The Public Policy Process

WEEK 12: THE SCIENCE OF THE POLICY PROCESS
Why Study Public Policy

• **Scientific Reasons**
  - To help us better understand the nature of political behavior and its relationship with policy making

• **Professional Reasons**
  - To learn the skills involved in policy analysis

• **Political Reasons**
  - To provide you with the tools to have an influence on the system
We focus on the Policy Process Tradition

- Develops theory, not just a set of case studies
- Not as specialized as policy analysis
- Integrates a lot of what you know about American politics in a cohesive framework
Policy studies, as a separate subfield, really doesn’t start until the 1960s.

- More government programs
- More analytic techniques borrowed from big business and from WWII (Robert MacNamara).
- New theories of how politics and policy work.
Where are policy studies today?

- **Case studies**
  - Individual, descriptive cases of how public policies have succeeded or (mostly) failed

- **Policy analysis**
  - Efforts to analyze policies using data and statistical techniques. Much of the method derives from economics

- **Policy process studies**
  - Studies of the policy process, beginning from problem identification and ending with evaluation and feedback
Policy Studies as Science

- Method
- Evidence versus anecdote
- The development of theory
- Why theory is important
What is the scientific method?

- The statement of a hypothesis—often the “null hypothesis”
- Gathering data
- The testing of the hypothesis
- Determining whether the null hypothesis is rejected, or whether it cannot be rejected.
Differences between natural and social sciences

- Natural sciences often, but not always, can study phenomena using controlled experiments.
- Social sciences often, but not always, must use “quasi experimental” or other designs without good or even perfect controls.
- The natural sciences often operate under a “paradigm” or a body of beliefs about science shared by all participants in the scientific process.
- The social sciences are generally non paradigmatic.
Why does this matter?

- We can say that the social sciences are sciences—methodological differences don’t denigrate these as sciences
- Of course, this is all the ideal type—often, hypotheses are not tested, and we often use brute force, or guesstimates (wing loading on planes)
- But the point is that students of policy—of both the process and the substance of policy tend to seek knowledge and evidence of claimed phenomena.
The Interdisciplinary Nature of Policy Studies

- Review the definition of the study of public policy I just gave you earlier this semester.
- Would that definition limit policy studies to only political scientists?
- What other disciplines are involved in studying public policy?
## Disciplines in Policy Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political science</td>
<td>The study of political relationships (power)</td>
<td>The political process → policy making and enforcement.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>“[T]he study of social life, social change, and the social causes and consequences of human behavior.”</td>
<td>Community and group activities include groups of people forming to make demands.</td>
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## Disciplines in Policy Studies

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<th>Discipline</th>
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<th>Economic factors that influence public policy, and economic theories explain choices, success, failure.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>The study of the allocation of resources in a community, however defined. Economists study markets and exchanges.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Public administration</td>
<td>The study of the management of government and nonprofit organizations.</td>
<td>The management of public programs is an integral part of the policy process.</td>
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## Disciplines in Policy Studies

| Public Policy | The study of what governments choose to do or not to do, including studies of the policy process, policy implementation and impact, and evaluation. | We give this label to the highly interdisciplinary study of the public policy process. |
Summary

- What we do is a science, with some background in the social sciences broadly
- Public policy is influenced by, and influences, many disciplines
- Scientific knowledge of any sort is not the only thing that policy makers consider, and is often not the most important thing.
Modern Models of the Policy Process
The Stages “Model” of the Policy Process

1. Issue Emergence
2. Agenda Setting
3. Alternative Selection
4. Enactment
5. Implementation
6. Evaluation

Feedback

Flow diagram showing the sequence of stages in the policy process with feedback loops.
Features of the stages “model”

- A series of six ordered stages
- Policies move from one stage to another
- Implementation and evaluation leads to feedback
Strengths and Weaknesses of the Stages “Model”

- **Strength: The various stages isolate elements of the process for study and analysis**

- **Weaknesses**
  - When does one stage end and the other begin?
  - Do policies move through each step?
  - Do policies move in order?
  - Does feedback always happen? Does it feed back to the beginning, or somewhere else?
Kingdon’s Streams Metaphor

- An adaptation of the “garbage can” model

- The streams:
  - The state of politics and public opinion (the politics stream)
  - The potential solutions to a problem (policy stream)
  - Attributes of problems and the attention to them (problem stream)
Kingdon’s Streams Metaphor

- Streams are parallel and somewhat independent of each other
- Policy entrepreneurs try to join the streams in a “window of opportunity.”
- Window of opportunity: the possibility of policy change.
Kingdon’s Streams Metaphor

Problem Stream

Politics Stream

Policy Stream

Window of Opportunity

Time
Strengths of the Streams Metaphor

- **Strengths**
  - Not as mechanical as systems/stages models
  - Shows how elements of the policy process happen separately and in parallel
  - Particularly strong in showing how alternative policies are selected and how agendas are set
Weaknesses of the Streams Metaphor

- Doesn’t go much beyond agenda setting and alternative selection
- Doesn’t really describe implementation (not a whole system model)
- Not clear about the role of some actors, such as the courts (although these actors certainly fit in the model).
Sabatier’s Advocacy Coalition Framework

- Interest groups are organized in policy communities within a policy domain
- Each policy domain contains 2 – 4 advocacy coalitions
- The coalitions self-organize around shared beliefs
- Policy brokers seek to make compromises among advocacy coalitions
Sabatier’s Advocacy Coalition Framework

• Policy change can take a long time
• There are stable and dynamic influences on the policy process
• Stable influences – the policy problem, distribution of natural resources, and cultural values and social structure
• Dynamic influences - Changes in socioeconomic conditions, technology, public opinion, governing coalitions
The important contribution to public policy studies:

- Long periods of policy stability is followed by rapid change, followed by long periods of stability.
- Policy change isn’t incremental
- Policy isn’t in a state of constant flux
The balance of political power between groups of interest is relatively stable over long periods of time. But this balance of power is punctuated by sudden shifts in:
- Public understanding of policy problems
- The balance of power between groups seeking to fight entrenched interests
Policy Monopolies

- Based on a coalition of government and special interest groups, they form a policy subsystem
- These monopolies are controlled by a relatively few number of actors
  - This causes policy monopolies to be unstable

How do policy monopolies break down?

- Media attention to an issue
- Changes in the policy image
- Changes in the policy venue
Summary

- We’ve developed a pretty sophisticated way of thinking about policy and politics