

Public Policy

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third level

There are several implications of this concept of public policy as a relatively stable, purposive course of action followed by government in dealing with some problem or matter of concern.

First, the definition links policy to purposive or goal-oriented action rather than to random behavior or chance occurrences. Public policies in modern political systems do not, by and large, just happen. They are instead designed to accomplish specified goals or produce definite results, although these are not always achieved. Proposed policies may be usefully thought of as hypotheses suggesting that specific actions be taken to achieve particular goals. Thus, to increase farm income, the national government utilizes income subsidies and production controls. These programs have indeed enhanced the incomes of many farmers, but by no means all.

The goals of a policy may be somewhat loosely stated and cloudy in content, thus providing general direction rather than precise targets for its implementation. Those who want action on a problem may differ both as to what should be done and how it should be done. Ambiguity in language then can become a means for reducing conflict, at least for the moment. Compromise to secure agreement and build support may consequently yield general phrasing and lack of clarity in the statement of policy goals.

Second, policies consist of courses or patterns of action taken over time by governmental officials rather than their separate, discrete decisions. It is difficult to think of such actions as a presidential decision to honor a movie actor or a Social Security Administration decision to award disability benefits to Joe Doaks as public policies. A policy

includes not only the decision to adopt a law or make a rule on some topic but also the subsequent decisions that are intended to enforce or implement the law or rule. Industrial health and safety policy, for example, is shaped not only by the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970 but also by a stream of administrative rules and judicial decisions interpreting, elaborating, and applying (or not applying) the act to particular situations.

Third, public policies emerge in response to policy demands, or those claims for action or inaction on some public issue made by other actors—private citizens, group representatives, or legislators and other public officials—upon government officials and agencies. Such demands may range from general insistence that a municipal government "do something" about traffic congestion to a specific call for the national government to prohibit theft of pet dogs and cats for sale to medical and scientific research organizations. In short, some demands simply call for action; others also specify the action desired.

In response to policy demands, public officials make decisions that give content and direction to public policy. These decisions may enact statutes, issue executive orders or edicts, promulgate administrative rules, or make judicial interpretations of laws. Thus the decision by Congress to enact the Sherman Antitrust Act in 1890 was a policy decision; another was the 1911 Supreme Court ruling that the act prohibited only unreasonable restraints of trade rather than all restraints of trade.

Each was of major importance in shaping that course of action called antitrust policy. (The Sherman Act also prohibits monopolization and attempts to monopolize.) Such decisions may be contrasted with the innumerable relatively routine decisions that officials make in the day-to-day application of public policy. The Department of Veterans Affairs, for

example, makes hundreds of thousands of decisions every year on veterans' benefits; most, however, fall within the bounds of settled policy and can be categorized as routine decisions.

Policy statements in turn usually are formal expressions or articulations of public policy. Among these are legislative statutes, executive orders and decrees, administrative rules and regulations, and court opinions, as well as statements and speeches by public officials indicating the government's intentions and goals and what will be done to realize them. Policy statements are sometimes notably ambiguous. Witness the conflicts that arise over the meaning of statutory provisions or judicial holdings, or the time and effort expended analyzing and trying to divine the meaning of policy statements by national political leaders, such as the president of the United States or the chair of the Federal Reserve Board. Different levels, branches, or units of government may also issue conflicting policy statements, as on such matters as environmental pollution or liability for consumer products.

Fourth, policy involves what governments actually do, not just what they intend to do or what officials say they are going to do. If a legislature enacts a law requiring employers to pay no less than a stated minimum wage but nothing is done to enforce the law, and subsequently little change occurs in economic behavior, it seems reasonable to contend that public policy actually takes the form of nonregulation of wages.

Relevant here is the concept of policy output, or the action actually taken in pursuance of policy decisions and statements. This concept focuses our attention on such matters as amounts of taxes collected, miles of highway built, welfare benefits paid, restraints of trade eliminated, traffic fines collected, and foreign-aid projects undertaken. These can usually be enumerated' with little difficulty. Examining policy outputs,

we may find that a policy differs somewhat or even greatly from what policy statements indicate it should be. Policy outputs should be distinguished from policy outcomes, which focus on a policy's societal consequences. For example, do longer prison terms reduce crime rates? Do air pollution control programs improve public health? Outputs can be counted; outcomes are often difficult or impossible to measure.

Fifth, a public policy may be either positive or negative. Some form of overt governmental action may deal with a problem on which action is demanded (positive), or governmental officials may decide to do nothing on some matter on which government involvement was sought (negative). In other words, governments can follow a policy of *laissez faire*, or hands off, either generally or on some aspects of economic activity. Such inaction may have major consequences for a society or some groups, as in the late 1970s, when the national government decided to cease regulating commercial airline rates and routes.

Inaction becomes a public policy when officials decline to act on a problem—that is, when they decide an issue negatively. This choice differs from nonaction on a matter that has not become a public issue, has not been brought to official attention, and has not been considered or debated. A slightly ludicrous example is the lack of governmental action on the taking of earthworms—the activity has no seasons and no bag limits. Is this a public policy? The answer is no, because it is not an issue and no decisions have been made.

Finally, public policy, at least in its positive form, is based on law and is authoritative. Members of a society usually accept as legitimate the facts that taxes must be paid, import controls must be obeyed, and highway speed limits must be complied with, unless one wants to run the risk of fines, jail sentences, or other legally imposed sanctions or

disabilities. Thus public policy has an authoritative, legally coercive quality that the policies of private organizations do not have. Indeed, a major characteristic distinguishing government from private organizations is its monopoly over the legitimate use of coercion. Governments can legally incarcerate people; private organizations cannot.

Some public policies may be widely violated even though they are authoritative, such as national prohibition in the 1920s and many highway speed limits. Moreover, enforcement may be limited, piecemeal, or sporadic. Are these still public policies? The answer is yes, because they were on the statute books and enforcement was provided for. Whether such policies are effective or wise is another matter. Authoritativeness is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for effective public policy.

The policy process is a process of balancing different solutions that address the different aspects of a cluster of problems. Every policy has three key elements: a problem definition, goals to be achieved, and the policy instruments to address the problem and achieve the goals. Policy may be formal or informal: a formal policy might take the form of a planned policy document that has been discussed, written, reviewed, approved and published by a policymaking body. It could be a government's national plan on HIV/AIDS for example. An informal policy might be an ad hoc, general, unwritten but widely recognized practice or understanding within an organization that a course of action is to be followed. Even though this policy may not be made explicit in writing it still exists in practice.