

# Understanding Public Policy

# Policy Analysis

*What Governments Do, Why They Do It,  
and What Difference It Makes*

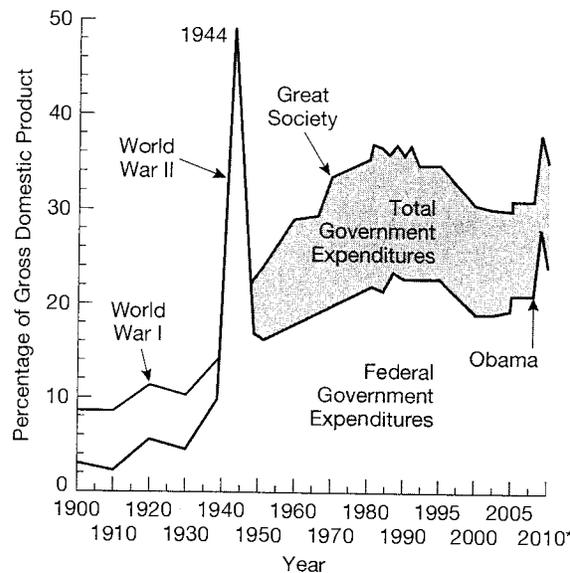
## What is Public Policy?

This book is about public policy. It is concerned with what governments do, why they do it, and what difference it makes. It is also about political science and the ability of this academic discipline to describe, analyze, and explain public policy.

**Definition of Policy.** Public policy is whatever governments choose to do or not to do.<sup>1</sup> Governments do many things. They regulate conflict within society; they organize society to carry on conflict with other societies; they distribute a great variety of symbolic rewards and material services to members of the society; and they extract money from society, most often in the form of taxes. Thus public policies may regulate behavior, organize bureaucracies, distribute benefits, or extract taxes—or all these things at once.

**Policy Expansion and Government Growth.** Today people expect government to do a great many things for them. Indeed there is hardly any personal or societal problem for which some group will not demand a government solution—that is, a public policy designed to alleviate personal discomfort or societal unease. Over the years, as more and more Americans turned to government to resolve society's problems, government grew in size and public policy expanded in scope to encompass just about every sector of American life.

Throughout most of the twentieth century, government grew in both absolute size and in relation to the size of the national economy. The size of the economy is usually measured by the gross domestic product (GDP), the sum of all the goods and services produced in the United States in a year (see Figure 1–1). Government spending amounted to only about 8 percent of the GDP at the beginning of the last century, and most governmental activities were carried out by state and local governments. Two world wars, the New Deal programs devised during the Great Depression of the 1930s, and the growth of the Great Society programs of the 1960s and 1970s all greatly expanded the size of government, particularly the

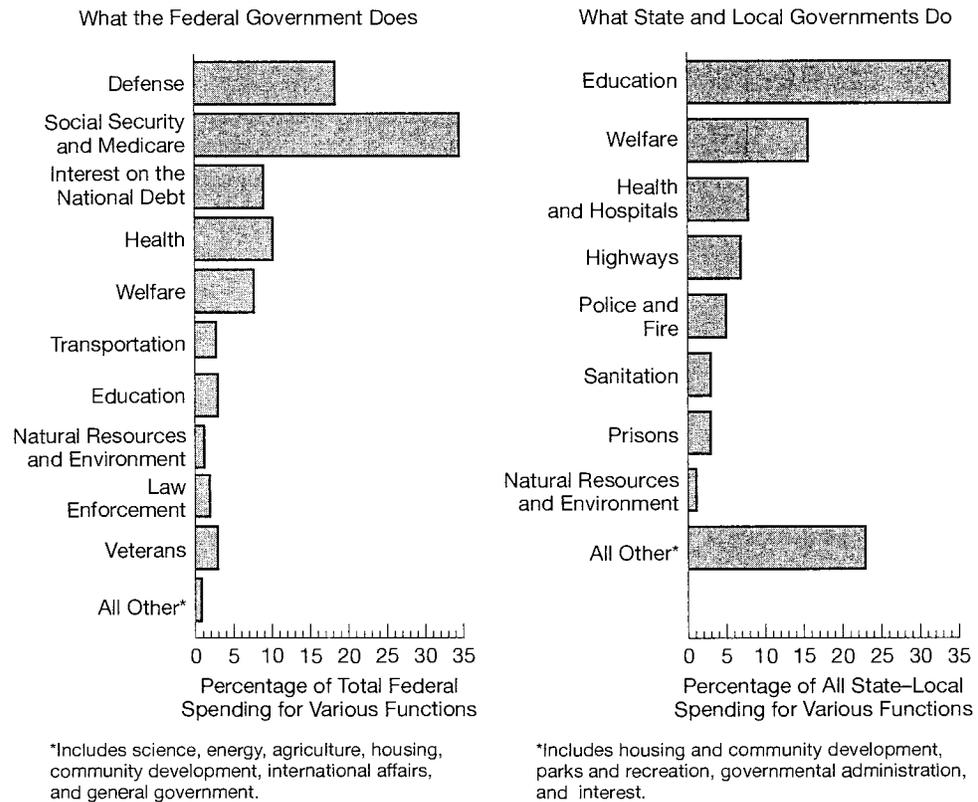


**FIGURE 1-1 The Growth of Government** The size of government can be measured in relation to the size of the economy. Total federal, state, and local government spending now exceeds 35 percent of the GDP, the size of the economy. \*Estimate from *Budget of the United States Government 2010*.

federal government. The rise in government growth relative to the economy leveled off during the Reagan presidency (1981–1989). The economy in the 1990s grew faster than government spending, resulting in a decline in the size of government *relative to the economy*. An economic downturn in 2000–2001, together with increased government expenditures for defense and homeland security, caused government to grow relative to the GDP.

The Obama Administration brought about a dramatic increase in federal spending, much of it in response to the recession that began in 2008. Federal spending in 2009 soared to 28 percent of the GDP; this spending included a “stimulus” package designed to jumpstart the economy (see Chapter 7). But it is expected that continued increases in federal spending under President Barack Obama will keep federal spending close to 25 percent of the GDP, the highest figure since World War II. The nation’s 50 state governments and 87,000 local governments (cities, counties, towns and townships, school districts, and special districts) combined to account for about 10 percent of the GDP. Total government spending—federal, state, and local—now amounts to about 35 percent of GDP.

**Scope of Public Policy.** Not everything that government does is reflected in governmental expenditures. *Regulatory activity*, for example, especially environmental regulations, imposes significant costs on individuals and businesses; these costs are *not* shown in government budgets. Nevertheless, government spending is a common indicator of governmental functions and priorities. For example, Figure 1-2 indicates that the *federal government* spends more on



**FIGURE 1-2 Public Policy: What Governments Do** Government spending figures indicate that Social Security and Medicare consume the largest share of federal spending, while education is the largest item in state and local government spending.

SOURCES: *Budget of the United States Government, 2009*; *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2009*.

senior citizens—in Social Security and Medicare outlays—than on any other function, including national defense. Federal welfare and health programs account for substantial budget outlays, but federal financial support of education is very modest. *State and local governments* in the United States bear the major burden of public education. Welfare and health functions consume larger shares of their budgets than highways and law enforcement do.

### Why Study Public Policy?

Political science is the study of politics—the study of “who gets what when and how.”<sup>2</sup> It is more than the study of governmental institutions, that is, federalism, separation of powers, checks and balances, judicial review, the powers and duties of Congress, the president, and the courts. “Traditional” political science focuses primarily on these institutional arrangements as well as the philosophical justification of government. And political science is more than the

study of political processes, that is, campaigns and elections, voting, lobbying, legislating, and adjudicating. Modern “behavioral” political science focuses primarily on these processes.

Political science is also the study of public policy—the *description and explanation of the causes and consequences of government activity*. This focus involves a description of the content of public policy; an analysis of the impact of social, economic, and political forces on the content of public policy; an inquiry into the effect of various institutional arrangements and political processes on public policy; and an evaluation of the consequences of public policies on society, both intended and unintended.

### What Can Be Learned from Policy Analysis?

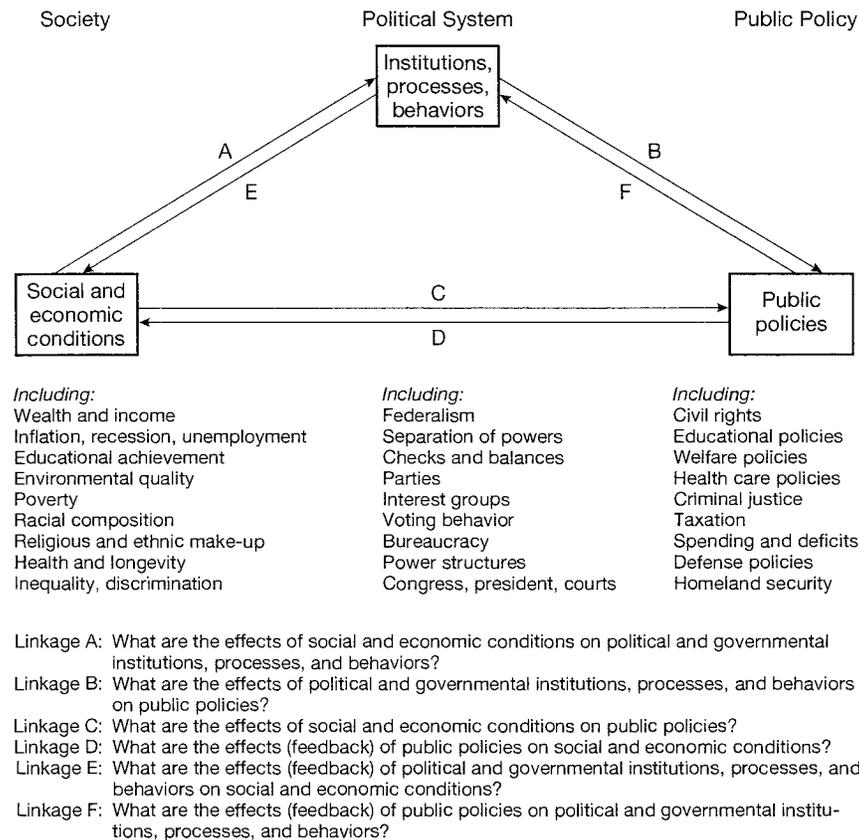
Policy analysis is finding out what governments do, why they do it, and what difference, if any, it makes. What can be learned from policy analysis?

**Description.** First, we can describe public policy—we can learn what government is doing (and not doing) in welfare, defense, education, civil rights, health, the environment, taxation, and so on. A factual basis of information about national policy is really an indispensable part of everyone’s education. What does the Civil Rights Act of 1964 actually say about discrimination in employment? What did the Supreme Court rule in the *Bakke* case about affirmative action programs? What is the condition of the nation’s Social Security program? What do the Medicaid and Medicare programs promise for the poor and the aged? What agreements have been reached between the United States and Russia regarding nuclear weapons? What is being done to fight terrorism at home and abroad? How much money are we paying in taxes? How much money does the federal government spend each year, and what does it spend it on? These are examples of descriptive questions.

**Causes.** Second, we can inquire about the causes, or determinants, of public policy. Why is public policy what it is? Why do governments do what they do? We might inquire about the effects of political institutions, processes, and behaviors on public policies (Linkage B in Figure 1–3). For example, does it make any difference in tax and spending levels whether Democrats or Republicans control the presidency and Congress? What is the impact of lobbying by the special interests on efforts to reform the federal tax system? We can also inquire about the effects of social, economic, and cultural forces in shaping public policy (Linkage C in Figure 1–3). For example: What are the effects of changing public attitudes about race on civil rights policy? What are the effects of recessions on government spending? What is the effect of an increasingly older population on the Social Security and Medicare programs? In scientific terms, when we study the *causes* of public policy, policies become the *dependent* variables, and their various political, social, economic, and cultural determinants become the *independent* variables.

**Consequences.** Third, we can inquire about the consequences, or impacts, of public policy. Learning about the consequences of public policy is often referred to as *policy evaluation*. What difference, if any, does public policy make in people’s lives? We might inquire about the effects of public policy on political institutions and processes (Linkage F in Figure 1–3). For example, what is the effect of the war in Iraq on Republican party fortunes

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**FIGURE 1-3 Studying Public Policy, Its Causes and Consequences** This diagram (sometimes referred to as the “systems model”) classifies societal conditions, political system characteristics, and public policies, and suggests possible linkages between them.

in Congress? What is the impact of immigration policies on the president’s popularity? We also want to examine the impact of public policies on conditions in society (Linkage D in Figure 1-3). For example, does capital punishment help to deter crime? Does cutting cash welfare benefits encourage people to work? Does increased educational spending produce higher student achievement scores? In scientific terms, when we study the *consequences* of public policy, policies become the *independent* variables, and their political, social, economic, and cultural impacts on society become the *dependent* variables.

## Policy Analysis and Policy Advocacy

It is important to distinguish policy analysis from policy advocacy. *Explaining* the causes and consequences of various policies is not equivalent to *prescribing* what policies governments ought to pursue. Learning *why* governments do what they do and what the consequences of

their actions are is not the same as saying what governments *ought* to do or bringing about changes in what they do. Policy advocacy requires the skills of rhetoric, persuasion, organization, and activism. Policy analysis encourages scholars and students to attack critical policy issues with the tools of systematic inquiry. There is an implied assumption in policy analysis that developing scientific knowledge about the forces shaping public policy and the consequences of public policy is itself a socially relevant activity, and that policy analysis is a *prerequisite to prescription, advocacy, and activism*.

Specifically, policy analysis involves:

1. *A primary concern with explanation rather than prescription.* Policy recommendations—if they are made at all—are subordinate to description and explanation. There is an implicit judgment that understanding is a prerequisite to prescription and that understanding is best achieved through careful analysis rather than rhetoric or polemics.
2. *A rigorous search for the causes and consequences of public policies.* This search involves the use of scientific standards of inference. Sophisticated quantitative techniques may be helpful in establishing valid inferences about causes and consequences, but they are not essential.
3. *An effort to develop and test general propositions about the causes and consequences of public policy and to accumulate reliable research findings of general relevance.* The object is to develop general theories about public policy that are reliable and that apply to different government agencies and different policy areas. Policy analysts clearly prefer to develop explanations that fit more than one policy decision or case study—explanations that stand up over time in a variety of settings.

However, it must be remembered that policy issues are decided not by analysts but by political actors—elected and appointed government officials, interest groups, and occasionally even voters. Social science research often does not fare well in the political arena; it may be interpreted, misinterpreted, ignored, or even used as a weapon by political combatants. Policy analysis sometimes produces unexpected and even politically embarrassing findings. Public policies do not always work as intended. And political interests will accept, reject, or use findings to fit their own purposes.

## Policy Analysis and the Quest for Solutions to America's Problems

It is questionable that policy analysis can ever “solve” America's problems. Ignorance, crime, poverty, racial conflict, inequality, poor housing, ill health, pollution, congestion, and unhappy lives have afflicted people and societies for a long time. Of course, this is no excuse for failing to work toward a society free of these maladies. But our striving for a better society should be tempered with the realization that solutions to these problems may be very difficult to find. There are many reasons for qualifying our enthusiasm for policy analysis.

**Limits on Government Power.** First, it is easy to exaggerate the importance, both for good and for ill, of the policies of governments. It is not clear that government policies, however ingenious, could cure all or even most of society's ills. Governments are constrained by many powerful social forces—patterns of family life, class structure, child-rearing practices, religious

beliefs, and so on. These forces are not easily managed by governments, nor could they be controlled even if it seemed desirable to do so. Some of society's problems are very intractable.

**Disagreement over the Problem.** Second, policy analysis cannot offer solutions to problems when there is no general agreement on what the problems are. For example, in educational policy some researchers assume that raising the achievement levels (measures of verbal and quantitative abilities) is the problem to which our efforts should be directed. But educators often argue that the acquisition of verbal and quantitative skills is not the only, or even the most important, goal of the public schools. They contend that schools must also develop positive self-images among pupils of all races and backgrounds, encourage social awareness and the appreciation of multiple cultures, teach children to respect one another and to resolve their differences peacefully, raise children's awareness of the dangers of drugs and educate them about sex and sexually transmitted diseases, and so on. In other words, many educators define the problems confronting schools more broadly than raising achievement levels.

Policy analysis is not capable of resolving value conflicts. If there is little agreement on what values should be emphasized in educational policy, there is not much that policy research can contribute to policymaking. At best it can advise on how to achieve certain results, but it cannot determine what is truly valuable for society.

**Subjectivity in Interpretation.** Third, policy analysis deals with very subjective topics and must rely on interpretation of results. Professional researchers frequently interpret the results of their analyses differently. Social science research cannot be value-free. Even the selection of the topic for research is affected by one's values about what is important in society and worthy of attention.

**Limitations on Design of Human Research.** Another set of problems in systematic policy analysis centers around inherent limitations in the design of social science research. It is not really possible to conduct some forms of controlled experiments on human beings. For example, researchers cannot order children to go to poor schools for several years just to see if it adversely impacts their achievement levels. Instead, social researchers must find situations in which educational deprivation has been produced "naturally" in order to make the necessary observations about the causes of such deprivation. Because we cannot control all the factors in a real-world situation, it is difficult to pinpoint precisely what causes educational achievement or nonachievement. Moreover, even where some experimentation is permitted, human beings frequently modify their behavior simply because they know that they are being observed in an experimental situation. For example, in educational research it frequently turns out that children perform well under *any* new teaching method or curricular innovation. It is difficult to know whether the improvements observed are a product of the new teaching method or curricular improvement or merely a product of the experimental situation.

**Complexity of Human Behavior.** Perhaps the most serious reservation about policy analysis is the fact that social problems are so complex that social scientists are unable to make accurate predictions about the impact of proposed policies. *Social scientists simply do not know enough about individual and group behavior to be able to give reliable advice to policymakers.* Occasionally

policymakers turn to social scientists for “solutions,” but social scientists do not have any. Most of society’s problems are shaped by so many variables that a simple explanation of them, or remedy for them, is rarely possible. The fact that social scientists give so many contradictory recommendations is an indication of the absence of reliable scientific knowledge about social problems. Although some scholars argue that no advice is better than contradictory or inaccurate advice, policymakers still must make decisions, and it is probably better that they act in the light of whatever little knowledge social science can provide than that they act in the absence of any knowledge at all. Even if social scientists cannot predict the impact of future policies, they can at least attempt to measure the impact of current and past public policies and make this knowledge available to decision makers.

### Policy Analysis as Art and Craft

Understanding public policy is both an art and a craft. It is an art because it requires insight, creativity, and imagination in identifying societal problems and describing them, in devising public policies that might alleviate them, and then in finding out whether these policies end up making things better or worse. It is a craft because these tasks usually require some knowledge of economics, political science, public administration, sociology, law, and statistics. Policy analysis is really an applied subfield of all of these traditional academic disciplines.

We doubt that there is any “model of choice” in policy analysis—that is, a single model or method that is preferable to all others and that consistently renders the best solutions to public problems. Instead we agree with political scientist Aaron Wildavsky, who wrote:

Policy analysis is one activity for which there can be no fixed program, for policy analysis is synonymous with creativity, which may be stimulated by theory and sharpened by practice, which can be learned but not taught.<sup>3</sup>

Wildavsky goes on to warn students that solutions to great public questions are not to be expected:

In large part, it must be admitted, knowledge is negative. It tells us what we cannot do, where we cannot go, wherein we have been wrong, but not necessarily how to correct these errors. After all, if current efforts were judged wholly satisfactory, there would be little need for analysis and less for analysts.

There is no one model of choice to be found in this book, but if anyone wants to begin a debate about different ways of understanding public policy, this book is a good place to begin.

### Notes

1. This book discourages elaborate academic discussions of the definition of public policy—we say simply that public policy is whatever governments choose to do or not to do. Even the most elaborate definitions of public policy, on close examination, seem to boil down to the same thing. For example, political scientist

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David Easton defines public policy as “the authoritative allocation of values for the whole society”—but it turns out that only the government can “authoritatively” act on the “whole” society, and everything the government chooses to do or not to do results in the “allocation of values.”

Political scientist Harold Lasswell and philosopher Abraham Kaplan define policy as a “a projected program of goals, values, and practices,” and political scientist Carl Friedrich says, “It is essential for the policy concept that there be a goal, objective, or purpose.” These definitions imply a difference between specific government actions and an overall program of action toward a given goal. But the problem raised in insisting that government actions must have goals in order to be labeled “policy” is that we can never be sure whether or not a particular action has a goal, or if it does, what that goal is. Some people may assume that if a government chooses to do something there must be a goal, objective, or purpose, but all we can really observe is what governments choose to do or not to do. Realistically, our notion of public policy must include *all actions* of government, and not what governments or officials say they are going to do. We may wish that governments act in a “purposeful, goal-oriented” fashion, but we know that all too frequently they do not.

Still another approach to defining public policy is to break down this general notion into various component parts. Political scientist Charles O. Jones asks that we consider the distinction among various proposals (specified means for achieving goals), programs (authorized means for achieving goals), decisions (specific actions taken to implement programs), and effects (the measurable impacts of programs). But again we have the problem of assuming that decisions, programs, goals, and effects are linked. Certainly in many policy areas we will see that the decisions of government have little to do with announced “programs,” and neither are connected with national “goals.” It may be unfortunate that our government does not function neatly to link goals, programs, decisions, and effects, but as a matter of fact it does not.

So we shall stick with our simple definition: *public policy is whatever governments choose to do or not to do*. Note that we are focusing not only on government action but also on government inaction, that is, what government chooses *not* to do. We contend that government *inaction* can have just as great an impact on society as government action.

See David Easton, *The Political System* (New York: Knopf, 1953), p. 129; Harold D. Lasswell and Abraham Kaplan, *Power and Society* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 71; Carl J. Friedrich, *Man and His Government* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), p. 70; Charles O. Jones, *An Introduction to the Study of Public Policy* (Boston: Duxbury, 1977), p. 4.

2. Harold Lasswell, *Politics: Who Gets What, When and How* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1936).
3. Aaron Wildavsky, *Speaking Truth to Power* (New York: John Wiley, 1979), p. 3.

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## Web Sites

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT. White House home page, with president's policy positions, speeches, press releases, etc. [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov)

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES. Official House Web site, with links to individual House members' Web sites. [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov)

U.S. SENATE. Official Senate Web site, with links to individual senators' Web sites. [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov)

U.S. CONGRESS ON THE INTERNET. Library of Congress Thomas search engine for finding bills and tracing their progress through Congress. <http://thomas.loc.gov>

FEDERAL STATISTICS ONLINE. Links to federal statistical reports, listed by topic A–Z. [www.fedstats.gov](http://www.fedstats.gov)

U.S. CENSUS BUREAU. The official site of the Census Bureau, with access to all current reports—population, income and poverty, government finances, etc. [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)

FIRST GOV. U.S. government's official portal to all independent agencies and government corporations. [www.firstgov.gov](http://www.firstgov.gov)

FEDERAL JUDICIARY. U.S. judiciary official site, with links to all federal courts. [www.uscourts.gov](http://www.uscourts.gov)

SUPREME COURT CASES. Compilation of all key U.S. Supreme Court decisions. [www.supct.law.cornell.edu](http://www.supct.law.cornell.edu)

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS. Compilation of the laws of the United States. <http://thomas.loc.gov>

# Models of Politics

## *Some Help in Thinking About Public Policy*

### Models for Policy Analysis

A model is a simplified representation of some aspect of the real world. It may be an actual physical representation—a model airplane, for example, or the tabletop buildings that planners and architects use to show how things will look when proposed projects are completed. Or a model may be a diagram—a road map, for example, or a flow chart that political scientists use to show how a bill becomes law.

**Uses of Models.** The models we shall use in studying policy are *conceptual models*. These are word models that try to

- Simplify and clarify our thinking about politics and public policy.
- Identify important aspects of policy problems.
- Help us to communicate with each other by focusing on essential features of political life.
- Direct our efforts to understand public policy better by suggesting what is important and what is unimportant.
- Suggest explanations for public policy and predict its consequences.

**Selected Policy Models.** Over the years, political science, like other scientific disciplines, has developed a number of models to help us understand political life. Throughout this volume we will try to see whether these models have any utility in the study of public policy. Specifically, we want to examine public policy from the perspective of the following models:

- Institutional model
- Process model
- Rational model

- Incremental model
- Group model
- Elite model
- Public choice model
- Game theory model

Each of these terms identifies a major conceptual model that can be found in the literature of political science. None of these models was derived especially to study public policy, yet each offers a separate way of thinking about policy and even suggests some of the general causes and consequences of public policy.

*These models are not competitive in the sense that any one of them could be judged "best."* Each one provides a separate focus on political life, and each can help us to understand different things about public policy. Although some policies appear at first glance to lend themselves to explanation by one particular model, most policies are a combination of rational planning, incrementalism, interest group activity, elite preferences, game playing, public choice, political processes, and institutional influences. In later chapters these models will be employed, singularly and in combination, to describe and explain specific policies. Following is a brief description of each model, with particular attention to the separate ways in which public policy can be viewed.

### **Institutionalism: Policy as Institutional Output**

Government institutions have long been a central focus of political science. Traditionally, political science was defined as the study of government institutions. Political activities generally center around particular government institutions—Congress, the presidency, courts, bureaucracies, states, municipalities, and so on. Public policy is authoritatively determined, implemented, and enforced by these institutions.

The relationship between public policy and government institutions is very close. Strictly speaking, a policy does not become a *public* policy until it is adopted, implemented, and enforced by some government institution. Government institutions give public policy three distinctive characteristics. First, government lends *legitimacy* to policies. Government policies are generally regarded as legal obligations that command the loyalty of citizens. People may regard the policies of other groups and associations in society—corporations, churches, professional organizations, civic associations, and so forth—as important and even binding. But only government policies involve legal obligations. Second, government policies involve *universality*. Only government policies extend to all people in a society; the policies of other groups or organizations reach only a part of the society. Finally, government monopolizes *coercion* in society—only government can legitimately imprison violators of its policies. The sanctions that can be imposed by other groups or organizations in society are more limited. It is precisely this ability of government to command the loyalty of all its citizens, to enact policies governing the whole society, and to monopolize the legitimate use of force that encourages individuals and groups to work for enactment of their preferences into policy.

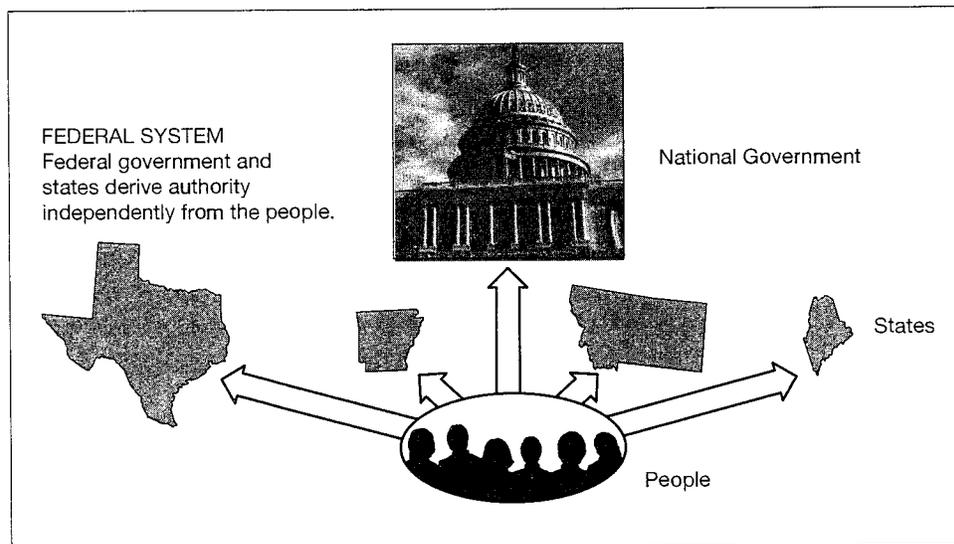
**Institutionalism: Applying the Model**

In Chapter 12, "American Federalism: Institutional Arrangements and Public Policy," we shall examine some of the problems of American federalism—the distribution of money and power among federal, state, and local governments.

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The Constitution of the United States establishes the fundamental institutional structure for policymaking. It is "the supreme Law of the Land" (Article VI). Its key structural components—separation of powers and checks and balances among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of the national government—together with federalism—dividing power between the nation and the states—were designed by the Founders in part "to form a more perfect Union." These institutional arrangements have changed significantly over more than two centuries, yet no other written constitution in the world has remained in place for so long. Throughout this volume we will be concerned with the effect of these institutional arrangements on public policy. And in Chapter 12 we shall explore in some detail the effect of federalism.

Federalism recognizes that both the national government and the state governments derive independent legal authority from their own citizens (Figure 2-1): both can pass their own laws, levy their own taxes, and maintain their own courts. The states also have important roles in the selection of national officeholders—in the apportionment of congressional seats, in the allocation of two U.S. senators to each state, and in the allocation of electoral



**FIGURE 2-1 An Institutional Model: American Federalism** Governmental institutional arrangements affect public policy, including federalism—the distribution of money and power among federal, state, and local governments.

votes for president. Most important, perhaps, both the Congress and three-quarters of states must consent to any changes in the Constitution itself.

### Process: Policy as Political Activity

Today political processes and behaviors are a central focus of political science. Since World War II, modern “behavioral” political science has studied the activities of voters, interest groups, legislators, presidents, bureaucrats, judges, and other political actors. One of the main purposes has been to discover patterns of activities—or “processes.” Political scientists with an interest in policy have grouped various activities according to their relationship with public policy. The result is a set of *policy processes*, which usually follow the general outline in Table 2–1. In short, one can view the policy process as a series of political activities—problem identification, agenda setting, formulation, legitimation, implementation, and evaluation.

The process model is useful in helping us to understand the various activities involved in policymaking. We want to keep in mind that *policymaking* involves agenda setting (capturing the attention of policymakers), formulating proposals (devising and selecting policy options), legitimating policy (developing political support; winning congressional, presidential, or court approval), implementing policy (creating bureaucracies, spending money, enforcing laws), and evaluating policy (finding out whether policies work, whether they are popular).

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#### Processes: Applying the Model

Political processes and behaviors are considered in each of the policy areas studied in this book. Additional commentary on the impact of political activity on public policy is found in Chapter 3, “The Policymaking Process: Decision-Making Activities.”

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**TABLE 2–1 The Policy Process**

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- *Problem Identification.* The identification of policy problems through demand from individuals and groups for government action.
  - *Agenda Setting.* Focusing the attention of the mass media and public officials on specific public problems to decide what will be decided.
  - *Policy Formulation.* The development of policy proposals by interest groups, White House staff, congressional committees, and think tanks.
  - *Policy Legitimation.* The selection and enactment of policies through actions by Congress, the president, and the courts.
  - *Policy Implementation.* The implementation of policies through government bureaucracies, public expenditures, regulations, and other activities of executive agencies.
  - *Policy Evaluation.* The evaluation of policies by government agencies themselves, outside consultants, the media, and the general public.
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## Rationalism: Policy as Maximum Social Gain

A rational policy is one that achieves “maximum social gain”; that is, governments should choose policies resulting in gains to society that exceed costs by the greatest amount, and governments should refrain from policies if costs exceed gains.

Note that there are really two important guidelines in this definition of maximum social gain. First, no policy should be adopted if its costs exceed its benefits. Second, among policy alternatives, decision makers should choose the policy that produces the greatest benefit over cost. In other words, a policy is rational when the difference between the values it achieves and the values it sacrifices is positive and greater than any other policy alternative. One should *not* view rationalism in a narrow dollars-and-cents framework, in which basic social values are sacrificed for dollar savings. Rationalism involves the calculation of *all* social, political, and economic values sacrificed or achieved by a public policy, not just those that can be measured in dollars.

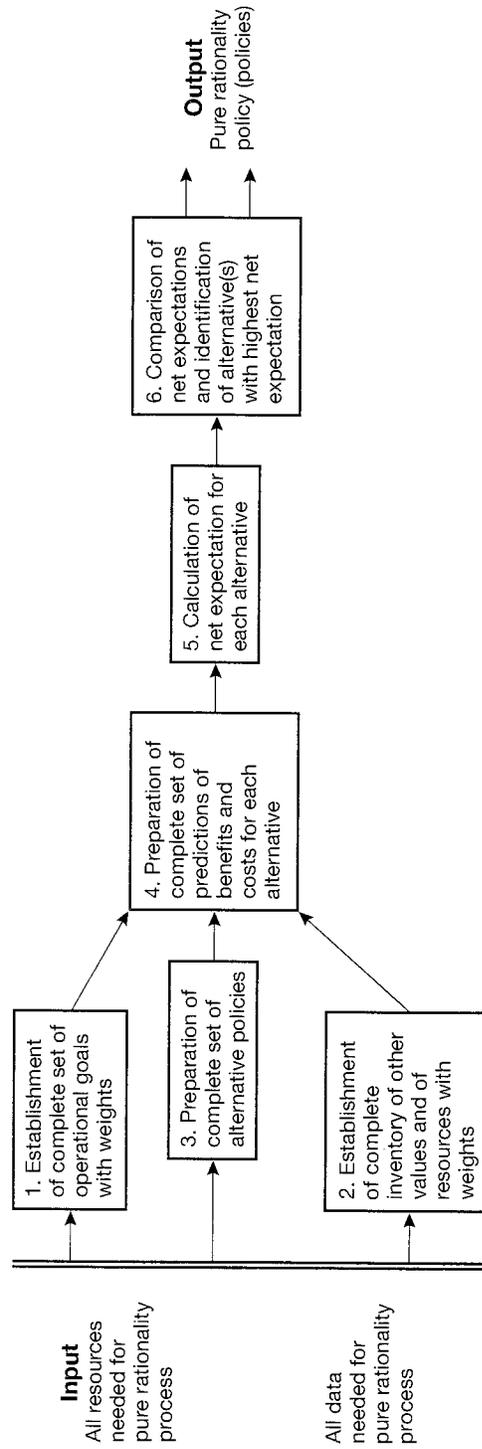
To select a rational policy, policymakers must (1) know all the society’s value preferences and their relative weights, (2) know all the policy alternatives available, (3) know all the consequences of each policy alternative, (4) calculate the ratio of benefits to costs for each policy alternative, and (5) select the most efficient policy alternative. This rationality assumes that the value preferences of *society as a whole* can be known and weighted. It is not enough to know and weigh the values of some groups and not others. There must be a complete understanding of societal values. Rational policymaking also requires *information* about alternative policies, the *predictive capacity* to foresee accurately the consequences of alternate policies, and the *intelligence* to calculate correctly the ratio of costs to benefits. Finally, rational policymaking requires a *decision-making system* that facilitates rationality in policy formation. A diagram of such a system is shown in Figure 2–2.

However, there are many barriers to rational decision making, so many, in fact, that it rarely takes place at all in government. Yet the model remains important for analytic purposes because it helps to identify barriers to rationality. It assists in posing the question, Why is policymaking *not* a more rational process? At the outset we can hypothesize several important *obstacles to rational policymaking*:

- Many conflicting benefits and costs cannot be compared or weighted; for example, it is difficult to compare or weigh the value of individual life against the costs of regulation.

### Rationalism: Applying the Model

Chapter 4, “Criminal Justice: Rationality and Irrationality in Public Policy,” shows that rational policies to deter crime—policies ensuring certainty, swiftness, and severity of punishment—have seldom been implemented. The problems of achieving rationality in public policy are also discussed in Chapter 5, “Health and Welfare: The Search for Rational Strategies.” We will consider the general design of alternative strategies in dealing with poverty, health, and welfare. We will observe how these strategies are implemented in public policy, and we will analyze some of the obstacles to the achievement of rationality in public policy.



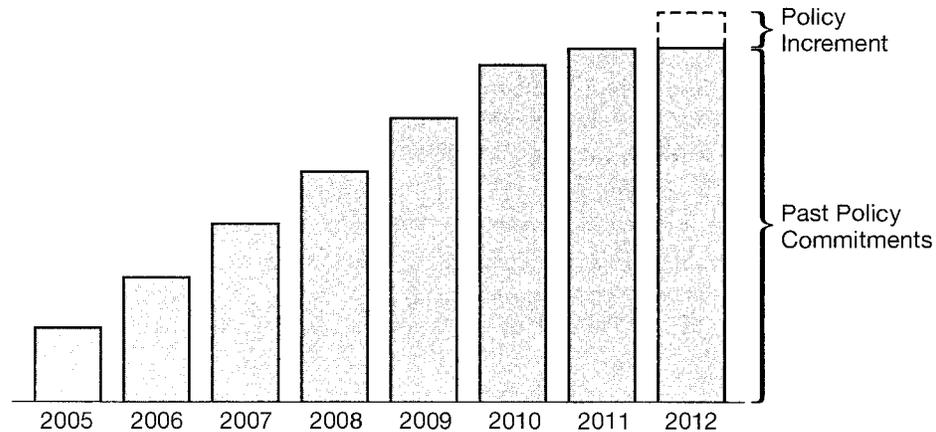
**FIGURE 2-2 A Rational Model of a Decision System** The rational model assumes complete agreement on goals, knowledge of alternative policies, and the ability to calculate and select the policies with the greatest benefits and least costs.

- Policymakers may not be motivated to make decisions on the basis of societal goals but instead try to maximize their own rewards—power, status, reelection, and money.
- Policymakers may not be motivated to maximize net social gain but merely to satisfy demands for progress; they do not search until they find “the one best way”; instead they halt their search when they find an alternative that will work.
- Large investments in existing programs and policies (sunk costs) prevent policymakers from reconsidering alternatives foreclosed by previous decisions.
- There are innumerable barriers to collecting all the information required to know all possible policy alternatives and the consequences of each, including the cost of information gathering, the availability of the information, and the time involved in its collection.
- Neither the predictive capacities of the social and behavioral sciences nor those of the physical and biological sciences are sufficiently advanced to enable policymakers to understand the full benefits or costs of each policy alternative.
- Policymakers, even with the most advanced computerized analytical techniques, do not have sufficient intelligence to calculate accurately costs and benefits when a large number of diverse political, social, economic, and cultural values are at stake.
- Uncertainty about the consequences of various policy alternatives compels policymakers to stick as closely as possible to previous policies to reduce the likelihood of unanticipated negative consequences.
- The segmentalized nature of policymaking in large bureaucracies makes it difficult to coordinate decision making so that the input of all the various specialists is brought to bear at the point of decision.

### Incrementalism: Policy as Variations on the Past

Incrementalism views public policy as a continuation of past government activities with only incremental modifications. Political scientist Charles E. Lindblom first presented the incremental model in the course of a critique of the rational model of decision making.<sup>1</sup> According to Lindblom, decision makers do *not* annually review the whole range of existing and proposed policies, identify societal goals, research the benefits and costs of alternative policies in achieving these goals, rank order of preferences for each policy alternative in terms of the maximum net benefits, and then make a selection on the basis of all relevant information. On the contrary, constraints of time, information, and cost prevent policymakers from identifying the full range of policy alternatives and their consequences. Constraints of politics prevent the establishment of clear-cut societal goals and the accurate calculation of costs and benefits. The incremental model recognizes the impractical nature of “rational-comprehensive” policymaking, and describes a more conservative process of decision making.

Incrementalism is conservative in that existing programs, policies, and expenditures are considered as a *base*, and attention is concentrated on new programs and policies and on increases, decreases, or modifications of current programs. (For example, budgetary policy for any government activity or program for 2012 might be viewed incrementally, as shown in



**FIGURE 2-3 The Incremental Model** The incremental model assumes that policymakers rarely examine past policy commitments, but rather focus their attention on changes in policies and expenditures.

Figure 2-3.) Policymakers generally accept the legitimacy of established programs and tacitly agree to continue previous policies.

They do this because they do not have the time, information, or money to investigate all the alternatives to existing policy. The cost of collecting all this information is too great. Policymakers do not have sufficient predictive capacities to know what all the consequences of each alternative will be. Nor are they able to calculate cost-benefit ratios for alternative policies when many diverse political, social, economic, and cultural values are at stake. Thus completely “rational” policy may turn out to be “inefficient” (despite the contradiction in terms) if the time and cost of developing a rational policy are excessive.

Moreover, incrementalism is politically expedient. Agreement comes easier in policymaking when the items in dispute are only increases or decreases in budgets or modifications to existing programs. Conflict is heightened when decision making focuses on major policy shifts involving great gains or losses, or “all-or-nothing,” “yes-or-no” policy decisions. Because the political tension involved in getting new programs or policies passed every year would be very great, past policy victories are continued into future years unless there is a substantial political realignment. Thus, incrementalism is important in reducing conflict, maintaining stability, and preserving the political system itself.

But *the incremental model may fail when policymakers are confronted with crises*. When faced with potential collapse of the nation’s financial markets in 2008, the president, Congress, the Treasury Department, and the Federal Reserve Board came together to agree on an

#### Incrementalism: Applying the Model

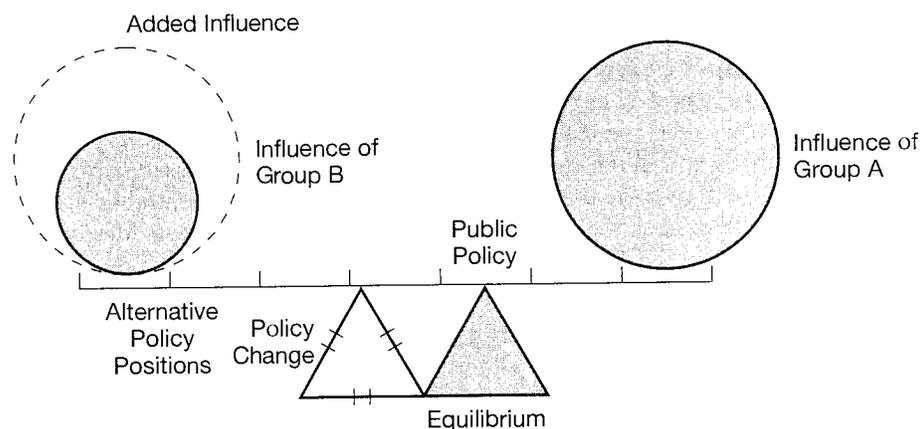
Special attention to incrementalism is given in the discussion of government budgeting in Chapter 7, “Economic Policy: Incremental and Nonincremental Policymaking.”

unprecedented, *nonincremental* expansion of federal power (see Chapter 7, “Economic Policy: Incremental and Nonincremental Policymaking”). Overall, federal spending and deficits increased dramatically, well beyond any levels that might have been predicted by the incremental model. The Treasury Department was given unprecedented authority and \$700 billion to “bail out” the nation’s major financial institutions. The Federal Reserve Board reduced interest rates to their lowest in history and provided unprecedented amounts of credit to the financial system. Congress itself passed a “stimulus package,” the largest single spending bill in the nation’s history. Incrementalism was abandoned.

### Group Theory: Policy as Equilibrium in the Group Struggle

Group theory begins with the proposition that interaction among groups is the central fact of politics.<sup>2</sup> Individuals with common interests band together formally or informally to press their demands on government. According to political scientist David Truman, an interest group is “a shared-attitude group that makes certain claims upon other groups in the society”; such a group becomes political “if and when it makes a claim through or upon any of the institutions of government.”<sup>3</sup> Individuals are important in politics only when they act as part of, or on behalf of, group interests. The group becomes the essential bridge between the individual and the government. Politics is really the struggle among groups to influence public policy. The task of the political system is to *manage group conflict* by (1) establishing rules of the game in the group struggle, (2) arranging compromises and balancing interests, (3) enacting compromises in the form of public policy, and (4) enforcing these compromises.

According to group theorists, public policy at any given time is the equilibrium reached in the group struggle (see Figure 2–4). This equilibrium is determined by the relative influence of various interest groups. Changes in the relative influence of any interest groups



**FIGURE 2–4 The Group Model** The group model assumes that public policy is a balance of interest group influence; policies change when particular interest groups gain or lose influence.

### Group Theory: Applying the Model

Throughout this volume we will describe struggles over public policy. In Chapter 6, "Education: Group Struggles," we will examine group conflict over public policy in the discussions of education and school issues. In Chapter 8, "Tax Policy: Battling the Special Interests," we will observe the power of interest groups in obtaining special treatments in the tax code and obstructing efforts to reform the nation's tax laws.

can be expected to result in changes in public policy; policy will move in the direction desired by the groups gaining influence and away from the desires of groups losing influence. The influence of groups is determined by their numbers, wealth, organizational strength, leadership, access to decision makers, and internal cohesion.<sup>4</sup>

The whole interest group system—the political system itself—is held together in equilibrium by several forces. First, there is a large, nearly universal, *latent group* in American society that supports the constitutional system and prevailing rules of the game. This group is not always visible but can be activated to administer overwhelming rebuke to any group that attacks the system and threatens to destroy the equilibrium.

Second, *overlapping group membership* helps to maintain the equilibrium by preventing any one group from moving too far from prevailing values. Individuals who belong to any one group also belong to other groups, and this fact moderates the demands of groups who must avoid offending their members who have other group affiliations.

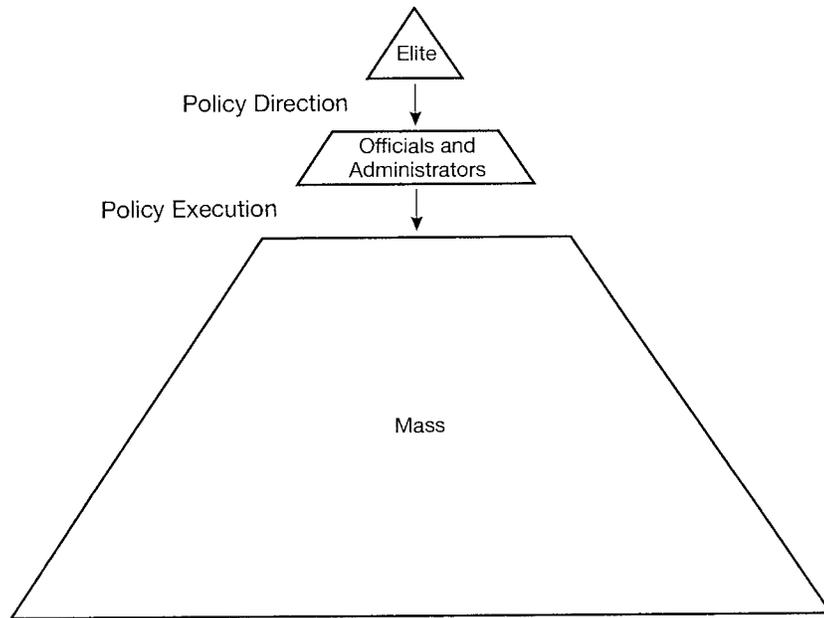
Finally, the *checking and balancing resulting from group competition* also helps to maintain equilibrium in the system. No single group constitutes a majority in American society. The power of each group is checked by the power of competing groups. "Countervailing" centers of power function to check the influence of any single group and protect the individual from exploitation.

### Elite Theory: Policy as Elite Preference

Public policy may also be viewed as the preferences and values of a governing elite.<sup>5</sup> Although it is often asserted that public policy reflects the demands of "the people," this may express the myth rather than the reality of American democracy. Elite theory suggests that the people are apathetic and ill informed about public policy, that elites actually shape mass opinion on policy questions more than masses shape elite opinion. Thus, public policy really turns out to be the preferences of elites. Public officials and administrators merely carry out the policies decided on by the elite. Policies flow downward from elites to masses; they do not arise from mass demands (see Figure 2-5).

Elite theory can be summarized briefly as follows:

- Society is divided into the few who have power and the many who do not. Only a small number of persons allocate values for society; the masses do not decide public policy.
- The few who govern are not typical of the masses who are governed. Elites are drawn disproportionately from the upper socioeconomic strata of society.



**FIGURE 2-5 The Elite Model** The elite model implies that public policy does not flow upward from demands by the people, but rather downward from the interests, values, and preferences of elites.

- The movement of nonelites to elite positions must be slow and continuous to maintain stability and avoid revolution. Only nonelites who have accepted the basic elite consensus can be admitted to governing circles.
- Elites share consensus in behalf of the basic values of the social system and the preservation of the system. In America, the bases of elite consensus are the sanctity of private property, limited government, and individual liberty.
- Public policy does not reflect the demands of masses but rather the prevailing values of the elite. Changes in public policy will be incremental rather than revolutionary.
- Active elites are subject to relatively little direct influence from apathetic masses. Elites influence masses more than masses influence elites.

#### Elite Theory: Applying the Model

Chapter 9, "International Trade and Immigration: Elite-Mass Conflict," expands on the elite model by arguing that when elite preferences differ from those of the masses, the preferences of elites prevail. Chapter 11, "Civil Rights: Elite and Mass Interaction," portrays the civil rights movement as an effort by established national elites to extend equality of opportunity to blacks. Opposition to civil rights policies is found among white masses in the states.

What are the implications of elite theory for policy analysis? Elitism implies that public policy does not reflect the demands of the people so much as it does the interests, values, and preferences of elites. Therefore, change and innovations in public policy come about as a result of redefinitions by elites of their own values. Because of the general conservatism of elites—that is, their interest in preserving the system—change in public policy will be incremental rather than revolutionary. Changes in the political system occur when events threaten the system, and elites, acting on the basis of enlightened self-interest, institute reforms to preserve the system and their place in it. The values of elites may be very “public regarding.” A sense of *noblesse oblige* may permeate elite values, and the welfare of the masses may be an important element in elite decision making. Elitism does not necessarily mean that public policy will be hostile toward mass welfare but only that the responsibility for mass welfare rests on the shoulders of elites, not masses.

### Public Choice Theory: Policy as Collective Decision Making by Self-Interested Individuals

Public choice is the economic study of nonmarket decision making, especially the application of economic analyses to public policymaking. Traditionally, economics studied behavior in the marketplace and assumed that individuals pursued their private interests; political science studied behavior in the public arena and assumed that individuals pursued their own notion of the public interest. Thus, separate versions of human motivation developed in economics and political science: the idea of *homo economicus* assumed a self-interested actor seeking to maximize personal benefits; that of *homo politicus* assumed a public-spirited actor seeking to maximize societal welfare.

But public choice theory challenges the notion that individuals act differently in politics than they do in the marketplace. This theory assumes that all political actors—voters, taxpayers, candidates, legislators, bureaucrats, interest groups, parties, and governments—*seek to maximize their personal benefits in politics as well as in the marketplace*. James Buchanan, the Nobel Prize-winning economist and leading scholar in modern public choice theory, argues that individuals come together in politics for their own mutual benefit, just as they come together in the marketplace; and by agreement (contract) among themselves they can enhance their own well-being, in the same way as by trading in the marketplace.<sup>6</sup> In short, people pursue their self-interest in both politics and the marketplace, but even with selfish motives they can mutually benefit through collective decision making.

Government itself arises from a *social contract* among individuals who agree for their mutual benefit to obey laws and support the government in exchange for protection of their own lives, liberties, and property. Thus, public choice theorists claim to be intellectual heirs to the English political philosopher John Locke, as well as to Thomas Jefferson, who incorporated this social contract notion into the American Declaration of Independence. Enlightened self-interest leads individuals to a constitutional contract establishing a government to protect life, liberty, and property.

Public choice theory recognizes that government must perform certain functions that the marketplace is unable to handle, that is, it must remedy certain “market failures.” First, government must provide *public goods*—goods and services that must be supplied to everyone if they are supplied to anyone. The market cannot provide public goods because their costs

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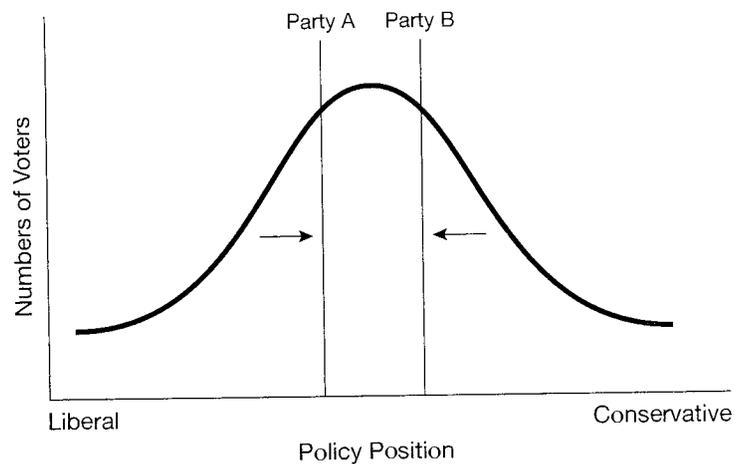
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### Public Choice: Applying the Model

The public choice theory is employed in Chapter 10, “Energy and Environmental Policy: Externalities and Interests,” to aid in recognizing environmental pollution as a problem in the control of externalities in human activity. Public choice theory also helps us to understand the behavior of environmental interest groups in dramatizing and publicizing their cause.

exceed their value to any single buyer, and a single buyer would not be in a position to keep nonbuyers from using it. National defense is the most common example: protection from foreign invasion is too expensive for a single person to buy, and once it is provided no one can be excluded from its benefits. So people must act collectively through government to provide for the common defense. Second, *externalities* are another recognized market failure and justification for government intervention. An externality occurs when an activity of one individual, firm, or local government imposes uncompensated costs on others. The most common examples are air and water pollution: the discharge of air and water pollutants imposes costs on others. Governments respond by either regulating the activities that produce externalities or imposing penalties (fines) on these activities to compensate for their costs to society.

Public choice theory helps to explain why political parties and candidates generally fail to offer clear policy alternatives in election campaigns. Parties and candidates are not interested in advancing principles but rather in winning elections. They formulate their policy positions to win elections; they do not win elections to formulate policy. Thus each party and candidate seeks policy positions that will attract the greatest number of voters.<sup>7</sup> *Given a unimodal distribution of opinion on any policy question* (see Figure 2–6), *parties and candidates*



**FIGURE 2–6 Public Choice: A Vote-Maximizing Model of Party Competition** Public choice theory assumes that individuals and organizations seek to maximize their own benefits in politics; for example, parties and candidates whose policy views may be distinctly liberal or conservative move to the center at election time to win the most votes.

will move toward the center to maximize votes. Only “ideologues” (irrational, ideologically motivated people) ignore the vote-maximizing centrist strategy.

### Game Theory: Policy as Rational Choice in Competitive Situations

Game theory is the study of decisions in situations in which two or more *rational* participants have choices to make and the outcome depends on the choices made by each. It is applied to areas in policymaking in which there is no independently “best” choice that one can make—in which the “best” outcomes depend upon what others do.

The idea of “game” is that rational decision makers are involved in choices that are interdependent. “Players” must adjust their conduct to reflect not only their own desires and abilities but also their expectations about what others will do. Perhaps the connotation of a “game” is unfortunate, suggesting that game theory is not really appropriate for serious conflict situations. But just the opposite is true: game theory can be applied to decisions about war and peace, the use of nuclear weapons, international diplomacy, bargaining and coalition building in Congress or the United Nations, and a variety of other important political situations. A “player” may be an individual, a group, or a national government—indeed, anybody with well-defined goals who is capable of rational action.

Consider the game of “chicken.” Two adolescents drive their cars toward each other at a high speed, each with one set of wheels on the center line of the highway. If neither veers off course they will crash. Whoever veers is “chicken.” Both drivers prefer to avoid death, but they also want to avoid the “dishonor” of being “chicken.” The outcome depends on what both drivers do, and each driver must try to predict how the other will behave. This form of “brinkmanship” is common in international relations (see Figure 2–7). Inspection

*The game theorist himself or herself supplies the numerical values to the payoffs. If Driver A chooses to stay on course and Driver B chooses to stay on course also, the result might be scored as -10 for both players, who wreck their cars. But if Driver A chooses to stay on course and Driver B veers, then Driver A might get +5 (“courage”) and Driver B -5 (“dishonor”). If Driver A veers but Driver B stays on course, the results would be reversed. If both veer, each is dishonored slightly (-1), but not as much as when one or the other stayed on course.*

		DRIVER A'S CHOICES	
		Stay on Course	Veer
DRIVER B'S CHOICES	Stay on course	A: -10 B: -10	A: -5 B: +5
	Veer	A: +5 B: -5	A: -1 B: -1

**FIGURE 2–7 A Game-Theoretic Matrix for the Game of Chicken** Game theory suggests that policymakers, or “players,” adjust their conduct to reflect not only their own preferences but also the likely choices of opponents.

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### Game Theory: Applying the Model

Game theory is frequently applied in international conflicts. We will explore the utility of game theory, especially the notion of deterrence, in Chapter 13, "Defense Policy: Strategies for Serious Games." We will also explore the weakness of deterrence in defending against terrorism in Chapter 14, "Homeland Security: Terrorism and Nondeterrable Threats."

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of the payoff matrix suggests that it would be better for both drivers to veer in order to minimize the possibility of a great loss (-10). But the matrix is too simple. One or both players may place a different value on the outcomes than is suggested by the numbers. For example, one player may prefer death to dishonor in the game. Each player must try to calculate the values of the other, and neither has complete information about the values of the opponent. Moreover, bluffing or the deliberate misrepresentation of one's values or resources to an opponent is always a possibility. For example, a possible strategy in the game of chicken is to allow your opponent to see you drink heavily before the game, stumble drunkenly toward your car, and mumble something about having lived long enough in this rotten world. The effect of this communication on your opponent may increase his or her estimate of your likelihood of staying on course, and hence provide incentive for your opponent to veer and allow you to win.

An important component of game theory is the notion of *deterrence*. Deterrence is the effort to prevent an opponent from undertaking an action by inspiring fear of the consequences of the action. Players engage in deterrence when they threaten their opponents with retaliatory actions that promise to impose costs on their opponents that are far in excess of any benefits their opponents might envision by taking these actions. *Deterrence is really a psychological defense: it tries to prevent opponents from undertaking a particular action by creating in their minds the fear of costly retaliation.*

The success of deterrence depends on the credibility of the retaliatory threat and on the rationality of the opponent. Opponents must truly believe that their actions will result in retaliatory responses that inflict unacceptable costs on themselves, their people, or their nation. Opponents who do not really believe a retaliatory attack will occur are not deterred. Moreover, opponents must be *rational*—opponents must weigh the potential costs and benefits of their actions and choose a course of action that does not result in costs that exceed gains. Opponents who are irrational—who do not consider the costs of their actions to themselves, or their people, or their nation—are not deterred.

### Models: How to Tell if They Are Helping or Not

A model is merely an abstraction or representation of political life. When we think of political systems or elites or groups or rational decision making or incrementalism or games, we are abstracting from the real world in an attempt to simplify, clarify, and understand what is really important about politics. Before we begin our study of public policy, let us set forth some general criteria for evaluating the usefulness of concepts and models.

**Order and Simplify Reality.** Certainly the utility of a model lies in its ability to order and simplify political life so that we can think about it more clearly and understand the relationships we find in the real world. Yet too much simplification can lead to inaccuracies in our thinking about reality. On the one hand, if a concept is too narrow or identifies only superficial phenomena, we may not be able to use it to explain public policy. On the other hand, if a concept is too broad and suggests overly complex relationships, it may become so complicated and unmanageable that it is not really an aid to understanding. In other words, some theories of politics may be too complex to be helpful, while others may be too simplistic.

**Identify What Is Significant.** A model should also identify the really significant aspects of public policy. It should direct attention away from irrelevant variables or circumstances and focus on the real causes and significant consequences of public policy. Of course, what is “real,” “relevant,” or “significant” is to some extent a function of an individual’s personal values. But we can all agree that the utility of a concept is related to its ability to identify what it is that is really important about politics.

**Be Congruent with Reality.** Generally, a model should be congruent with reality—that is, it ought to have real empirical referents. We would expect to have difficulty with a concept that identifies a process that does not really occur or symbolizes phenomena that do not exist in the real world. However, we must not be too quick to dismiss unrealistic concepts *if* they succeed in directing our attention to why they are unrealistic. For example, no one contends that government decision making is completely rational—public officials do not always act to maximize societal values and minimize societal costs. Yet the concept of rational decision making may still be useful, albeit unrealistic, if it makes us realize how irrational government decision making really is and prompts us to inquire why.

**Provide Meaningful Communication.** A concept or model should also communicate something meaningful. If too many people disagree over the meaning of a concept, its utility in communication is diminished. For example, if no one really agrees on what constitutes an elite, the concept of an elite does not mean the same thing to everyone. If one defines an elite as a group of democratically elected public officials who are representative of the general public, one is communicating a different idea in using the term than one who defines an elite as an unrepresentative minority that makes decisions for society based on its own interests.

**Direct Inquiry and Research.** A model should help to direct inquiry and research into public policy. A concept should be operational—that is, it should refer directly to real-world phenomena that can be observed, measured, and verified. A concept, or a series of interrelated concepts (which we refer to as a model), should suggest relationships in the real world that can be tested and verified. If there is no way to prove or disprove the ideas suggested by a concept, the concept is not really useful in developing a science of politics.

**Suggest Explanations.** Finally, a model should suggest an explanation of public policy. It should suggest hypotheses about the causes and consequences of public policy—hypotheses that can be tested against real-world data. A model that merely describes public policy is not as useful as one that explains public policy, or at least suggests some possible explanations.

## Notes

1. See Charles E. Lindblom, "The Science of Muddling Through," *Public Administration Review*, 19 (Spring 1959), 79–88; Aaron Wildavsky, *The Politics of the Budgetary Process* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1964).
2. The classic statement on group theory is David B. Truman, *The Governmental Process* (New York: Knopf, 1951).
3. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
4. Earl Latham, "The Group Basis of Politics," in *Political Behavior*, ed. Heinz Eulau, Samuel J. Eldersveld, and Morris Janowitz (New York: Free Press, 1956), p. 239.
5. Elite theory is explained at length in Thomas R. Dye and Harmon Zeigler, *The Irony of Democracy*, 14th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2009).
6. James M. Buchanan and Gordon Tullock, *The Calculus of Consent* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962).
7. Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957).

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## Web Sites

- AMERICAN POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION. Home page of academic political scientists' professional organization. [www.apsanet.org](http://www.apsanet.org)
- PUBLIC AGENDA ONLINE. Brief guide to a variety of policy issues, including public opinion surveys on these issues. [www.publicagenda.org](http://www.publicagenda.org)
- ALMANAC OF POLICY ISSUES. Background information on a variety of issues with links to sources. [www.policy-almanac.org](http://www.policy-almanac.org)
- PUBLIC OPINION ONLINE. Compilation of recent public opinion polls on policy issues, political actors, government institutions, etc. [www.pollingreport.com](http://www.pollingreport.com)
- THE GALLUP ORGANIZATION. Home page of the Gallup public opinion organization. [www.gallup.com](http://www.gallup.com)
- NATIONAL CENTER FOR POLICY RESEARCH. Conservative policy research organization, with studies on a variety of policy issues. [www.nationalcenter.org](http://www.nationalcenter.org)
- PROGRESSIVE POLICY INSTITUTE. Liberal policy research organization, with policy briefs on a variety of issues. [www.ppionline.org](http://www.ppionline.org)
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