Introduction to the Text

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

When you finish reading Chapter 1, you should be able to do the following:

■ Define what is meant by politics
■ Distinguish between public and private policies
■ Illustrate how a nondecision is still an exercise of power in policy making
■ Summarize the ways in which the process of policy making helps to clarify the workings of our democracy
“The first rule of Fight Club is you don’t talk about Fight Club. The second rule of Fight Club is that you don’t talk about Fight Club.”

In the iconic movie *Fight Club*, the characters create a world that they feel is more real than the one they turn their backs on when they enter into the realm of bare-knuckle brawling as a release from the oppression of a mundane, workaday life. Devotees of the movie instantly recognize the often repeated line about keeping the underground club a secret. It neatly sums up two of the main ideas that draw the characters to the club in the first place: Do not talk about the subject with anyone outside the sphere of participants, because doing so will spoil the secret. (Secrets are mysterious and rather exciting things, especially if you are in on one.) And, if you do not know the secret, then you do not matter at all that much in the first place. (Secrets create exclusivity, a very sought-after item in many circles.) Many students look at public policy making as a sort of secret, one that they know exists, but one that they have not been let in on yet. Those who are adept in the language and concepts of public policy making and the stuff of policies themselves sometimes seem to be communicating in a foreign language. This text is going to let you in on the “secret” of public policy making.

You may be reading this text for any number of reasons, but it is probably safe to assume that at some level you think that politics is important or at least is something worth knowing about. Many times we—even academics who study, write, and teach about public policy and how it is made—tend to compartmentalize politics and policy so that the connections between the two are obscured. The dominant way that public policy making is taught to students is to place the process within the framework of a set of steps. That works well as a heuristic or type of “shorthand” way of thinking about the complexities of the process. However, using this model to understand the policy-making process sometimes gets many of us—both students and instructors—caught up in the abstraction of the model rather than the reality that the process of public policy making is, first and foremost, a political process. Public policy making is really the intersection of what are traditionally thought of as the “political” players and forces in the United States, such as the power of the presidency, Congress, and the courts; the influence of interest groups and lobbyists; and the impact of elections. Other players and forces are less conventionally thought of as “political” in nature but are still key parts of the making of public policy. Examples range from the transformative effects of the new communications environment of the Internet and social networking to the fundamental shifts in demographics now taking place. Public policy making is the process that features the interplay of these and many other actors and forces.

Simply put, if you want to get a deeper understanding of politics and government in this nation, you need to study public policy making. Three main points support this claim: First, 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 democracy. Second, the only way to really understand our democracy is to see it in political terms. This does not mean partisan or ideological terms. Politics is about power—who has it, who does not, 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 our primary objective—getting a better understanding of American democracy. In short, if you want to get a fuller understanding of our democracy, you need to understand public policy making, and the best way to solidly interface with the field of public policy making is to think about it as the stuff of politics.

To these ends, this text examines the policy-making process—from identifying a problem through the analysis of the success or failure of the implementation of solutions—with a consistent focus on the political factors that influence each of these phases. This “policy as politics” approach highlights the nature of power in our democracy and features the struggle over ideas and values brought by a range of established and emerging players in the policymaking process, as well as those spawned by recent political, social, and economic changes.

Politics is generally thought of as a zero-sum game, meaning there are distinct winners and losers; the winners win absolutely and the losers are totally vanquished. If this sounds a great deal like the terms used in warfare, you are right, except that what are won and lost are not the typical spoils of war, such as natural resources or geographic territory. Instead, politics is about power over political institutions—such as the presidency, the courts, and Congress—and over the processes that these institutions carry out—such as law making and rendering decisions. Additionally, the means of battle are different. While no armies face off on battlefields using lances, swords, or rifles, political “warfare” does share many of the linguistic and conceptual items associated with a physical war. Candidates wage “campaigns” against their rivals. Some places are considered the “battleground” because the outcome of the election will be determined by winning the vote in that location. Parties “square off” to win a vote through maneuvering in a legislature. A Congress may try to defy a president over a war. Interest groups or social movements may use dramatic actions to push politicians to see it their way. Because so much “heat” is generated by political action, we are naturally attracted to the personalities and drama that permeate politics. After all, one of the most enduring of all plot scenarios going back to antiquity is the dramatic tension we see in a contest of wills. In short, that is the stuff of politics.

One of the most enduring definitions of politics was crafted by political scientist Harold Lasswell. He wrote that politics is “who gets what, when, and how.” This classic formulation may, at first look, seem trite or simplistic, but in reality it is a rich and meaningful way to think about politics because it asks us to think about actors (who), values and rewards (what), the time frame for action (when),
and the means to gaining goals (how). We can also add the arena of conflict or action (where) to Lasswell’s formula to make it more complete. One part of this formulation—the “what” aspect—is generally what comes to mind when people think about public policy, since policy is, in many cases, the outputs of governmental action. These outputs, such as a law or court decision, are for some political actors desirable outcomes because they provide material benefits (e.g., a change in the tax code that puts more money in a person’s pocket) or more symbolic benefits that give people status in society or rights that are not solely material in nature (e.g., the recent laws creating same-sex marriage in some states).

The “what” part of Lasswell’s formula—the outputs of the policy-making process—is very important in its own right, but just looking at a public law, regulation, or court decision is a bit like looking at or even eating a slice of pizza. Yes, knowing about the final product is worthwhile, but understanding the process of how the product was created—making the dough and sauce, shaping the crust, slicing the toppings—and the myriad of decisions and subtleties of choices that went into the results—what to put on the top, how long to cook the pie—can only deepen our appreciation of the outcome. Thinking about the process can help us answer questions about the outcomes while also getting us to think about what we do not yet know about the end results and, perhaps, how to improve both the process and its outputs in the future. So while there are plenty of examples of classic and contemporary policy outputs in this text, they are included as a means to illustrate aspects of the process and to spur your own questions about both the process and its outcomes.

A timely example may help to clarify the text’s approach: at present, one of the real “hot-button” policy areas has to do with immigration. Both legal and illegal immigration are good topics to bring up if you want a heated exchange. Try striking up a conversation with a stranger in a grocery store on the subject or watching the debate over the state of immigration on the floor of the US Congress! Few people, especially elected politicians, react with disinterest about immigration. President Bush campaigned in 2004 on a pledge to create a program that he claimed would provide a way for people who are here illegally to stay in the country legally. The president’s emphasis on this policy was often carefully meted out on the campaign trail because part of his natural base of support, social conservatives from many of the Sunbelt areas of the country, did not like the president’s proposed program and, instead, called it “amnesty” for people who should be punished for breaking our immigration laws. Candidate Bush often avoided talking about this policy in places where it was sure to ruffle the feathers of potential voters. Members of the president’s own Republican Party, either out of genuine dislike for the guest worker policy or because they knew their constituents were against it, were not at all receptive to the policy. Oddly enough, after the 2006 midterm election, it was the Democrats in Congress that rallied to the president’s side on the issue. Some Republicans squawked that the president was caving in to special interests that enjoy an immigration
system that provides the plentiful and relatively inexpensive labor that they claim would flow from the president’s program. For example, agriculture, the hospitality industry, and meat processors all benefit from cheaper labor because the often difficult, dangerous, and dreary jobs of picking fruits and vegetables, making beds, and slaughtering cattle are more easily filled by people who lack the education, skills, and legal status to find better paying jobs. By keeping the pay and benefits low, contended the president’s critics, these industries would make more money; hence, in their opinion, the guest worker program was simply a fig leaf over an unscrupulous labor practice that shortchanged the American worker.

So what do we have here? Was President Bush’s guest worker and immigration reform proposal just political payback to one of the president’s constituencies or was it a thoughtful and reasoned attempt to craft a policy that would deal with a difficult set of problems? (The prospect also exists that it was both of these things, but that is not our concern at the present time.) If this division over the meaning and intent of the Bush White House’s immigration policy seems like a familiar pattern of thinking in Washington and elsewhere, there is a good deal of truth to such an observation. When politicians and the news media bandy about politics and policy, there is often an all-or-nothing quality to the discussion. It is as though policies are merely vessels to contain the real power advancement goals of the policy maker, and any hint of political gain for a person or group is evidence that the policy itself is a sham. While all this line drawing about politics and policy may be
very political itself—after all, there may be something to be gained by demon-
izing an opponent’s policy as being too “political”—it does point out a ten-
dency on the part of political observers to sort the world of politics into two
conceptual boxes. Even academics that study politics, government, and policy
tend to do the same thing. For many years, and with some holdover today, it
was assumed that there was a politics/administration dichotomy. Woodrow
Wilson, a political scientist before he was elected president in 1912, advocated
just such a division in his book The Study of Administration (1887) as a way
to keep politics out of governing and assure a purer administration of policy
without corruption or undue special influence.

While no one has seriously believed that elected officials and other
policy makers are elevated to some special realm of pure governance and
policy making after they slip the bonds of politics and gain office, there has
been, and to a degree still exists, a feeling among the public and some policy
makers that politics—usually an election or appointment to office—decides
the conflict over who will make decisions. Once the players are seated to
make decisions, then politics is over and governing can begin. Does this
sound impossibly Pollyannaish? Maybe, but recall that not long ago, just
after the election of Barack Obama in 2008, some commentators were specu-
lating that we were entering a “post-partisan” era in which President Obama
would, by virtue of his commanding victory and unique place in history,
be able to govern with a mandate that transcended politics as usual. While
Obama did enjoy a “honeymoon” of positive press coverage, mostly cordial
relations with Congress, and support from the public, his major policy initia-
tives, especially health care insurance reform, ran smack into a very tradi-
tional set of political hurdles featuring strong opposition from Republicans
in Congress, dissent among Democrats, and well mobilized counter pressure
from interest groups. While reality intrudes into our wish for the “political
struggle ends after the election” dream, we continue to hope for its real-
ization. Much of our discontent with government and the policy-making
process stems from the dissonance we get when we witness the clash of
values and goals that make up the reality of policy making. Historically,
the process of policy making and governing has, with few exceptions, been
framed by politics. Even the halcyon days of the early years of the Republic,
prior to the creation of formal political parties, featured conflicts over where
to place the nation’s capitol and a plan to have the federal government take
over the debts incurred by the states during the fighting of the Revolution, to
two well-known examples. The Founding Fathers, including Thomas
Jefferson, George Washington, and Alexander Hamilton, all engaged in poli-
tics over these and other issues of policy. This brings up an important point:
politics is not a dirty word if, by politics, we are talking about representation
of constituents in the policy-making process. Certainly, the American public
casts a cynical eye toward those who populate government. However, if we
step back for a minute and think about politics as a process that allows for
the expression of our particular interests in the course of decision making,
we will realize that politics is, in many ways, just what the people want.
Elected officials in a republic are representatives of the people. (To what degree and in what fashion this takes place is an important debate for later.)

DEFINING PUBLIC POLICY

A timeworn practical joke is the snipe hunt. The snipe is a bird that really does exist, but the snipe hunt is a gag that asks the unwitting participant to try to catch one of these birds, usually at night in a location that probably has not been graced by the presence of a snipe in a good long while, if ever. The “hunter” sets off on the impossible mission and others laugh at his or her expense. It is common for many policy texts to offer up their own versions of the snipe hunt in their early chapters. They take a long path intended to nail down some meaning for public policy, but sometimes end with a concession that public policy can mean so many things that it cannot be adequately defined. This does not have to be the case.

Starting with the basics of the term itself, it is apparent that policy has a generic meaning of a “how-to” set of instructions or a “do not do” sign. Anyone who has applied for a driver’s license or received a parking ticket knows these things firsthand. There are a whole range of things that can be considered “policies.” Power is a necessary element of political, social, and economic order, and the decisions of those with power are commonplace forms of policy. A presidential executive order, a bill passed by Congress, a verdict rendered by a court, these are all familiar forms of policies to most Americans. However familiar these forms of policy are to you, it is wise to keep in mind at this point that policy is more than just what the government does or, just as importantly, what the government does not do. (A decision not to do something is still a policy. The decision to stay out of the direct fighting in World War II after the war began in Europe in the late 1930s was still a “policy” of the American government.) In a very interesting twist, two policy scholars once argued that policy making frequently takes place when governmental decision makers avoid dealing with a problem or an issue. Bachrach and Baratz called these instances nondecisions because they do not directly affirm or deny the need for government to tackle a problem or an issue, but they still map out a position taken by government.²

The “public” part of public policy is a bit less straightforward. Fraternities, sororities, clubs, and other organizations may have all sorts of policies about how to do things and what is and is not acceptable behavior, but these policies do not govern the actions of nonmembers. The “public” in public policy is far more sweeping than that. Such policies may not encompass every citizen at all times, but they are aimed at much larger portions of the population. For example, the federal government’s recent creation of a prescription drug program for older Americans does not affect all citizens. The other aspect of the “public” side of public policy that needs to be addressed is the idea that what makes a policy public is that someone or something has the power to require compliance with the process or restrictions created by the policy.
To illustrate this point, if the leader of a campus club set a policy that only students with at least a 3.0 GPA could vote in US presidential elections, most students on campus—especially nonmembers of the club—would probably see this directive as silly and simply ignore it. Some club members might also think the directive was ridiculous and ignore it. However, the club could try to sanction members who voted in the election without the requisite GPA by kicking them out of the club or by other punishments. In this example, the campus club has limited power because its legitimacy and authority to impose restrictions is highly restricted. The federal government and state governments, however, have much more in the way of legitimacy and authority and, therefore, are able to impose restrictions on all manner of activities and behaviors, including voting.

One of the basic elements of American democracy rests on the notion that our representative form of democracy—our republic—is governed by decision makers populating institutions that have the legitimate ability to exercise authority over the rest of us. John Locke, a 17th century English political philosopher who greatly influenced the Founding Fathers here in America, was the main person who articulated the idea that governments gain legitimacy, and thus power, only through the consent of the governed. He argued that in legitimate political systems, the public is connected to the government by a contract in which the people give up some of their natural, inborn rights so that government can establish a well-ordered political, economic, and social system. If the government lives up to its end of the bargain by using its power wisely and judiciously, the public will continue to support the government by going along with its decisions. On the other hand, if the government abuses its power, it is in danger of losing legitimacy because the public has the right to break off its support. Our political system is far more entrenched, and the public has such a long history with the ideals of American democracy that exercising the right to terminate the contract with the government, in other words, call for a revolution, is not a likely option for most Americans. However, the idea behind Locke’s “social contract theory,” as it is often identified, is still valid and important for our discussion about the “public” part of public policy. In the hypothetical example with the campus club and voting, few students are likely to go along with the club’s limitations for at least three reasons. First, the club’s authority is limited to club members, and because of this, its potential impact is largely in the private and not in the public realm of life. Second, even if we set aside the points about authority and the nature of policy itself, the policy is still questionable because the way it was produced does not seem to be democratic and fair since the campus student body had no ability to influence the decision of the club. Third, even if the club had the authority to dictate the voting requirements for students on campus, the arbitrary nature of the decision undermines its legitimacy. After all, why is a 3.0 GPA the cutoff? This aspect of the policy does not make it any less public in its intent, but does point out that citizens must accept the legitimacy of the policy if it is to affect them in a meaningful way. For example, several states have adopted bans on the use of cell phones while driving, but these laws are routinely violated to such an extent that their impact may be negligible.
Taking these points together, the “public” side of public policy can be summarized in the following way:

- Public policies affect a wide segment of citizens or other actors—such as corporations, the mass media, and the government itself—that directly impact the public. (Of course, for every rule there is probably some exception, and that is a danger of defining terms. For example, the US Congress passes private bills regarding specific individuals, usually for people who are seeking to gain citizenship in the United States but are unable to use the more common route to becoming citizens.)
- Public policies are made by decision makers who have the legitimate authority to set policy. (For a policy to be more than public in intent only, it must be accepted by enough of the public to confer legitimacy.)

**POLITICS, AGAIN**

While this chapter has already touched on the meaning of politics, it is worthwhile to revisit those ideas with an eye toward making explicit connections between public policy and politics. Given the way public policy is connected with power and the public, the lines between politics and policy should be fairly obvious, but in many discussions by academics and policy practitioners, they are not. If we stick with the definition borrowed from Harold Lasswell that politics is “who gets what, where, when, and how,” then policies themselves—the laws, rules, and other forms of decisions and nondecisions by legitimate authorities—are the evidence of the process of policy making and the political power that fuels the process. The process is important for a number of reasons. First, it is worth knowing how things work when it comes to the nuts and bolts of, say, a legislature. The US Congress and a state’s legislature are both complex and rule-driven institutions. Understanding the structure, historical evolution, and functions of such institutions evident in their processes is valuable, in and of itself. The process is also important because if we peel back a layer or so down from the process, the power—such as party control, elections, or the influence of a host of other actors including but not limited to the executive branch, the judiciary, the media, and the public—that shapes the process becomes more evident. Therefore, if we can keep the reason for studying the process in front of us, we can use it to know more about the politics that underlies the process. That is the promise of studying public policy as a means of knowing more about our political system; it can give us a context to understand politics that is sometimes absent when we just focus on what is usually considered “political,” such as an election or the decision that comes from a contentious court case.

Politics is a word derived from *polis*, a term the ancient Greeks used for their key unit of government, the city-state, such as Athens. The term *polis*, in turn, is a word that has its roots in the expression for “the people” or “the public.” Most conceptions of politics take these ideas into consideration and weave definitions of politics that are amalgams of the people, however they are
defined, and some governmental structure or some other form of authoritative societal creation, such as an army. The result is a hefty assortment of definitions that underscore the meaning of politics as a relationship between the government (and other possible powerful actors, such as unions, corporations, interest groups, movements, and the media) and the governed. Sometimes the relationship is one where the public has great influence over the government. In most political systems that have the support of their citizens, the public likes to at least think that they have this upper hand on the decision makers. At other times and other places, the government and other political actors are in a position of dominance over the people. Milton Rokeach, a social scientist of great renown in the 1960s and 1970s, had a handy way of explaining the nature of government using the terms of political ideology. Nations, like the United States, with great freedom for the individual but with limited guarantees of equality—supposedly provided by governmental intervention—were classified as “capitalistic.” Nations with little freedom for individuals but with supposedly high amounts of equality—again, created by governmental action—were classified as “communist.” Rokeach used this format to map out the makeup of the other dominant ideologies of his present and fairly recent past, including fascism and socialism.

Rokeach’s ideas are just one example of how politics has been conceptualized as a marriage between the public and government. It is tempting, when in a cynical mood, to think that is all there is to politics. Some people crave power, and the public lives in the transitional space around this struggle for power, sort of like living at the shoreline as the ocean does battle with the land for dominance. As Thucydides, an ancient Greek historian, wrote over two thousand years ago, “The strong do what they can; the weak suffer what they must.” Certainly, there are those who engage in politics because they lust for power. However, the nature of politics is more complex than this simplistic rendering. People create institutions because they need a means for doing what they cannot do alone because of their lack of resources, expertise, time, and knowledge. If politics is the means of governing forces that people would like tamed and, perhaps, made better, then policy is the means to undertake these tasks.

**PLAN FOR THE TEXT**

This text examines the policy-making process—from identifying a problem to the evaluation of the success or failure of the implementation of solutions—with a consistent focus on the political factors that influence each of these phases. This “policy as politics” approach highlights the nature of power in our democracy and features the struggle over ideas and values brought by a range of established and emerging players in the policy-making process, as well as those spawned by recent political, social, and economic changes.

Each chapter examines fundamental aspects of policy making by first placing them within the context of the policy-making process. The process
is then examined to highlight how the actual production of policy is a battle over the definition of problems, variations in possible solutions, and assessment of the efficacy of policies once they are implemented. While the commonly recognized political activities of democracy—such as campaigns and lobbying—are understood to be major influences on policy making, they are not the only instances where politics—the struggle over ideas and values—work to shape public policy. Each chapter of this text works to merge the basics of the policy-making process with a sharp-eyed focus on the apparent and not-so-obvious influences of the political world on policy making. By taking this approach, the reader will learn about the policy-making process and its implications for understanding the intricacy of democracy as it exists in the American political system.

Chapter 2 delves deeper into the exact nature of both politics and policy by commenting on how the two have intermingled over time and why this has taken place. The chapter also discusses why this move toward a more politicized form of policy making is an important development for those concerned with American government, politics, and democracy.

Chapter 3 presents a survey of the major scholarly approaches to public policy making. It begins by focusing on power, one of the building blocks of any understanding of the essence of politics. Power is then related to the ways in which policies can change the existing political, social, and economic relationships in the United States. The chapter concludes by offering a synopsis of the major scholarly models of policy making.

Chapter 4 establishes a frame of reference for how the policy-making process works by mapping out many of the major influences on past and contemporary public policies, including our political culture, changes in the nation’s demographics, the revolution in communications technology, and trends within the nation’s economy.

The main emphasis of Chapter 5 is the role that political actors outside the government (i.e., interests groups, social movements, corporations, and the media) have on the identification of policy problems and their placement on the policy-making agenda inside of government.

In Chapter 6, the policy-making process is placed in the context of the text’s “policy as politics” approach by focusing on how policy makers inside the apparatus of government control or influence the formulation and implementation of policies.

Chapter 7 provides a discussion of policy evaluation. It offers a set of diverse examples designed to get the reader to think about evaluation as it relates to the concepts of success and failure and how the influence of politics shapes these most basic and universal benchmarks of policy assessment.

Chapter 8 ends the text with a set of ideas that challenge the reader to think about both the stable and the more changeable factors that shape the making of public policy. The chapter concludes with a challenge to the reader to use both of these factors as tools for their continued thinking about what policy making can tell them about American government, politics, and democracy.
Chapter 1

Introduction to the Text

SUMMARY
Oftentimes, public policy is viewed as something that is beyond politics. This introductory chapter sets the stage for the text’s “policy as politics” approach which examines the public policy-making process and resulting policies as important to the understanding the nature of power and democracy in the American political system. The dominant way that public policy making is taught to students is to place the process within the framework of a set of steps. However, using this type of model to understand policy making can sometimes lead us to dismiss the reality that the process of public policy making is, first and foremost, a political process. While the process of policy making, from the point of identifying a problem to implementing solutions, is examined throughout this text, along the way, there is a focus on how the actual production of policy is a battle over the definition of problems, variations in possible solutions, and assessment of the efficacy of policies once they are implemented.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
1. Why are there so many definitions of public policy?
2. What is the difference between a private policy and a public policy? Why does this difference matter to our understanding of how politics and policy making interact?
3. Would it be possible to remove politics from public policy making? Would this be desirable? Why or why not?
4. How does understanding the politics behind a public policy provide us with a deeper understanding about the nature of the American political system?

NOTES