

CHAPTER 11

The Policy Process

■ SETTING THE STAGE

On the morning of August 29, 2005, one of the strongest hurricanes ever recorded in American history made landfall in southeast Louisiana.¹ By the time the storm reached the Louisiana shores, it had been downgraded from a category 5 to category 3 storm. However, it was still sufficiently deadly to wreak havoc over an area of 100 square miles from its center. The storm surge caused immense damage along the coastlines of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, making Katrina one of the most devastating natural disasters in U.S. history. Perhaps the most lasting images associated with Katrina, however, were of the storm's path through the city of New Orleans and the aftermath of flooding there.

New Orleans, in the direct path of the storm, met with a disaster of epic proportions. The potential for destruction was so enormous because much of the city's metropolitan area is below sea level along Lake Pontchartrain, placing New Orleans at risk for severe flooding. On August 29, the nightmare scenario long feared by many in New Orleans occurred as the hurricane's storm surge breached the system of levees around the city in many places, putting approximately 80 percent of the city under water. Although New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin had ordered a mandatory evacuation on August 28, thousands of residents remained behind as the storm battered the city. Many who took refuge in the Convention Center and the Superdome were stranded there for days in horrific conditions. Looting in parts of the city bore witness to a major breakdown in law and order.

While Katrina's catastrophic human and financial toll (more than 1,800 lives lost, almost as many declared missing, and approximately \$75 billion in damage) assure its place in U.S. history as one of the deadliest storms, our primary interest with Katrina here has to do with what the disaster has to tell us about the policy process. Government responses to the storm at the federal, state, and local levels received severe criticism for the lack of planning and coordination that caused significant delays in providing needed assistance. Media coverage of the looting and suffering in New Orleans portrayed a breakdown in public policy.

Prior to Katrina, probably few Americans took more than a passing interest in the country's natural disaster policies and in the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). However, in the weeks and months after New Orleans was flooded, disaster policy at all levels of government was subject to intense scrutiny by politicians, the media, and the public. Hurricane Katrina provides a classic example of how a problem seizes the public's attention, temporarily forcing all other issues off the agenda. Public interest in an issue often reaches an intensity that then subsides as other problems assert themselves.



The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (August 2005) revealed fatal flaws in the disaster policies of all levels of U.S. government.

SOURCE: Wesley Bocxe/The Image Works

To study the **public policy** process is to examine how government decides what to do and the impact those decisions have on the lives of citizens. It is the process by which problems come to the attention of government, agendas are developed, alternatives are established, and decisions are made, then implemented and evaluated. Students of public policy are driven by questions of why some problems capture the attention of policymakers and result in governmental action and others do not, and which government actions make a real impact on the lives of its citizens and why they have such an effect. Government officials are faced with an unlimited number of problems and limited resources in terms of time, money, and human capital. Yet regulations are established, laws do get passed, money is appropriated, and agencies are authorized.

Public policy Any decision-making done on behalf of or affecting the public, especially that which is done by government.

■ CHAPTER PLAN

The policy process can be a bewilderingly complex subject, with a multitude of participants both inside and outside government. In order to come to terms with this complexity, scholars have developed a number of theories and models of policy-making. Each highlights certain aspects of the process, diminishes others, and therefore contains both strengths and weaknesses. For practitioners of public policy, models and theories suggest possible means of influencing policy outputs and outcomes. It is important to note that there is no grand

theory of the policy process that will completely explain or accurately predict governmental outcomes, but several fundamentals can be identified and explored for greater insights into how and why certain policies are proposed, decided upon, and implemented. In this chapter, we discuss several important theories of the policy process, beginning with a detailed examination of the policy cycle. We then explore some other helpful models, including incrementalism, policy streams and agendas, rational choice, and the advocacy coalition framework. The rest of the chapter discusses program implementation and evaluation, two important stages of the policy process.

Going Beyond the Institutional Approach

Students are often presented with a view of the policy process focusing on the government and its institutions. Most students have seen a basic flow chart describing how bills are introduced in the legislature, proceed to signature by the executive, and undergo the process of legislative review. This familiar depiction can be described as the institutional view of the policy-making process. This view of public policy is only partially accurate, however. Harold D. Lasswell defined the field as the “knowledge of and in the decision processes of the public and civil order.”² His definition recognized that any attempt to draw a dividing line between government and nongovernment decision-making is difficult, since many public sector issues are heavily influenced by the private sector and vice versa.

Thus, any attempt to develop greater knowledge of the process must extend beyond a purely legalistic view of how laws are made or court decisions are reached. The institutional view of policy-making depicts the process as an organizational chart listing the various governmental institutions involved and their formal lines of communication. The policy process, however, also includes issues of power, conflict, influence, and perspective not included in the institutional approach. In this chapter, we go beyond the institutional model to examine the policy process through the different lenses provided by other frameworks.³

The Policy Cycle

The concept of policy as a cycle or series of stages is helpful as an introductory concept, since it represents an understandable, if not totally accurate, means of understanding the policy process. This model highlights the policy process as having a life cycle with different stages, and it recognizes that there are many participants involved, both inside and outside government agencies. The **policy cycle** consists of eight stages: (1) agenda setting, (2) problem definition, (3) alternative selection, (4) authoritative decision, (5) policy design, (6) program implementation, (7) program evaluation, and (8) termination or change (see [Figure 11.1](#)).

Policy cycle The concept of public policy as a cycle or series of stages.

Agenda setting refers to the process by which problems first come to the attention of policymakers. Because society always faces myriad problems and issues, agenda setting involves a competition of ideas and a means of bringing those ideas to the attention of the public and those in positions of power. Mothers against Drunk Driving (MADD), for example, through effective use of the media, orchestrated a successful campaign to stiffen penalties on drunk drivers. Agenda setting is a means of setting the stage for subsequent action. By directing the public’s attention to the emotional and economic costs of accidents involving drunk drivers, MADD helped to focus policymakers on this issue, and eventually legislation was passed to address the problem. Bill Clinton helped bring the issue of welfare reform to the forefront of national attention in his campaign for the presidency in 1992, although it had been a national priority for many years even before then. Republicans gained control of the House of Representatives in 1994 in part because they campaigned on a platform of welfare reform even more radical than the one Clinton advocated. Thus, reforming welfare was a well-established item on the national policy agenda by 1996.

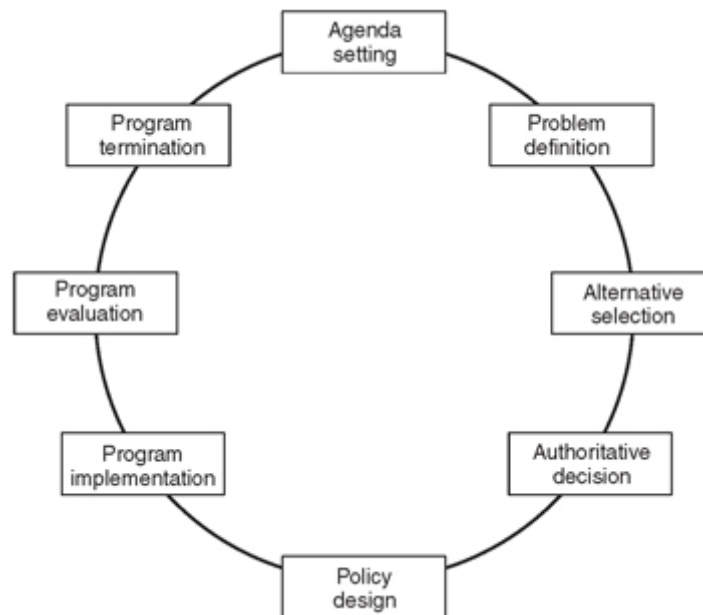


Figure 11.1 The Policy Cycle

Problem definition provides the framework within which interventions are considered and defined as potential solutions. Problem definition is a very important stage, since every definition carries with it a series of proposed solutions that lead directly to the stages of alternative selection and policy design. Problem definition is an inherently political process involving competition between interest groups that attempt to cast the problem in a way that leads to solutions they prefer. When problems are defined as organizational, restructuring is often the solution of choice. Communication problems can result in

solutions involving education and advertising. Problems defined as involving leadership often result in the replacement of responsible administrators. In the case study at the end of this chapter, the problem of low numbers of army recruits was defined as a marketing issue, resulting in a predictable set of solutions. In the case of welfare reform, the problem was defined as dependency on government subsidies by many generations in the same family, and individuals who were dependent on society as a matter of personal choice, as opposed to hardship caused by illness or economic conditions. Defined in this way, any possible solution had to set strict limits on the amount of time one could spend on the welfare rolls. This provision was indeed an important part of the eventual legislation.

Alternative selection involves the means by which some solutions, and not others, are presented to policymakers for decision-making. Inherent in this concept is a rational decision-making model that includes the process of collecting information on the advantages and disadvantages of each alternative course of action, then selecting the best one. It involves a narrowing of alternatives to those that are feasible within existing constraints, including available resources and public will. Those who establish or control the listing of alternative courses of action hold real power, since they restrict the range of policies and programs that will result. For example, consider the possible responses of a city traffic engineer when residents complain to elected officials about an inordinate number of traffic accidents involving pedestrians at an intersection in their neighborhood. When presenting possible solutions, the engineer will look for alternatives that meet the demands of the citizens and the city council with an eye to cost effectiveness. The engineer might recommend to the council several courses of action, including more police drive-bys, speed-limit changes, or placement of a stop sign. The engineer probably would not suggest costly intersection redesign initiatives, such as building a pedestrian bridge or hiring full-time crossing guards. The community might later demand additional alternatives, but initially the council considers the list of alternatives provided by the engineer, who assumes an important role in the policy process because of professional expertise.

Authoritative decision-making recognizes that no public program or policy results without there being first an act of government. The legislature passes laws, authorizes spending for programs, and issues resolutions. The president issues executive orders and signs laws into effect, while administrative agencies promulgate regulations. The courts render opinions. Each is a means of publicly announcing the result of a decision by those invested with the authority to do so. Every authoritative decision represents the outcome of an inherently political process involving various interests and ideologies. Welfare reform was enacted as part of an election-year compromise reached by the Democratic president, Bill Clinton, and the Republican-controlled Congress. Neither side received exactly what it wanted from the 1996 welfare reform act, but both sides could legitimately claim victory and could use it as a campaign issue.

Policy design involves the stated intent of policymakers and its translation into plans for programs administered by government officials. It involves the establishment of guidance to agencies that must achieve program goals and objectives that may or may not be stated in detail. It may involve elements of intent, oversight, review, and revision. For example, in response to highly publicized incidents of hate crimes and testimony by civil-rights advocacy groups in the late 1980s, Congress passed Public Law 101-275, which was signed by President George H. W. Bush, directing the attorney general to collect data about crimes that manifest prejudice based on group characteristics. The law expressed the intent of Congress, including that the data should be used only for research or statistical purposes, that the identity of victims of crime should be protected, and that nothing in the law should create a cause of action based on discrimination due to sexual orientation. In the case of welfare reform, the new Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) legislation meant that the states and not the federal government would be responsible for designing new programs to move people from the welfare rolls to jobs and increased personal responsibility. Provided that they meet certain federal guidelines, states now have greater discretion and flexibility in devising public assistance strategies.

Program implementation recognizes that the actual outcomes of a program may not resemble what the decisionmakers originally intended. As the number of participants involved in implementing a policy increases, so does the likelihood that the program will not be implemented in the manner envisioned by the decisionmakers. This helps to explain why programs with otherwise good intentions sometimes fail when put into practice. In general, states in implementing welfare reform have stressed both short-term job strategies and long-term education and training programs. Most states realize that long-term strategies are needed to keep people off welfare by promoting job retention, increased earnings, and career development. Poverty analysts are

finding that because single mothers usually can get only low-paying jobs, the government must still provide them with enough subsidies for a decent living. (At the end of this chapter, we examine implementation in more detail.)

Program evaluation is the means of determining what actually happens after a policy has been implemented. It involves an assessment of program processes and impacts, focusing on aspects that are observable or measurable. It may involve the determination of whether the program is reaching its intended targets, whether it is having the intended effect, whether administrators are meeting established standards of operation, or whether the program is cost-effective. Key to the idea of program evaluation is that there should be some assessment of the relative worth of a program. Program evaluation is similar to the idea of the performance review or audit, discussed in [Chapter 4](#). Ideally, program evaluation should consider intended as well as unintended consequences. (We discuss program evaluation in more detail at the end of this chapter.)

Program termination addresses what happens to a program once the problem for which it was initiated has been solved. Programs and the organizations that administer them are extraordinarily resilient, especially within the government. They are far more likely to change their approach and goals to garner continued resources for operation than they are to actually terminate.

Models of the Policy Process

The policy cycle model is an elegant way of looking at the actions of government, but it is not without deficiencies. Other models have been developed to incorporate elements missing from the policy cycle model. These include policy streams, rational choice, and the advocacy coalition framework, each of which is discussed below. Several of the most notable problems with the policy cycle model surround the inference that the policy proceeds in an orderly progression from one stage to the next.⁴ Reality rarely conforms to such a tidy and rational model. Multiple phases of the process occur simultaneously and out of order. Some rarely occur at all, as in the case of policy termination. Different players in the process have varying levels of power and access to information. Still, the cycle approach holds an influential spot in public policy circles, prompting a large amount of high-quality research. But other models highlight the contentious nature of competition for the attention of policymakers and the dynamic nature of policy change.

Incrementalism and Sweeping Change

Incrementalism, which was discussed in [Chapter 9](#) as a concept for explaining organizational decision-making, also has been used to explain the policy process, which often proceeds in small steps. Incrementalism reflects the limitations of humans in dealing with the complexity inherent in the policy process. Robert Dahl and Charles Lindblom introduced the concept of incrementalism as a means of comparing the gains and losses of closely related alternatives as a substitute for the rational calculation of all possible choices.⁵

Incrementalism The theory that public policy occurs in a series of small, incremental steps or changes and not all at once.

Although incrementalism may serve to describe policy change most of the time, there are indeed periods of sweeping change.⁶ The American democratic system is designed more to balance competing interests and to safeguard individual rights than it is to be efficient. It is therefore institutionally resistant to change, yet it also provides for mobilization of public opinion. Of the many issues facing elected officials, most do not engender widespread interest among the American public. Most issues are confined to groups of experts or advocates, and as long as the debate on a public issue is confined to interest groups, policy networks, or policy subsystems, stability reigns supreme. **Policy subsystems** are groups of people with a common interest in an issue, including experts, advocates, and officials. Occasionally an issue will escape the confines of a policy subsystem and reach the national consciousness—and it is during these periods that widespread change takes place.

Policy subsystems Groups of people with a common interest in an issue, including experts, advocates, and officials.

It is difficult to predict what will move an issue out of a policy subsystem, but it can involve pressures both internal and external to government. The role of the media is an important one in this process, as it focuses public attention on issues through investigative reporting and news coverage. For instance, during the 1980s, homelessness emerged from the poverty and housing policy subsystems to briefly capture the national interest, with the help of media attention, only to subside back to the relative obscurity of those subsystems by the early 1990s.

Policy Streams

The models discussed above emphasize the stable nature of the policy process over time. The policy cycle, iron triangles, and policy networks suggest a static policy process, and incrementalism suggests only small changes from one point to the next. Even the model accounting for sweeping change cannot tell us anything about what gives rise to these changes. To understand why events in the realm of public policy often appear to be random and unpredictable, we must turn to the model of policy streams.

John Kingdon sought to understand why some issues come to the attention of decisionmakers while others do not.⁷ His **policy streams** theory therefore focuses on the agenda setting and alternative selection stages of the policy cycle. He concluded that a complex combination of factors is responsible for the arrival of an issue on the policy agenda, and he advised that attempts to pinpoint their origin are futile. Using the metaphor of streams, Kingdon expanded on the garbage can model of change in organizations.⁸ The **garbage can model**, or organized anarchy, reflects a fluid and somewhat random process as people, problems, and solutions flow together. (For more on the garbage can theory, see Vignette 11.1.) Kingdon asserts that there are three separate streams operating independently of each other, consisting of problems, policies, and politics. Problems are issues occupying the attention of people both inside and outside government. Policies refer to ideas and ready-made solutions held and promoted by specialists and policy entrepreneurs within policy communities. Policy community participants have their own agendas and seek to promote their desired solutions at every opportunity. The political stream represents public opinion, changes in political party dominance, and interest-group pressures.

Policy streams The theory that a complex combination of factors is responsible for the arrival of an issue on the policy agenda, and that attempts to pinpoint their origin are futile.

Garbage can model The theory that the policy process is marked by fluidity and a certain degree of randomness as people, problems, and solutions flow together and apart.

At certain unpredictable times, the streams come together, often in response to a well-publicized focusing event or series of events, resulting in a window of opportunity for policy change. The focusing event might be a single horrific event such as a plane crash, prompting calls for increased airline safety measures. Or a series of events such as the recurring depictions of widespread welfare fraud in the 1990s might bring public attention to the issue and contribute to calls for welfare reform. In any case, the window of opportunity for policy change remains open for only a limited amount of time. Attention eventually moves elsewhere. The problem may be solved, or realization of the complexity of the problem dawns and policymakers and the public begin to lose interest.



VIGNETTE 11.1 Garbage Cans and Public Policies

An influential approach to organizational decisionmaking that draws on bounded rationality is Cohen, March, and Olsen's "garbage can" model, or organized anarchies.^a (Bounded rationality refers to the idea that in rational decision-making, humans have various limitations.) In this approach, decision-making is marked by fluidity, as people, opportunities, problems, and solutions flow together and apart at different times.^b In contrast to the traditional model of decision-making, a degree of randomness characterizes the garbage can approach. Problems develop a life of their own, while "solutions no one originally intended or even expected may be generated, or no solutions at all. Some problems simply waste away."^c As a consequence of bounded rationality, administrators participate in certain decisions on the basis of their needs, overall objectives, and time constraints. They have personal agendas they are trying to advance, which results in their putting forth ideas that are problems in search of a solution or solutions in search of a problem.^d After a problem has been "solved," the participants presume a rational process existed all along. The difference with the traditional top-down approach could not be more striking.

a. Michael D. Cohen, James C. March, and Johan P. Olsen, "A Garbage Can Model of Organizational Choice," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 17:1 (1972): 1–25.

b. Michael Vasu, Debra Stewart, and G. David Garson, *Organizational Behavior and Public Management* (New York: Marcel Dekker, 1998), 42.

c. Charles Perrow, *Complex Organizations: A Critical Essay* (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1986), 135.

d. Vasu, Stewart, and Garson, *Organizational Behavior and Public Management*, 42.

As an example of policy streams in action, consider the enactment of hate crime legislation mentioned earlier in the chapter. Anecdotal accounts of shocking crimes against minorities received media attention and served as focusing events. Watchdog agencies such as the Anti-defamation League and the Southern Poverty Law Center maintained lists of bias-motivated incidents and tirelessly advocated for a government response. Faced with the perception of a rising epidemic of hate crimes and a national mood that considered prejudice-motivated crimes unacceptable in a democratic and diverse society, Congress enacted the Hate Crimes Statistics Act of 1990. The act changed crime-reporting policy by mandating that the attorney general acquire and publish data on crimes motivated by prejudice. The FBI and Bureau of Justice Statistics both opposed the act, expressing doubts as to the degree to which the motivation of perpetrators could be discerned by police officers. But records of congressional testimony indicate that the initiative had widespread public support.



Hate crimes directed against minorities by groups such as the Ku Klux Klan received media attention and served as focusing events prompting legislation.

SOURCE: Michael Greenlar/The Image Works

The policy streams theory recognizes the unpredictable nature of policy change, since it is not possible to predict the occurrence of focusing events. It is an approach best used retrospectively, when trying to explain a particular policy change.

Rational Choice

Rational choice theory emphasizes organizational decision-making behavior as influenced by incentives and rules in an institutional setting. Decisionmakers are assumed to seek outcomes that are in their own self-interest. In other words, decisionmakers seek to maximize their personal interest—a concept examined in [Chapter 7](#) in the discussion of public choice theory. Self-interest can be restated in rational choice terms as “utility.” Utility refers to the extent to which the wants and needs of an individual are satisfied. Given a number of possible outcomes, a rational individual can be expected to choose a course of action that will produce the maximum gain. Such assumptions permit the computer modeling of decision-making under various incentives and rules, an application of rational choice known as **game theory**.

Rational choice The theory that individuals attempt to maximize their interests in the policy process.

Game theory The application of rational choice theory to hypothetical situations using computer simulations.

The **Prisoner’s Dilemma** (see Vignette 11.2) is a classic example of the application of game theory to a hypothetical situation.⁹ The Prisoner’s Dilemma is a simple game with only two decision points, limited information exchange between the participants, and outcomes that are precise. When there are multiple outcomes, varying amounts of information, and ambiguity of outcomes, the game can become quite complex and unwieldy.¹⁰ Interestingly, some of the concepts from game theory can be applied to administrative or institutional settings.

Prisoner’s Dilemma An example of the use of game theory in a simple decision-making situation.



VIGNETTE 11.2 The Prisoner's Dilemma

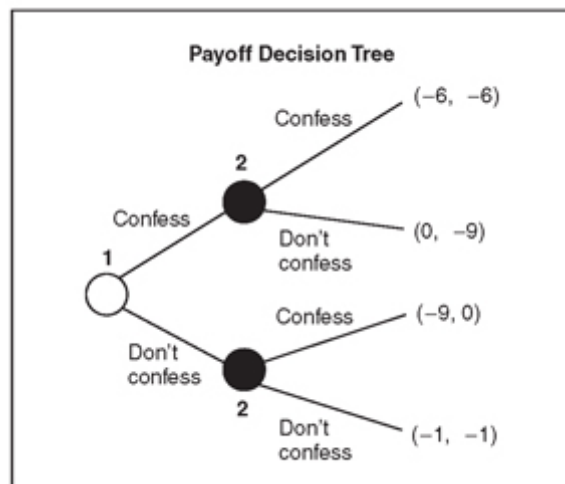
The Prisoner's Dilemma, an example of game theory, considers the possible courses of action available to two suspects who are arrested for committing a crime. In order to obtain a conviction, the police need to obtain the cooperation of one of the suspects. The suspects are held in separate cells and are not permitted to talk to each other. The police present both suspects with several options that depend on their level of cooperation. If neither suspect confesses, then both will be convicted of a minor offense with a one-month sentence. If both confess, they will both be sentenced to prison for a six-month sentence. If only one confesses, that prisoner will be released while the other will receive a nine-month sentence.

The options and payoffs can be depicted in several ways. For example, the following table depicts the various payoffs for the different courses of action.

Another way to depict the options is a decision tree. In the figure, the Payoff Decision Tree identifies the various courses of action at each stage of the game and their resulting payoffs. Number 1 in the figure indicates the first decision point. Decision points are also known as nodes. At the first node, the first prisoner has two choices, either confess or don't confess. Each branch of the tree represents an alternative choice. Number 2 indicates the second player's decision point. The second player is faced with the same two choices, confess or don't confess. The dotted line indicates that the second prisoner must make this decision without knowledge of the choice made by prisoner one. The payoffs for each course of action are depicted in parentheses at the end of the diagram.

Table of Payoffs

	Confess	Don't Confess
Confess	-6, -6	0, -9
Don't Confess	-9, 0	-1, -1



Payoff Decision Tree



In the Prisoner's Dilemma, an example of game theory, prisoners have to make a decision: confess or stay silent.

SOURCE: Aaron Lambert-Pool/Getty

A model by Elinor Ostrom applies elements of game theory to administration as it identifies a number of important structural elements present in organizational decision-making.¹¹ It recognizes that there are multiple levels in decision-making, each constrained by the decision of the level above it. For example, the provision of public services by government agencies is constrained by laws and regulations from the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government that are themselves constrained by the Constitution. At each level, the actions of decisionmakers depend on resources available, attributes of the community, and rules in use. The decision outcomes are a function of the actors involved in decision-making, the situation at hand, and the patterns of interaction in place.

Institutional rational choice represents a sophisticated means of envisioning the policy process. It suggests that changes in any of the factors, such as rules or patterns of interaction, will produce different policy outcomes. It also accounts for the impact of the community and available resources on the policy environment. Another approach considering similar elements, but with an emphasis on the competitive and changing nature of the process, is provided by the advocacy coalition framework, discussed below.

The Advocacy Coalition Framework

The advocacy coalition framework (ACF) focuses on policy subsystems rather than official institutions of government, and it emphasizes the importance of core beliefs or values that drive coalitions to compete for influence in the policy

VIGNETTE 11.2 The Prisoner's Dilemma

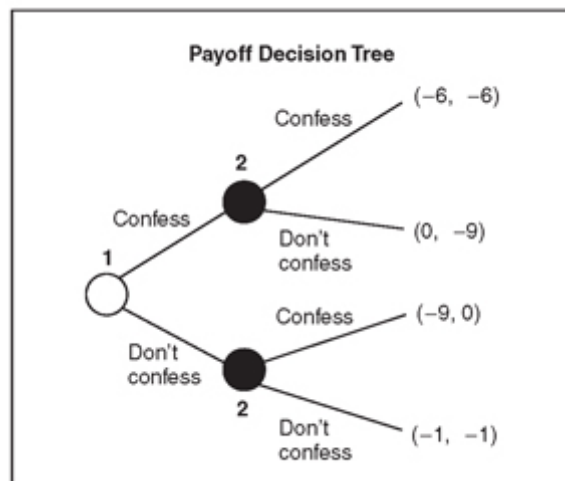
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Implementation

Implementation is the stage of the policy process in which policies are carried out by public agencies, but the actual outcomes of a program may not resemble what the decisionmakers originally intended. Every policy results in at least three realities: policy in intention, policy in action, and policy in experience.²⁰ This notion recognizes that policy, as developed and intended by lawmakers, may markedly differ from the policy put into effect or implemented by agents of government, while the policy eventually experienced by the public may be something else entirely. Those who develop policies are usually not the ones who put them into effect. Pressman and Wildavsky addressed this phenomenon in a landmark work that analyzed why efforts to increase minority employment in Oakland California by a well-funded agency of the federal government, the Economic Development Administration, failed in the 1960s. The long title of the book is a particularly clever introduction to the contents: *Implementation: How Great Expectations in Washington Are Dashed in Oakland; or, why it's amazing that federal programs work at all, this being a saga of the Economic Development Administration as told by two sympathetic observers who seek to build morals on a foundation of ruined hopes.*

Implementation The stage of the policy process in which policies are carried out by public agencies; it recognizes that the actual outcomes of a program may not resemble what the decisionmakers originally intended.

In the Oakland case, it initially appeared as though all the means for success were at hand. Plenty of funds were available, public and private entities were in agreement, agencies were staffed by dedicated and hard-working professionals, and there was a sense of urgency. The project was developed during a time of social unrest. Policymakers saw economic development leading to minority employment as a means of avoiding race riots. Despite the dedication of \$23 million in federal funds in 1968, only \$3 million were actually spent by 1969, and most of that went to a highway project that probably would have been built without the federal initiative.²¹ But the program involved a myriad of players at the federal, state, local, and private levels. Each agency had its own agenda and definition of success, conflicting organizational goals, and preferences. As the authors conclude, “the multiplicity of participants and perspectives combined to produce a formidable obstacle course for the program. When a program depends on so many actors, there are numerous possibilities for disagreement and delay.”²²

The larger the number of participants involved, the greater the chance that a program will be distorted, changed, co-opted, or delayed. Pressman and Wildavsky also used probability theory to demonstrate that the ultimate success of public programs requires near-perfection in execution at each step in the process. Failure in any link in the chain of implementation practically guarantees failure for the program as a whole. Pressman and Wildavsky point out that even if a venture can be assured of a 90 percent likelihood of success at each step, it takes only seven steps to lower the probability of total program success to below 50 percent!²³

Given that public policies are hard to implement, what can administrators do to even the odds? Steven Kelman suggests several things that can be done to “have a fighting chance of success” in this endeavor. First, administrators must plan early. Second, they must be willing to deal with contingencies and other unforeseen problems. Third, planning requires group decision-making. Fourth, it helps to keep the program as simple as possible, since this reduces the need for a lot of coordination and control. Finally, successful implementation might require changing organizational culture.²⁴

Pressman and Wildavsky's work was more than a call for simplicity in execution; it also sought a deeper understanding of the nature of policy. They observed that policy objectives are often vague, multiple, and contested, while our ability to understand is limited and the environment is constantly changing. They saw policy implementation as the process of constantly shifting relationships between resource constraints and objectives. Policy could not be viewed as an inclusive model or blueprint handed off to government workers to dutifully execute according to plan. According to Wildavsky: “If planning were judged by results, that is, by whether life followed the dictates of the plan, then planning has failed everywhere it has been tried. Nowhere are plans fulfilled. No one, it turns out, has the knowledge to predict sequences of actions and reactions across the realm of public policy, and no one has the power to compel obedience.”²⁵ On the other hand, there is clearly a need for accountability in implementation, lest programs morph in ways outside of or in conflict with the intent of lawmakers. Programs are not fire and forget systems. They exist in an environment of democratic accountability wherein they must bear the continuous scrutiny of elected officials and the public at large.

Pressman and Wildavsky's research heralded an era of high-quality implementation studies that sought to gain insights into policy in action. Of particular interest was a means for determining whether programs could be deemed successes or failures. Programs are labeled as failures when they provide inconsistent service, not enough service, or the wrong service to the targeted population. Case studies like Pressman and Wildavsky's focused on a specific policy and provided context-rich insights into successes and failures of government programs. Some studies attempted to identify factors in general that contribute to successful program implementation. One study identified four variables that contribute to program success or failure: (1) quality and effectiveness of communication between decisionmakers and implementers; (2) sufficiency of resources such as staff, authority, equipment, and funds; (3) dispositions or attitudes of those implementing the policy; and (4) appropriate bureaucratic structure.²⁶

Evaluation

The concept of implementation is closely associated with that of program **evaluation**, because it is through evaluation that interested parties obtain information about the reality of policy in action and policy in experience.²⁷ One definition of program evaluation is: "The use of social research procedures to systematically investigate the effectiveness of social intervention programs that is adapted to their political and organizational environments

and designed to inform social action in ways that improve social conditions.”²⁸ At the heart of evaluation is the concept that some relative worth or value can be attached to programs in order to judge their effectiveness and efficiency.

Evaluation The means of determining what actually happens after policy approval; it involves an assessment of program processes and impacts, focusing on aspects that are observable or measurable.

Evaluation is the means for answering the questions of what is happening to whom and at what cost. It provides a feedback loop to policymakers and implementers as they continually react to the public’s demands for service. The means of doing so encompass a wide variety of methods of social science research, including survey research, program monitoring through management information systems, interviews and observation, experimentation, and cost-benefit or cost-efficiency analysis. (For more on management information systems, see [Chapter 15](#)).

Evaluation research gained prominence after the Great Society initiatives of the 1960s as questions arose over whether expensive and expansive programs were accomplishing their intended effects. Application of sophisticated social science research methods was heralded as a means to determine what works and what doesn’t. Despite the rational basis of program evaluation, it takes place in a highly charged political environment that accounts for the contentious nature with which evaluation results are often received. It also helps explain why program administrators and policymakers often do not act on the best efforts and recommendations of evaluation researchers, an observation that causes no small amount of consternation among evaluators. Today, evaluation researchers are encouraged to conduct careful analysis of stakeholders (interested parties) and to determine the real purpose for an evaluation request before committing themselves to a project.²⁹ The objective for the evaluator is to provide information useful in developing future programs or modifying existing programs to better accomplish their intended purpose. In some cases this leads to recommendations that a program be expanded, curtailed, or cancelled—findings that will inevitably result in ardent challenge or support from those invested in the running of the program or its opponents. Evaluation reports rarely lack controversy.

While recognizing that no two evaluations are exactly alike, Rossi, Freeman, and Lipsey identify five common approaches to evaluation based on the types of organizational questions they address. First, needs assessments identify the scope and nature of problems in need of intervention. Second, program theory assessments make explicit how the program is supposed to attain its goals and then whether that approach is appropriate to the task. Third, process evaluations are oriented to the implementation phase of a program and are interested in how well the program is operating. Fourth, impact assessments are designed to determine the extent to which a program accomplished its intended outcome. Lastly, efficiency assessments are focused on the relationship of costs to program outcomes.³⁰ The environment of evaluation and the wide variety of tools available to the researcher suggest that the skilled evaluator is as much an artist and diplomat as scientist.

■ Chapter Summary

Various theories and models help us to understand the complexities of the policy process. The policy cycle depicts a process of eight discrete stages or steps: (1) agenda setting, (2) problem definition, (3) alternative selection, (4) authoritative decision-making, (5) policy design, (6) program implementation, (7) program evaluation, and (8) termination or change. Incrementalism views policy change as proceeding through a number of small steps or incremental adjustments over time. The policy streams model highlights the unpredictable nature of policy changes by focusing on the complexity of the mix of factors that lead to the emergence of an issue on the policy agenda. Rational choice models assert that the policy process can be treated like a mathematical problem; these models suggest that policy problems can be solved through the application of sophisticated methods like game theory. The policy paradox model, however, asserts that policy-making is anything but rational. Policy-making is a political art.

It should be clear that varying approaches are appropriate, given the lack of a grand theory and the desire to focus on a particular aspect of policy. The student interested in how policy changes over time might be well served by applying different facets of each theory.

The chapter also examines program implementation and evaluation. Implementation is a critical (perhaps the most critical) stage of the policy process and one that is still not well understood. It often poses seemingly insurmountable difficulties for administrators, who have to navigate a complex maze of players and their agendas. Finally, program evaluation is designed to get at the heart of the effectiveness and efficiency question for government programs. This often entails the use of quite sophisticated techniques and methods. Evaluation often occurs within a highly contentious setting as the fate of programs, or at least their reputations, might be at stake.

■ Chapter Discussion Questions

Why is it important to examine multiple theories and frameworks when explaining the policy process?

2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of viewing policy as a cycle or series of discrete stages?
3. What is the media's role in the policy process when issues escape policy subsystems?
4. According to Ostrom's framework, what constrains the actions of decisionmakers as they address public problems?
5. Why is there often such a difference between what policymakers intend when they authorize governmental programs and what happens at the local level when those programs are implemented?

BRIEF CASE MARKETING THE ARMY TO GENERATION X

Despite force reductions resulting in the smallest U.S. Army since World War II, recruiters experienced increasing difficulty attracting qualified enlistees in the late 1990s. In fiscal year 1999, the army missed its recruiting goal by 8 percent, reflecting a shortfall of over 6,000 soldiers. A healthy economy, record low unemployment, and increased college enrollment from high school contributed to the problem. Increased enlistment bonuses and college tuition grants failed to attract sufficient recruits. In response, Congress approved \$113 million to aid military recruiting, an increase from \$85 million two years earlier.

In 2001, the army changed its long-standing recruiting motto from "Be All You Can Be" to "An Army of One." The new slogan replaced one of America's most recognized advertising campaigns, one that had been used for two decades. The new approach emphasized the U.S. Army as a collection of individual soldiers, each with a unique story. Slick television and print media commercials focused on the challenges and triumphs of specific named soldiers. The campaign was influenced in part by market research indicating that the young men and women of Generation X comprising the pool of eligible recruits were concerned about losing their individual identity.

In this example, we see that the problem of low enlistment was defined as a recruiting or marketing problem, a definition that at its outset held preset solutions, including increased spending on bonuses and advertisement. When financial inducements failed, emphasis switched to one of improving the army's image through advertising, but it remained essentially defined as a recruiting problem. Why wasn't the problem identified as one resulting from how recruits are treated once they enter the army? Such a problem definition would involve a completely different set of potential solutions, ones that would likely be associated with attitudes and practices within the organization. It is a definition that would require solutions that are potentially more difficult to implement and potentially threatening to some. The definition of the problem as a recruiting rather than an organizational issue therefore may have represented solutions preferred by the dominant group of policymakers.

Brief Case Questions

1. *What factors caused the army recruitment problem to reach the agenda of policymakers?*
1. *What possible alternative solutions are suggested if the problem is defined not as a recruiting problem but as an inability to keep trained personnel after they enlist? In what other ways could this problem be defined?*
1. *Who stood to gain by defining the problem as a marketing issue? Why?*

■ Key Terms

advocacy coalition framework (ACF) ([page 268](#))

policy cycle ([page 259](#))

evaluation ([page 272](#))

policy streams ([page 264](#))

game theory ([page 266](#))

policy subsystems ([page 264](#))

garbage can model ([page 264](#))

Prisoner's Dilemma ([page 266](#))

implementation ([page 271](#))

public policy ([page 258](#))

incrementalism ([page 263](#))

rational choice ([page 266](#))