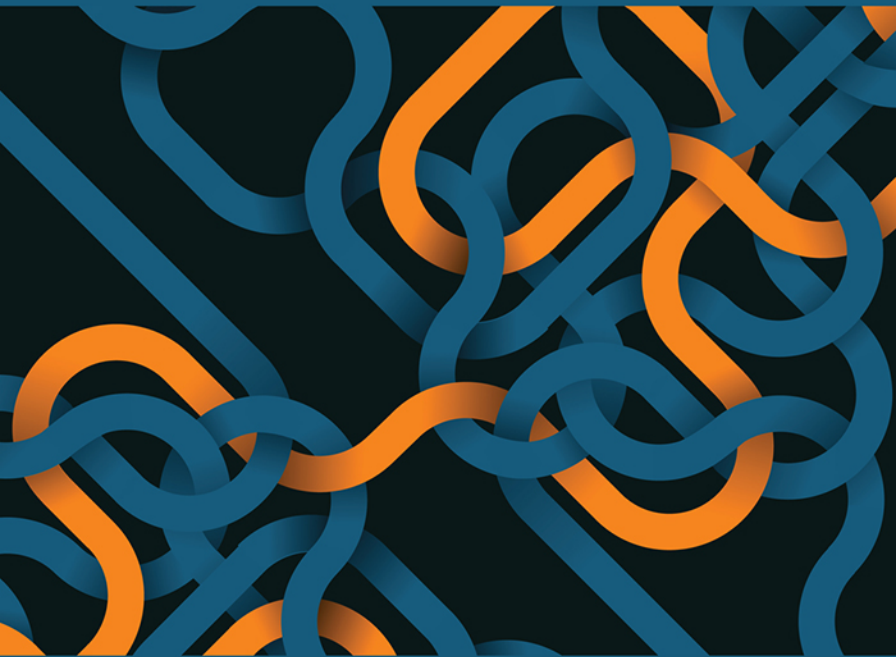


UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC POLICY

FIFTEENTH EDITION



Thomas R. Dye

Understanding Public Policy

Fifteenth Edition

Thomas R. Dye

*McKenzie Professor of Government Emeritus
Florida State University*

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Preface

Policy analysis is concerned with “who gets what” in politics and, more important, “why” and “what difference it makes.” We are concerned not only with what policies governments pursue, but why governments pursue the policies they do, and what the consequences of these policies are.

Political Science, like other scientific disciplines, has developed a number of concepts and models to help describe and explain political life. These models are not really competitive in the sense that any one could be judged as the “best.” Each focuses on separate elements of politics, and each helps us understand different things about political life.

We begin with a brief description of eight analytic models in political science and the potential contribution of each to the study of public policy:

Process model	Group model
Institutional model	Elite model
Rational model	Public choice model
Incremental model	Game theory model

Most public policies are a combination of rational planning, incrementalism, competition among groups, elite preferences, public choice, political processes, and institutional influences. Throughout this volume we employ these models, both singly and in combination, to describe and explain public policy. However, certain chapters rely more on one model than another. The policy areas studied are:

Criminal justice	Energy and
Welfare and	environment
inequality	Civil rights
Health care	Defense policy
Education	Homeland security
Economic policy	International trade
Tax policy	and Immigration

In short, this volume is not only an introduction to the study of public policy but also an introduction to the models the political scientists use to describe and explain political life.

New to this Edition

The fifteenth edition of *Understanding Public Policy* focuses on the policy issues confronting President Barack Obama in his second term in the White House.

President Obama has made income inequality a major political issue. The rise of inequality in recent years is described and analyzed in a revised chapter entitled “Welfare and Inequality: the Search for a Rational Strategy.” But despite rising inequality, America remains the land of opportunity. Income mobility—people moving up and down the income ladder—characterizes American society. Studies reveal that over half of the poorest Americans can expect to move up the income scale in less than a 10-year period.

Obamacare remains the signature political achievement of the Obama administration. So far it has survived various challenges, including the important question of the constitutionality of the individual mandate. Chapter 8 describes the complex reasoning of Chief Justice John Roberts, who held that the mandate and penalty was really a “tax” and therefore within the constitutional power of Congress to levy taxes. This decision, opposed by the Attorney Generals of 26 states, paved the way for the implementation of Obamacare. Initially implementation went badly with computer glitches obstructing enrollment; later it was revealed that millions of existing plans were canceled for failure to meet new federal requirements. The President’s promise “if

you like your healthcare plan, you can keep your healthcare plan" was broken.

According to national polls, the economy remains the most important issue facing America. Chapter 11 describes the near collapse of the banking industry in 2008–09 and the government's unprecedented efforts to avert another Great Depression. It attributes much of the near disaster to the federal government's policies including the actions of government corporations "Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac." The chapter traces the long, slow, incomplete recovery—the "Great Recession." The federal government's debt now amounts to about \$18 *trillion*, an amount in excess of \$50,000 for every man, woman, and child in the nation. The economic policy chapter also describes that proposals to reduce annual deficits. A new section shows America's ranking on the Economic Freedom Index to be dropping.

Despite years of seeming neglect, federalism appears to be experiencing a revival in the American institutional structure. The states are leading the way in medicinal use of marijuana, in same-sex marriage, and banning racial preference. All three issues are covered in separate chapters. Crime is down from its historic highs, partially as a result of law enforcement initiatives taken in states and cities in the 1980s and 90s, although now pressures have arisen to lessen sentences and hard-nosed police practices. In education, the federal government has granted waivers to most states from the controversial No Child Left Behind Act. The states have come together through the National Governors Association to construct a "common core" of desired educational outcomes.

Tax policy issues have severely divided the Congress. The standoff between the President and the Democratic-controlled Senate, and the Republican-controlled House is described in detail, including the sequestration and temporary shutdown of the federal government in 2013. President Obama succeeded in placing the blame on the House Republicans, and he succeeded in getting a raise in the top marginal income tax

rates back to 39.6 percent. Despite the president's rhetoric about income inequality, no change was made in capital gains tax and dividends taxation, which remain less than half of the rates on wage income.

Comprehensive immigration reform passed the Democratic-controlled Senate but failed to get to a vote in the Republican-controlled House. The elements of immigration reform are discussed in Chapter 12 and contrasted with current immigration policy of the United States. The United States has failed to enforce border controls and allowed 10–12 million undocumented immigrants to live in the country as second-class non-citizens. Special interests who gain from low-wage labor have been successful so far in preventing comprehensive immigration reform or even full implementation of current immigration laws. By executive order, President Obama ordered the non-deportation of children brought to the United States by their parents (in effect enacting the Dream Act which had been defeated in Congress). One result was an influx of children across our Mexican border.

Climate change is given new extensive coverage in Chapter 13 "Energy and the Environment: Externalities and Interests." "Cap and trade" proposals are described as well as the efforts of the Environmental Protection Agency to enact rules previously rejected by the Congress. A new revolution in energy production—"Fracking"—promises to reduce United States dependence on foreign oil and gas, as well as reduce carbon emissions. Fracking was developed by the private market, not government, which continues to heavily subsidize "renewable" energy sources.

President Barack Obama's drawdown of U.S. military forces is described and assessed in a revised defense policy chapter. The chaotic conclusions to America's participation in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars are described as far as possible through our date of publication. The new drone war is also described. Obama's statements on the key question of when to use military force

are contrasted with earlier statements by General Colin Powell and by Presidents Reagan, George W. Bush, and Bill Clinton. The final chapter on homeland security discusses the trade-offs between security and liberty, including surveillance by the National Security Agency, the activities of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FICA) Court, and the status of “enemy combatants” held at the United States prison and Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

Thomas R. Dye

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Chapter 1

Policy Analysis

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



EXPANDING THE SCOPE OF PUBLIC POLICY President Barack Obama signs the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act in the East Room of the White House, March 30, 2010. This health care reform bill greatly expands the scope of public policy in America. (© Brooks Kraft/Corbis News/Corbis)

1.1: 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.

1.1.1: Definition of Policy

Public policy is whatever governments choose to do or not to do.¹ 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 of these things at once.

1.1.2: 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

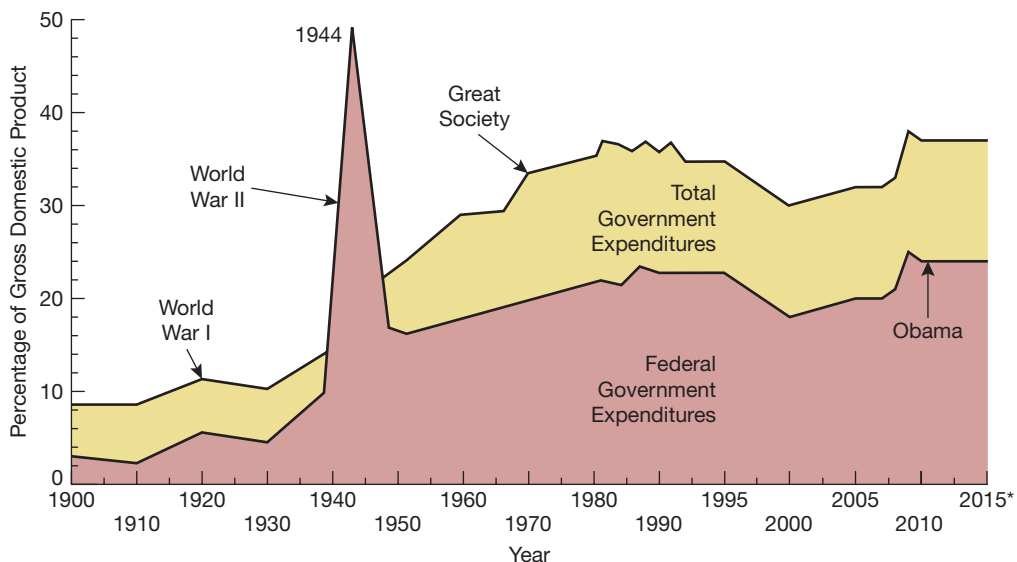
in scope to encompass just about every sector of American life.

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 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 modest decline in the size of government

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 37 percent of the GDP, the size of the economy.

*Estimate from *Budget of the United States Government*, 2015.



relative to the economy. Federal spending was less than 20 percent of the GDP.

The Obama Administration brought about a dramatic increase in federal spending, much of it in response to the “Great Recession” of 2008–2009. Federal spending in 2009 soared to 25 percent of the GDP; this spending included a “stimulus” package designed to jump-start the economy (see Chapter 10). Under President Barack Obama, federal spending was kept close to 24 percent of the GDP. The nation’s 50 state governments and 90,000 local governments (cities, counties, towns and townships, school districts, and special districts) combined to account for over 13 percent of the GDP.

Total government spending—federal, state, and local—now amounts to about 37 percent of GDP.

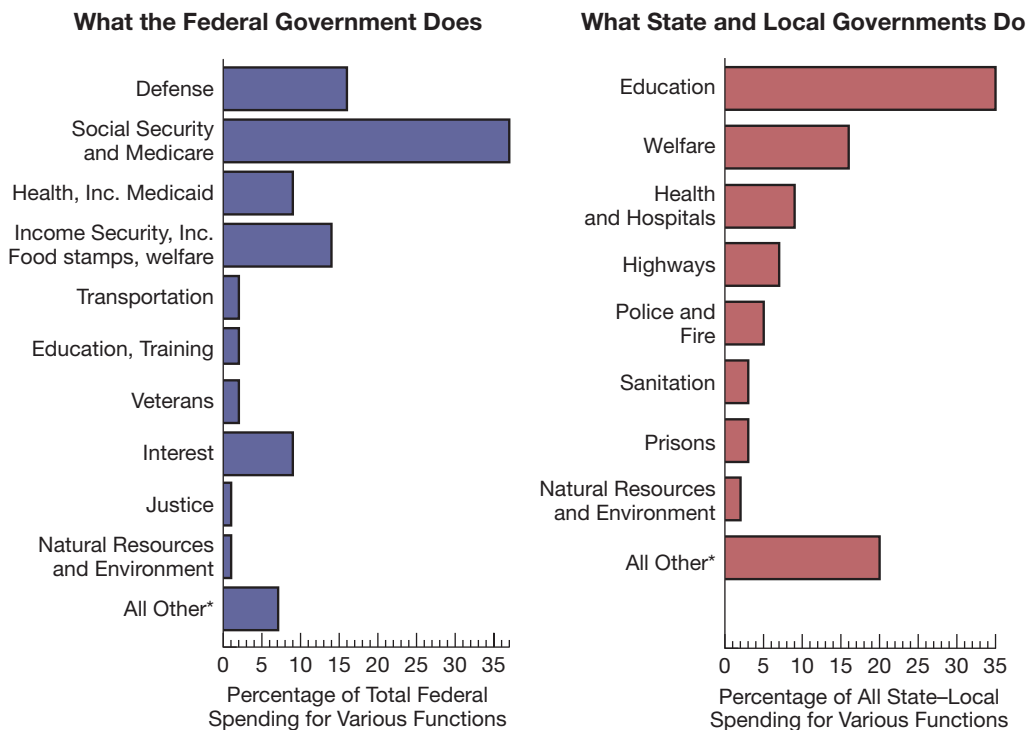
1.1.3: Scope of Public Policy

Not everything that government does is reflected in governmental expenditures. *Regulatory activity*, for example, especially environmental regulations and health insurance requirements, 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*

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, 2015*; *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2013*.



*Includes science, energy, agriculture, housing, community development, international affairs, and general government.

*Includes housing and community development, parks and recreation, governmental administration, and interest.

government spends more on 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.

1.2: Why Study Public Policy?

Political science is the study of politics—the study of “who gets what, when, and how?”² 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. And political science is more than the study of political processes, that is, campaigns and elections, voting, lobbying, legislating, and adjudicating.

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.

1.3: 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?

1.3.1: Description

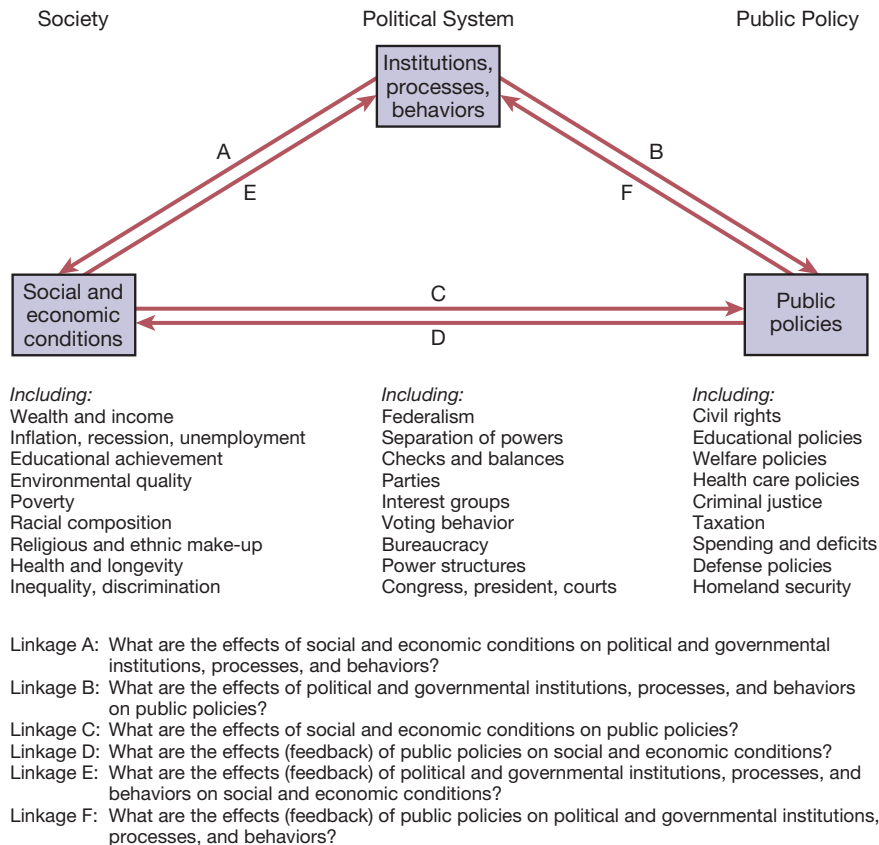
First, we can describe public policy—we can learn what government is doing (and not doing) in welfare, defense, education, civil rights, health, the environment, taxation, and so on. A factual basis of information about national policy is really an indispensable part of everyone’s education. What does 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 do the Medicaid and Medicare programs promise for the poor and the aged? What is actually mandated in the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act—“Obamacare”—and what has the Supreme Court said about it. What agreements have been reached between the United States and Russia regarding nuclear weapons? 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.

1.3.2: 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

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.



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.

1.3.3: 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 continuing high unemployment on Republican party fortunes in Congressional elections? What is the impact of economic 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 existing unemployment benefits discourage people from seeking 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.

1.4: 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.

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.

1.5: 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.

1.5.1: 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, can 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.

1.5.2: 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 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.

1.5.3: 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.

1.5.4: 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 overcrowded or underfunded 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.

1.5.5: 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.

1.6: 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.³

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.

Summary: Policy Analysis

There are a variety of definitions of public policy. But we say simply that public policy is whatever governments choose to do or not to do.

1. Policy analysis is finding out what governments do, why they do it, and what difference it makes.
2. The scope of public policy has expanded as governments do more things and grow in size.
3. A systems model relates societal conditions to political institutions and processes, and to policy outcomes.
4. Policy analysis is often limited by disagreements over the nature of societal problems, by subjectivity in the interpretation of results, by limitations to the design of policy research, and by the complexity of human behavior.