

# The Politics of Public Policy

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# PREFACE

Jumping into the complexity of the academic study of public policy with its attendant theories and schools of thought can and does frustrate students. A way to draw students into the study of public policy is to make use of their sincere, if inchoate, fascination with politics. “Wow, that last presidential election was exciting!” “The reaction to the health care reform package sure got a lot of people riled up!” “The wrangling over the budget sequester really got ugly.” These musings are highly commonplace and also highly political in and of themselves. They reflect an interest in power, competition, fairness, and personalities—the things that make the political world interesting for most of us. These statements also have numerous connections to the policy process and to policies themselves. It is a basic tenet of this text’s approach that most of us come to study public policy not because we want to know more about public policy as an academic subject, but because we are intrigued by politics and we infer that there is a link between the two. While this is true, it is sometimes obscured in the way public policy is written about in textbooks and taught in the classroom. The “policy as politics” approach offered here works along these lines: First off, as political science students, policy scholars, and related seekers of knowledge, we all share in a basic pursuit to better understand the nature of our political system and our democracy. Second, the only way to really understand either of these is to see them in political terms. This does not mean partisan or ideological terms. Politics is about power, who has it, who doesn’t, how it is used, etc., and this does not always translate into who is right or wrong and what party affiliation they hold. Third, studying public policy in a framework of political phenomena and concepts gets us closer to an important related objective—getting a better understanding of the American political system and American democracy.

The thematic approach taken by this text is reflected in its structure, and the result is something different than what is available in many contemporary texts. Most policy textbooks contain a set of conceptual chapters followed by a selection of issue areas that are designed to act as illustrations of the concepts found in part one. I’ve used this approach many times in the past but became frustrated with it. Too often I would find it necessary to return to basic concepts from the early points in the semester in order to get my students to see that what we were reading about in one of these issue-area chapters was an excellent illustration of a nondecision in the agenda-setting phase of the policy process or some other conceptual nugget. It was as though the course was really two courses: the first part immersed in the abstraction of the parts of the policy process and largely divorced from the real bare knuckles world

of policy making, especially its political aspects, and the second part, a mix of real-world examples dealing with health care, immigration, the environment, education, and so on. I would even jokingly tell my students that we needed to get through the “boot camp” of theories and models to appreciate the richness of the real-world examples we would soon encounter.

Over time my approach changed. Why not infuse each section of the course concerning the conceptual aspects of the policy process with a sustained set of real-world examples? I did this in my teaching all the time, often literally tearing an ongoing episode in the policy process from the day’s newspaper. I felt that my students needed the reinforcement of a text for the theoretical framework of the course—all those new terms, ideas, and theories are daunting and not always easily assimilated—but I was frustrated that the set of chapters at the end of the text often went underutilized or unread altogether because I was doing more to illustrate the phases of the process with other material as we went along. The issue chapters often assumed too much prior knowledge about the policy process for them to work well as illustrations of specific aspects of the process, or the chapters covered the process from beginning to end, making them unsuitable as examples of one part of the process. I began to seek out books that just gave my students the nuts and bolts of the policy process with no issue-area chapters. I then used articles and even short books on a particular policy area broken into useful blocks as the illustrations of the concepts. I kept looking for a text that would provide the conceptual framework and the examples together in balance. I did not find one that provided the integration of the two in a way that met my needs. This text is my attempt to create a text that provides that mix.

A blended approach helps engage students in an ongoing way. Concepts are not abstractions that need memorization for their own sake; instead, they are part of a set of real-world events and actors that are far more likely to be retained and work as the basis for expanding the student’s analytical skills along with an extended knowledge of the intricacies of our political system.

It matters little if an instructor uses this text in the traditional pattern with concepts up front followed by longer illustrative readings in the later part of a semester, or if he or she uses it in the way I do, by elongating the discussion of the process of policy making over the course of the semester and injecting supplementary material as one progresses. In either case, a blended text improves the students’ ability to access the more challenging abstractions of the policy process and to build upon that knowledge. This, coupled with the policy-as-politics approach to the treatment of the material, provides a highly accessible text for undergraduates and maximum flexibility for instructors in terms of topic focus and emphasis, while still providing a rigorous treatment of the breadth of theory and practice of the study of the policy process.

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