that the concern over soda and its increasing portion sizes is making its way to the agenda of the government. The challenges associated with both problem identification and agenda setting may already seem daunting in bringing about policy action, but keep in mind, these are only the first two steps of six in the policy process.

Stage 3: Policy Formulation

The third step of the policy process, policy formulation, entails devising ways to solve—or at least ameliorate—public problems. Once the government's attention is adequately piqued, work is focused on crafting the solution to the public problem. This is the stage of the policymaking process where specific, concrete actions about how to address an issue are brainstormed, discussed, and debated. For very technical matters, such as building safety in areas prone to natural disasters like earthquakes, hurricanes, or floods, this is the stage of the process where experts come together to discuss what the government can and cannot mandate and what those building standards might look like.

In other areas of policy, such as prevention of terrorist attacks on airplanes, the technical aspects of policy options have to move forward alongside debates surrounding what levels of invasion Americans are willing to contend with regarding their privacy. For example, in 2009, the TSA introduced body scanners to be used at airports nationwide that could more effectively screen passengers to see if they were attempting to carry prohibited items on board a commercial aircraft. Critics charged body scanners, which captured images of passengers beneath their clothing, were too invasive. This controversy ignited debate about the need to maintain safety while also protecting a person's privacy. These sorts of advanced scanning technologies are still in use in the nation's airports. More recently, the airport in Las Vegas introduced an experimental self-service screening system for airport security akin to self-checkouts in grocery stores and other big box stores (Mohtasham 2024). Time will tell if this option proves effective at ensuring airport safety. These instances demonstrate that just because there are technical ways to ensure security screenings at airports, that does not always mean the options are viable. After all, the best way to prevent destruction from hurricanes is not to build structures anywhere near where hurricanes might strike; but what is the likelihood that all construction near beaches ceases? This demonstrates that policy formulation is far more than technical solutions to problems; it also involves reconciling competing goals and values, not to mention specific choices among policy tools.

As indicated in the previous examples, devising a solution to a public problem involves a variety of goals and values that are often in competition with one another. Consider the values of American society that political scientist Deborah Stone (2012) articulates: equity, efficiency,

welfare, liberty, and security. It is reasonable to conclude that Americans widely hold these values, but can all of these values be held to their highest ideals at the same time and for each policy issue? Returning to the issue of safety in commercial air travel and body scanners, how are we to reconcile our desire for security with our desires for efficiency in screening processes as well as our liberty not to have our privacy invaded? Can we be completely safe and completely free at the same time? If not, as the answer likely is, what balance between safety and liberty are we willing to accept? On one hand, these might seem like existential questions more appropriate in political theory and philosophy classrooms, but they are just as relevant questions for policymakers trying to take action surrounding issues facing the general public.

In addition to these questions, policy formulation also entails selection among policy tools to address problems. The government uses a variety of tools and techniques to compel action from individuals and organizations, and we turn to political scientist B. Guy Peters's (2019) useful typology of those tools. Peters offers six broad categories of policy tools at the disposal of government: laws, services, money, taxes, other economic instruments, and suasion.

Laws encompass acts of legislative bodies, like Congress, as well as regulations promulgated by executive agencies. These decrees tell individuals and organizations what they can and cannot do. For instance, the amount of effluent that can be released into a stream from a manufacturing company is the result of the Clean Water Act and subsequent regulations that implement the law.

The government can also provide services as a way to coax behavior. For example, the government ensures the safety of the skies by providing air traffic control and monitors weather through the National Weather Service in the Department of Commerce.

Money is a third tool available to policymakers. All levels of government—federal, state, and local—provide money to citizens and organizations through transfer payments, such as via the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or Social Security payments to individuals retired or unable to work due to injury or medical condition, grants to researchers, other governmental entities to study and solve a problem, or through contracting out. Increasingly, the government pays other firms to provide services on behalf of the government. For example, contracting out includes everything from your local municipality paying a large waste management company to collect your trash and recyclables, to some states paying privately run prison companies to incarcerate individuals convicted of crimes. With this policy tool, governments use money to address public problems.

A related fourth tool policymakers have is the power to tax. Taxes are used in myriad instances where the government wants to change the behavior of people and organizations without expressly telling them what to do. A case in point is cigarette taxes. The evidence is clear that smoking cigarettes can be hazardous to one's health, and in the aggregate, a public health problem as well. But instead of governments forbidding citizens from smoking, many governments add taxes to the price of cigarettes to discourage people from smoking.

Another category of tools identified by Peters related to money is assorted economic instruments. There are other ways governments employ funds to affect policy outcomes, including the use of loans and subsidies. Perhaps you are furthering your education with the assistance of federal government student loans. Here the government is encouraging people to

advance their education by making money readily available, and traditionally at lower interest rates, for students to take loans. Subsidies are also used by the government, including for farmers, to keep the nation engaged in agriculture and keep prices affordable.

A final category of tools is more nebulous: the use of suasion. This category of tools refers to all the indirect means the government might employ to encourage behaviors of individuals and organizations it wants and to discourage behaviors it does not. For example, we are all familiar with public service announcements (PSAs) that encourage citizens if they “see something, say something” in an effort to prevent violence and attacks and other announcements about the perils of drug abuse. These are some of the broad categories of tools that are available for policymakers to consider when endeavoring to craft a solution to a public problem. As is evident from this list of tools, there are many different ways to go about compelling action in response to public challenges. And how a particular issue is defined and how it comes to the government’s agenda will go a long way in helping us understand the tools that are selected to address the problem.

It should become increasingly clear that the policy process (at least in this model) is sequential, and one step builds on another; therefore, the previous steps impact future steps. Returning to our example of sugary sodas, think about how a policy could be designed. One option could be for the government to curb consumption of sodas by doing what New York City endeavored to do—limit the size of sodas available for purchase. So a proposal might employ laws and regulations that ban the sale of any soda larger than 12 ounces, thereby making large fountain sodas, liters, and so forth illegal. Of course, this does not preclude someone from buying eight sodas every morning, but instead of carrying one extra-large cup, an individual might have to carry eight now. This policy option would be indicative of a problem definition centered around the notion that people consume too much soda because the portion sizes available to them are too large, so if the size is curtailed, so will the intake of soda.

Another policy option might be to allow individuals to buy whatever size soda they want but to use taxes as a means of discouraging behavior. This policy option might be the addition of a \$5 per soda tax on any and all sodas bought in the United States. Such an option would be predicated on the idea that people buy and consume soda because it is cheap and therefore if it is made to be more expensive, people will consume less of it. Still another policy option might be to launch a widespread education campaign and encourage people to limit their consumption of soda through persuasive techniques. This approach is based on the problem definition that people consume as much soda as they do because they do not fully understand the risks of drinking so much soda. Therefore, in addition to the creation of an anti-soda drinking mascot, new labels might adorn soda cups and cans that show people who have become obese because they drank too much soda. The point of these examples is that the way the public problem is constructed and how it comes to the agenda will likely affect the kinds of policies that are designed and the tools that are called upon to address the problem. It is becoming increasingly evident just how complicated the policy process is—we are only at step three, and nothing has actually been enacted.

Stage 4: Policy Legitimation

The fourth step of the policy process, policy legitimation, is probably the step of the policy process you best understand, as this is the point at which a policy is decided and enacted. In other words, this is the step in which a bill becomes a law. At the federal level, policy legitimation occurs when Congress passes a bill; at the state level, policy legitimation occurs when a state legislature passes a bill; and at the local level, policy legitimation occurs when a local legislative body, such as a city council, passes an ordinance. For a brief refresher about the lawmaking process: a bill has to be drafted, introduced into one chamber (House or Senate at the federal level), referred to committee, and then usually referred to a subcommittee for hearings and investigation. Then those committees make changes to the bill before voting on whether to refer it to the entire chamber. From there, the entire legislative chamber debates a bill and votes. If all of these pieces fall into place, the process starts in the other chamber. And then, if the entire legislative body supports the bill, the bill moves to the executive (president or governor, for instance) for signature or a veto. Only after both legislative and executive branch involvement does a bill actually become a law and a policy legitimated. It is worth pausing for a moment and thinking about the difficulties associated with passing legislation, particularly at the federal level, in recent years. The policy process requires action and decisions at this stage of the process.

With our example of government intervention surrounding soda consumption, what would it take to get Congress to pass one of the policy options discussed in the last section? Congress might take up a bill entitled the No Extra-Large Sodas Act. This option would ban the sale of sodas above a certain size. Even if the best health and scientific information aligns to support this bill, there are going to be lots of actors who would mobilize to challenge the bill. For instance, the soda and beverage industry would likely lobby members of Congress to thwart such a bill. And it is likely that representatives of other similar industries, like the candy industry, would rally to support the soda lobbyists because if Congress limits sodas, it might seek to curb candy bar sizes next. An alternative may be banning soda outright; perhaps Congress would draft legislation to outlaw soda. An argument could be made that Americans are not in a position to make the best choices about what kinds of beverages to drink, so Congress should make those decisions for them. While this may seem extreme, remember that it was not that long ago that the United States endeavored to outlaw alcohol through constitutional amendment. A range of other options exist to limit Americans' consumption of soda, from bans, to size or portion limits, to taxes and other means of persuasion. Whatever policy options are offered, though, they must make it through the process of becoming legitimized by the decisions of our political leaders. At this juncture, the policy process seems daunting, but remember, this is not the end of the process.

Stage 5: Policy Implementation

Often times, widespread attention to public problems and corresponding policy options stops by this stage of the process. The news media are usually focused on the process of identifying issues and the path to devising options to address those challenges, as the politics associated with how a bill becomes a law in Stage 4 makes for good news stories. Policy implementation, the fifth stage

of the policy process, is the doing of policy, the executing of decisions to bring about change to address a public problem. After a policy has been decided on, the general presumption is the implementation just happens and is far less interesting. However, anyone who studies public policy at all knows that policy implementation—which is the process of carrying out policies—and accomplishing the actual policy, is often far more intriguing and indicative of the overall success or failure of a policy. Policy scholars Jeffrey Pressman and Aaron Wildavsky note that common perceptions hold that policy “implementation should be easy; [people] are therefore upset when expected events do not occur or turn out badly” (Pressman and Wildavsky 1973, xi–xvii).

There are many factors that make policy implementation just as complex as each of the preceding steps in the policy process. Although we devote an entire chapter to rulemaking (Chapter 4), here we provide an overview of the basics of implementation. Recall where we were in the policy process: a legislative body made a decision and chose among many competing policy options to address a problem. Typically, when bodies, such as Congress, pass a law, those laws are vague and rather general. For example, the 1972 Clean Water Act addresses water pollution in the nation’s waterways by mandating the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) make those waterways “swimmable” and “fishable.” This might seem a great description of how we want our bodies of water in the United States, but what does it actually mean to make a river or a lake “swimmable”? Your definition of what makes something swimmable may vary dramatically from a classmate. Policy implementation becomes about operationalizing terms like these. You might be thinking, why did Congress not get more specific about what makes a waterway swimmable? But remember, it takes a lot of consensus building to pass legislation, and the product of those negotiations typically has to be somewhat vague or more general in nature in order to gain enough votes to pass. Moreover, members of Congress, in this case, are not necessarily experts in water quality, as most of them are highly trained lawyers rather than ecologists and environmental engineers. As a result, Congress leaves the specifics to the experts who work at government agencies such as the EPA.

To implement policy decisions, various government agencies get involved in translating statutory language into actionable regulations that achieve the policy objectives in the legislation. This is called rulemaking and conducted by the civil servants who are employed by government agencies. These individuals are the experts who work for the government, who are not given jobs due to political affiliation but because they demonstrate competence and expertise in a particular area. While one agency is often given the primary task of implementing a policy, that agency frequently has to work with a host of other agencies, and many times, those agencies may be at the federal, state, and local level. Already you can see that implementation is not as simple as decreeing that the nation’s waterways should be cleaned up. Lots of agencies at the federal level, agencies from the fifty states, and all the organizations that might discharge into waterways or otherwise use the nation’s water bodies become involved.

As we have in the previous steps of the policy process, let us incorporate our ongoing example about sugary drinks. For the purposes of this example, remember that Congress decided to pass the No Extra-Large Sodas (NELS) Act despite strong opposition from the soda industry and convenience stores nationwide. Public opinion is split, with many Americans supportive of

the efforts to improve the health of their fellow citizens and a large portion annoyed that the government is overreaching and trying to control their lives. With these political currents in the background, Congress, through the NELS Act, told the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to work with the U.S. Department of Commerce to determine exactly what size soda constituted “extra-large” (e.g., number of ounces) and then to develop a plan to phase it out. While the media and news pundits may be less interested now that the law has passed, the work is just beginning. HHS and Commerce, tasked with two very different missions (one concerning public health and welfare and the other, job creation and economic growth), now have to come together to figure out the threshold for extra-large sodas. Many convenience stores sell (and have trademarked) their extra-large soda sizes, which range from 20 ounces to 50 ounces. What information should be used or be considered to decide what is too big? Should it be a universal declaration, or should what is too big be dependent on how old you are or your physical health? And once—or if—a decision can be made about the cup size, how do you make it happen? Should it be a phased-in ban—perhaps making super-sized cups collectors’ items that sell for lots of money on eBay? Or should it be mandated effective January 1 of a given year? And what happens if people bring their own cup to fill a fountain drink at their favorite snack shop? What are the consequences? And what is to stop someone from buying three drinks to equal the size of the drink cup that was banned (and would that not create more waste)? Does this policy option really address the underlying problem as conceived originally? All these questions, and many others, demonstrate the challenges associated with policy implementation. And these issues only comprise the fifth step of a six-step policy process.

Stage 6: Policy Evaluation

The final step in the policy process is policy evaluation. Assessing whether or not a policy is successful is critical, as the entire policy process strives to address, and perhaps even solve, public problems. But as has been true in the other stages of this process, this step is highly complex and riddled with challenges. Policy evaluation, simply put, is figuring out if the policy is working. Yet, what does it mean to be “working”? As we have seen regarding the importance of defining a problem in the initial stages of policymaking, defining “working” is critical in this stage. Politicians and members of the news media often leave our heads spinning, as they all have different assessments of whether the same policy is working. The reason why they can all have different conclusions about a policy is their definitions of “working” vary. Along these lines, conceptions of “success,” “effectiveness,” and even “efficiency” have to be defined. Just as we saw with Stage 1 of the policy process, arriving at common definitions can be a challenging process.

Despite the complexities of policies, we all seem to quickly decide whether a policy is working or not. For example, conclusions were quickly reached about whether or not the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) was successful. Passed by Congress and signed into law in March 2020, the \$2.2 trillion stimulus bill included one-time cash payments to taxpayers, increased unemployment benefits, created a forgivable loan program for small businesses, and created almost a trillion dollars in loan programs for corporations and state and local governments to respond to the pandemic. It represented the largest economic stimulus

package ever in U.S. history. But what were those assessments based on? Was government spending “enough” support to those affected by the economic havoc wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic? What is “enough”? Were the costs of the act worth it, as the inflation the nation has experienced since the earliest months of the pandemic are attributable, at least in part, to this stimulus spending? Would circumstances have been “worse” if the act had not been passed? Over what period of time should we conduct that evaluation? Or should we determine success by how efficiently payments were distributed? The point is that evaluating policy options that strive to solve complex policy problems is not as simple as the yes and no assessments we frequently hear attached to policies.

Beyond definitional complexities, systematically consider how policy evaluation is conducted and the problems inherent in it. Much like the problem definition stage of the policy process, policy evaluation requires an articulation of what about the policy is going to be assessed. Then, policy evaluation typically involves a multitude of actors to gather data; find out about how the policy is being implemented on the front lines; and analyze how the policy is working across time, cases, individuals, or in the natural environment, such as the condition of water bodies. Then, analysis of the data has to be conducted, findings summarized, and conclusions reached. Just as you have learned in your research methods courses, decisions have to be made in each phase of the investigation, and there are implications to those decisions. And sometimes data may not be readily available, particularly for interested parties. Even though the CARES Act passed in 2020, that did not stop politicians from running in the 2022 and 2024 elections declaring whether or not it was a success or failure. You can already see from our discussion of questions around what aspect of the CARES Act we might be evaluating, there is little chance that many answers to those questions were readily available even in the 2024 elections (indeed policy analysts are still working to determine what aspects were successful and which were not), but that did not stop candidates for office from claiming otherwise.

Regarding data, there are additional challenges obtaining them as well. Cost-benefit analysis is routinely employed to figure out if a policy is worthwhile. But the challenge lies in figuring out costs and calculating benefits. For example, if a new food safety policy details safety practices for processing dairy products, reasonable questions might be, “How much would these new requirements for farmers and producers cost?” and “What are the benefits?” If new equipment is required for farmers and producers of milk, cheese, and so forth, we can figure out how much they cost and add it up. But what about figuring out the benefits to compare against the costs to see if the new policy is a good idea? How do you figure out in a comparable unit—likely dollars in this case—what the benefit is for people who do not get sick from dairy products? Do you estimate health care costs? Do you also add in time at work people may miss because they got sick from contaminated dairy products?

These questions bring up another critical aspect of evaluation: **risk assessment**. In determining costs and benefits, questions usually arise surrounding how much risk we are willing to accept. Risk refers to the likelihood that an adverse situation will occur and evaluating its magnitude. In our case of the dairy products and new safety mechanisms, should the government create policy that guarantees no one will get sick from dairy products, indicating a zero tolerance for risk? Or is it reasonable to go with 98 percent of people will not get sick? It might be

reasonable to mandate regulations where there is only a 2 percent risk of getting sick, but if you are one of the 2 percent, you are unlikely to agree.

Numerous other problems present themselves during policy evaluation, but that does not mean evaluation is not important. Lots of resources, time, and energy are expended implementing policy, and we want policies to solve problems, so evaluation is crucial. Consider a handful of additional challenges in the evaluation process. First, as we have seen, uncertainty over goals and definitions is a perennial challenge in evaluation. Ambiguity around what is being assessed and the evaluative criteria create problems for evaluation from the start. Second, if clear criteria can be established, it is very difficult in social science research to isolate all of the factors that could be influencing a policy. And isolating causation is often integral to assessing whether or not a policy is working. For instance, if a determination is trying to be made about whether or not taxes on tobacco products are discouraging tobacco use, it is impossible to rule out any other reasons besides the tax alone that might be contributing to declining rates of tobacco use. While the taxes may be higher on tobacco products, perhaps the primary driver for declines in tobacco product consumption have to do with bans on advertising these items and not the increased taxes. A third factor is isolating the effects, positive or negative, of a particular policy, which might be diffuse and intertwined with other policies. This challenge points out that some policy options have unintended consequences. Fourth, evaluations of policy are contingent on data, and sometimes data are far harder to gather than one might think.

Finally, policy evaluations, as do all good social science research, take time. However, time is often not in ready supply when citizens and their elected leaders want answers about whether or not a problem is actually being solved. Moreover, credible evaluations often need data that span over many years, and that may not always be feasible. These are just some of the many issues that arise in trying to assess whether a policy that has made it through the entire policy process is working.

Returning to our example of the NELS Act, think about the aforementioned challenges of evaluation in this scenario. With congressional action limiting the size of sodas available to purchase, a reasonable assessment of this policy might be if rates of obesity among Americans are falling. So data could be gathered that track obesity rates pre- and postimplementation of the policy. But this evaluation is challenging because rates of obesity might have little to do with consuming sodas. And since Americans would no longer be able to buy large sodas, could they still be drinking the same amount of soda, just buying more cups? This increased consumption of smaller containers may have implications for solid waste as well. Furthermore, consumption patterns of soda may have changed because (hypothetically) new, groundbreaking research proves that drinking coffee is the healthiest beverage for you and coffee producers have responded by making all sorts of palate-appealing coffee flavors for reluctant coffee drinkers. Additionally, making determinations about whether a policy is working often involves calculations around costs and benefits. How do we put a dollar figure on the costs associated with obesity so we can compare the costs associated with the benefits of the law? How do we calculate the lost soda sales convenience stores might experience—along with the bag of chips bought with a large soda—if this law takes effect? The point is, evaluating the success of our policy option is hard. And to top it off, policy evaluation can often compel a restart of the entire policy process.

Assessing the Stages Model

The stages model of public policymaking is very common owing to a variety of advantages that will be discussed shortly; but at the conclusion of this overview of the six steps, it should also be evident that there are flaws in this particular policy theory. Pause, and consider the pros and cons of this approach.

There are numerous advantages to this model, as evidenced by its continued use in policy studies and by the many pages spent discussing it here. In particular, this model offers a linear, methodical introduction to the complexities of policymaking. It provides a vocabulary to help discuss and comprehend policy, and its neatly divided stages of the policy process help foster understanding for those new to policy studies. After all, there is something to be said for a simple explanation of a complicated process.

However, there are drawbacks to consider. While it could be argued that a simple model is helpful, perhaps this model is too simple and does not adequately account for the reality of public policy. The model offers steps that appear discrete and sequential, but many times, various steps occur simultaneously and even out of order during real-life policymaking. Additionally, the six steps of the model would make it seem that each step takes a similar amount of time; however, that is not the case, and it varies wildly from policy to policy. The model does little to account for the web of actors who play a role in the policy process and provides no predictive value as well in helping forecast when and if a policy will make it to the next stage of the process. Finally, this model can lead to the conclusion that policymaking is methodical and rational when, in reality, government action is often not intentional and perhaps irrational.

Regardless of the pros and cons associated with this model, this approach does have staying power, and few other models are as widely studied and used as this one—perhaps it is the best policy model we can hope for, as we are unlikely to find a perfect model (Smith and Larimer 2009, 35). Although this model is the foundation to understanding policy, in the next section we explore some alternative models that have been developed in response to the critiques offered about the stages heuristic model: the Multiple Streams Framework and Punctuated Equilibrium.

Alternative Policy Process Models

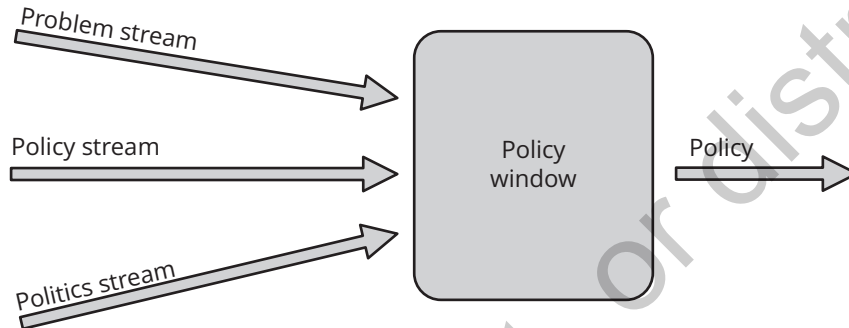
In the final pages of this chapter, we introduce two of the many alternative policy models that have been advanced in an effort to address some of the disadvantages of the stages model. John Kingdon's **Multiple Streams Framework** is an effort to account for the lack of sequential order of public policymaking; **Punctuated Equilibrium Theory**, advanced by Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones, speaks to how policymaking is often described in periods of stability and incrementalism while at other times it can be described in rapid and massive change.

Multiple Streams Framework

The Multiple Streams Framework (MSF) of policymaking speaks to the messy nature of the policy process and how policy is not often made in a neat, orderly fashion. Working in the 1970s

and early 1980s, John Kingdon was studying health care and transportation policy at the federal level, and through these investigations he sought an understanding of the agenda setting process, or Stage 2 as discussed earlier (see Kingdon 1984, 2010). But what he ultimately crafted in the MSF is a theory of policymaking in its own right. This model is built on three different “streams” that can converge in a “policy window,” which is where policymaking can occur. Consider each of the three streams and how they all may coalesce with a policy opening (see Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2 ■ Multiple Streams Framework



Think of a flowing stream. In the *problem stream* of the MSF, all sorts of public problems, issues, and challenges are flowing, mixing, and circulating. Some of the problems rise up to the surface of the stream; others sink toward the bottom. Actors in the policy process become cognizant of problems through indicators, or data and statistics about an issue, focusing events, and feedback on existing problems. Different problems captivate the attention of different policy actors, but all the problems exist together in the problem stream. The problem stream helps describe the mixing of problems that exist simultaneously and account for the interconnected problems.

Another flowing stream exists alongside the problem stream; this is the *policy stream*. This stream, which Kingdon referred to as the “policy primeval soup,” is the mix of ideas and solutions that vie to win traction and acceptance by policymakers in response to a particular problem. In other words, these are all the different ways any particular public problem might be addressed. These policy options may be in search of a particular problem, or they may be in direct response to a given problem. These ideas come in all shapes and sizes from everywhere you can imagine. They originate in hearings, the presentations and publications of researchers, or the ideas of policy actors. Some of the ideas evolve a lot in the stream, while other ideas exist in the stream in a more static manner.

The third stream running beside the other two streams is the *politics stream*. This is the stream that deals with all of the political aspects and considerations of policymaking. For example, this stream encapsulates the nation’s mood—what the citizens want or have the willingness to embrace. Additionally, this stream incorporates campaign and election cycles, which political

party is in power, and the politics of the political institutions. Here is where all the considerations surrounding politics come into play in the policy process. As in the other streams, different political facets surround different issues, and some rise to the top while others do not.

Each of the three streams described previously exists independently of one another in the MSF. Figure 2.2 provides a visual representation of these streams. But these streams can and do come together, and this coupling of the streams results in a *policy window* opening. When the streams converge—and it is difficult to predict or know what it will take for the streams to come together surrounding a particular issue—policy gets created. You can think of this as when all the stars—or streams, if you will—align and something happens. How long the policy window opens is uncertain, but it happens. If two streams come together, though, policymaking does not happen, according to this model. All three streams have to come together to result in a policy window.

Pros and Cons of the MSF

Kingdon's MSF is a policy model that is often presented in contrast to the stages model. Consider some of the advantages of this particular model over the stages approach. With the MSF, the unpredictability that is lacking in the stages model is (somewhat) addressed. Here, policymaking happens in a less orderly, more ad hoc manner. Furthermore, this model demonstrates that efforts surrounding problems, policy options, and politics happen simultaneously and may or may not be connected to one another. For some, this model is far more descriptive of policymaking in the real world. And the concept of the streams in this approach helps account for the ebbing and flowing of ideas and approaches that may not fit nicely into the six steps of the stages model. Yet, much like the stages model, the MSF does not help us predict when policy windows may open and policy gets made. In other words, there is little predictive value associated with this model as well. This model does not advance our understanding of who is included in policy debates and who is left out. Perhaps a strength *and* a weakness of this model is that the MSF conveys that policymaking is messy and often hard to describe. More recently, Luke Fowler (2023) has adapted MSF to help explain how policy is actually implemented, thereby expanding the scope of this model to more aspects of policymaking.

Punctuated Equilibrium

Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones, in their theorizing about public policy, sought to account for why policymaking often seems stable, while at other times rather dramatic. Before we get into their Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET) outright, we need to start with the theoretical underpinnings of this approach. Charles Lindblom advanced the idea of “muddling through,” or **incrementalism**, arguing that decision-making and governmental action are governed by small, incremental steps (Lindblom 1959). Paul Schulman responded to Lindblom, arguing that incrementalism is not a universal explanation for government action (Schulman 1975). Instead, Schulman contended that **nonincrementalism** is a better way to understand. In his explanations, he pointed to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration during the 1960s in its quest for a moon landing as evidence that swift and significant action is possible. PET endeavors to incorporate both perspectives on government decision-making and actions.

First published in 1993, *Agendas and Instability in American Politics* is the foundation for PET; Baumgartner and Jones argue that periods of stability (drawing on Lindblom) are periods of “equilibria” in policymaking. And periods of instability (drawing on Schulman) are periods of “punctuations.” Equilibrium is the most common. During these times, policymaking can and does happen, but it happens beneath the surface, if you will, often among policy subsystems. **Policy subsystems**, sometimes called issue networks, refer to the networks of actors working to achieve policy goals. Typically, these actors include representatives from interest groups, congressional staffers, and even those individuals working in government agencies. This type of policy work could be thought of as steady work among low-profile actors. Examples abound of policymaking during equilibrium, ranging from the next generation of airbags for passenger cars to updates on nutrition labels on food packages. While these issues undoubtedly garner attention from relevant industry sectors, government agencies, and even some politicians, the issues are worked on beneath the surface, and rarely do the debates boil up to the surface commanding national attention.

By contrast, policymaking during periods of punctuations is characterized by high-profile and dramatic action—or at least more dramatic than “business as usual.” During punctuations, which are typically far shorter and less common than periods of equilibria, a particular public problem or issue has galvanized attention from high-profile actors and commands national attention. Large-scale change happens during these periods at the macropolitical level. A historical example of a punctuation is the period after the Great Depression when the nation’s attention and energies were fixated on economics (c.f. Kettl 2013). Additional examples include efforts to replace Obamacare, particularly with the election of Donald Trump, and Republican control of Congress might be judged over time to be another period of punctuation. This leads to an important point about PET. Knowing how or when a punctuation will occur is very difficult, and it is typically only after a punctuation and significant policy change that a period of punctuation can be defined. In other words, it is hard to know when we are in a period of punctuation until after it is over.

Much like Kingdon’s MSF endeavored to address the less orderly process of policymaking, PET strives to explain why most of the time policymaking is incremental and moves along gradually, while during other times massive change can and does occur. Both theories stand in contrast to the stages heuristic model we spent the bulk of our time discussing.

These two models are not the only alternative theories, either. Policy observers and scholars are still trying to make sense out of the policymaking process and crafting different explanations. While we could fill the remaining pages of this entire book covering all of those perspectives, we opted to focus on MSF and PET; however, we also want to call attention to a couple of perspectives that might be intriguing. The Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) emerged in the early twenty-first century and it focuses on the role narratives play in the policymaking process (c.f. McBeth and Shanahan 2004; McBeth, Shanahan, and Jones 2005). We see all around us the importance of stories in conveying and perpetuating ideas and the realm of policy is no different. NPF provides a systematic way to study the influence of those stories. Deborah Stone’s Policy Paradox takes issue with the rational approach to policy theory arguing that policy is not rational and often paradoxical because policy is ultimately about bargaining in society over values and ideas instead of an orderly, rational process.

Policy studies has come a long way in trying to make sense out of the policy-making process in the United States, but it is also far from complete in that we do not have a definitive public policy theory. We have a variety of theories that do a credible job explaining how policy happens in some instances, but we lack one with universal applicability. At this juncture, the struggle policy scholars have with making sense of the policy process is understandable. Policy scholars also are grappling with how we consider which actors are included in policy debates and which actors are not. Much like not doing something is a policy action, exclusion of actors (intentional and unintentional) has implications. Perhaps you will come up with a policy model in the near future that replaces all of these models!

Actors in the Policy Process

Part of the challenge in devising public policy models has to do with the sheer number of actors, or individuals, who are involved in the creation and implementation of public policy. The remaining section of this chapter introduces the major categories of policy actors. In the subsequent chapters that focus on specific areas of public policy, those actors and their roles will be examined in greater detail. Think for a moment about all the individuals and organizations that might be involved in passenger cars and their safety features, like seat belts and airbags. Who might be on that list? Of course, there are the car manufacturers, the companies that make the safety equipment that car manufacturers install, there are drivers, there are auto repair mechanics, police officers, first responders (including paramedics and fire fighters who respond to traffic accidents), the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, Center for Auto Safety, Safe Kids Worldwide, *Consumer Reports*, Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety, the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, Automobile Manufacturers Association, the American Automobile Association, and the list goes on and on. The point is, there are far more actors involved than you might initially think, and we did not even include elected leaders, other government agencies, researchers, or even the media.

In an effort to ease our understanding of all the actors involved in policy, we start by introducing two broad categories of actors: official and unofficial. **Official actors** are those individuals and organizations in the policy process that have a constitutionally defined role in creating legislation. This category of actor includes legislative bodies, including Congress and state legislatures; executives, including the president, governors, and executive agencies; and the courts. This group of actors is responsible for passing laws, implementing laws, and evaluating the legality of those laws.

During the 1960s, public pressure mounted on lawmakers to make cars and the nation's highways safer, and Congress responded. In 1966, Congress passed laws requiring seat belts in cars and created the Department of Transportation. Then, in 1970, the Highway Safety Act was passed, which, among other things, created the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration within the Department of Transportation. These steps required action from Congress and the president. Since their passage, executive agencies have gone to work implementing these policies, and the courts have reviewed the government's work.

The category of **unofficial actors** refers to all the other people involved in policymaking, ranging from citizens, state legislatures, governors, and the media to lobbyists and representatives of a variety of organizations. Actors in this category may be the experts in a particular area, like automotive safety, and do extensive research about the latest safety methods and standards. Researchers in universities or “think tanks” may spend a good deal of time understanding the complexities of problems and coming up with possible solutions to those problems. Interest groups are very common, such as the American Automobile Association, better known as AAA; in addition to its efforts to provide services such as roadside assistance to stranded drivers and to educate the public about various subjects, it also lobbies lawmakers to take action on particular issues. Automobile manufacturers also have interests to represent, and they band together with other companies and lobby lawmakers as well. These actors were involved in the passage of the legislation mentioned above and continue to be active calling attention to safety concerns and the needs of drivers, auto manufacturers, and insurance companies, among others.

Concluding Thoughts

This chapter has provided the foundation and the language we need to talk about public policymaking in the United States. These fundamentals are critical as we collectively navigate significant and rather rapid changes unfolding with the second Trump administration, and these building blocks are essential in assessing what it is we want and expect from our government. It should be evident how complex the process is to create policy, as it is far more complicated than the legislative work of a bill becoming a law. To help us understand the intricacies of this process, we looked at the stages model of policymaking that is encapsulated in six steps: (1) problem identification and definition, (2) agenda setting, (3) policy formulation, (4) policy legitimation, (5) policy implementation, and (6) policy evaluation. We recognize policymaking is not entirely explained by this model, as it has strengths and weaknesses; therefore, we considered two alternative models: the Multiple Streams Framework and Punctuated Equilibrium Theory. While none of the models is perfect, they do provide us a means of talking about and analyzing policymaking, which are necessary for understanding the substantive policy chapters within this text. Part of the complexity of policy creation has to do with the number of actors—both official and unofficial—involved in the process. These discussions provide a foundation for us to explore in greater detail the nature of policymaking *after* a legislative body creates a law. The next chapter brings our attention to the multiple layers of government at work in public policy in our federal structure. Then, Chapter 4 details how legislative language is translated into actionable regulations.

Key Terms

Focusing events

Incrementalism

Multiple Streams Framework

Nonincrementalism

Official actors

Policy entrepreneurs

Policy subsystems

Risk assessment

Public policy

Unofficial actors

Punctuated Equilibrium Theory

Discussion Questions

1. Of the six stages outlined in the stages heuristic model of public policymaking, which is the most complicated and likely stage where a policy might fail? Why? Which stage is likely the easiest for a policy working its way through the process?
2. The stages heuristic model of public policymaking persists as arguably the most common model of policymaking. What are the advantages of this model? Where does this model fall short? In light of that evaluation, should this model continue to be used to introduce the policy process?
3. How do the policy models presented in this chapter help us understand who is and, perhaps more importantly, who is not included in policy debates? How does access to the policy debates affect policy outcomes? What can or should be done to increase access to these debates?
4. There are many public policy models that strive to explain policymaking, but a universally accepted one remains elusive. What are the essential elements of a policymaking model? Which elements are the most important to include versus other elements?
5. One of the challenges of policymaking is the multitude of actors involved in the process. Which actors do you think are the most influential, and why? Which actors are the least? Does the level of influence vary depending upon the policy issue? Which actors are likely to be the most vocal in the example of sugary drinks?
6. With your understanding of the policy process and actors involved, what types of careers might you pursue if you want to play a role in policymaking?

Suggested Resources

Suggested Websites

Congressional Bill Tracker, <http://www.congress.gov>.

Government Accountability Office, <http://www.gao.gov>.

National Conference of State Legislatures, <http://www.ncsl.org>.

Pew Research Center, <http://www.pewresearch.org>.

Suggested Books or Articles

Bardach, Eugene, and Eric M. Patashnik. 2015. *Practical Guide for Policy Analysis: The Eightfold Path to More Effective Problem Solving*. 5th ed. Washington, DC: CQ Press.

Birkland, Thomas A. 2019. *An Introduction to the Policy Process: Theories, Concepts, and Models of Public Policy Making*. 5th ed. New York, NY: Routledge.

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Weible, Christopher M., and Paul A. Sabatier, eds. 2023. *Theories of the Policy Process*. 5th ed. New York, NY: Routledge.

Suggested Films and Podcasts

I'm Just a Bill (Schoolhouse Rock!), Disney (1973: United States), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v5tyeJ55o3El0>.

Thank You for Smoking, Fox Searchlight Pictures (2005: United States).

Frontline's *The Power of Big Oil*, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/documentary/the-power-of-big-oil/>

Harvard Kennedy School's PolicyCast <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/policycast>

Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University's Policy 360 Podcast <https://sanford.duke.edu/news-events/podcasts/policy-360-podcast/>