

Public Policy

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third level

What is Policy What is Public Policy?

Generally speaking public policy is what the government chooses to do, or not to do. It is a decision made by government to either act, or not act in order to resolve a problem. Public policy is a course of action that guides a range of related actions in a given field. They rarely tackle one problem, but rather deal with clusters of entangled and long-term problems. Public policy provides guidance to governments and accountability links to citizens. Decision making is clouded by values, rather than based purely on objective data. Most issues tend to involve deeply held values/ interests and large amounts of money, making the policy process very complex .

In general usage, the term policy designates the behavior of some actor or set of actors, such as an official, a governmental agency, or a legislature, in an area of activity such as public transportation or consumer protection. Public policy also may be viewed as whatever governments choose to do or not to do. Such definitions may be adequate for ordinary discourse, but because we set out in this book to do a systematic analysis of public policy, a more precise definition or concept is needed to structure our thinking and to facilitate effective communication with one another.

In this book a policy is defined as a relatively stable, purposive course of action followed by an actor or set of actors in dealing with a problem or matter of concern. This definition focuses on what is actually done instead of what is only proposed or intended; differentiates a policy from

a decision, which is essentially a specific choice among alternatives; and views policy as something that unfolds over time.

Public policies are those developed by governmental bodies and officials. (Nongovernmental actors and factors may of course influence public-policy development.) The special characteristics of public policies stem from their being formulated by what political scientist David Easton has called the "authorities" in a political system, namely, "elders, paramount chiefs, executives, legislators, judges, administrators, councilors, monarchs, and the like." These are, he says, the persons who "engage in the daily affairs of a political system," are "recognized by most members of the system as having responsibility for these matters," and take actions that are "accepted as binding most of the time by most of the members so long as they act within the limits of their roles."³ In short, public policies are those produced by government officials and agencies. They also usually affect substantial numbers of people.