Chapter 13

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Government & Public Policy

In This Chapter

Chapter Objectives

Public policy is collectively what governments do. This chapter begins by addressing what public policy is and how it relates to the political process. We will then learn to think about public policies so that what appears to be a chaotic mass of procedures, institutions, and personalities is more understandable. Finally, given the fact that government does so many different things, this chapter will attempt to differentiate among different kinds of public policies.

13.1 Public Policy in the Political Process

Public policy can be defined in a variety of ways, but the simplest is that "public policy is whatever governments choose to do or not to do."[1] Financing cancer research, providing a Social Security system, cutting or raising taxes, initiating or halting development of a new weapons system, and attempting to minimize the impact of a global pandemic are all examples of public policies. This chapter will introduce the process of public policy; the following three chapters will address economic, domestic, and foreign policies, respectively.

13.1a Conflict Over the Ends of Government

Government is always subject to conflicting demands due to the great differences among citizens in economic status, occupations, and political ideas. Different groups will likely press for public policies in their own interests, regardless of the effect those policies might have on other groups. The use of rules, procedures, representatives, and institutions is important to such groups only toward the end of achieving public policies favorable to them.

The results of public policy mirror the conflicts in demands. No governmental action can affect all citizens in exactly the same way. Whatever government does will have varying consequences for different groups. For example, placing limits on Medicare spending will provide some relief to taxpayers by reducing pressure for higher taxes, but those same limits will place economic strains on hospitals and other health-care providers. Increasing the money supply to reduce interest rates will help first-time homebuyers by making mortgages easier to afford, but doing so will hurt older adults who depend on higher interest rates to bolster their investment income. Differences in demands and in the consequences of government action create political conflict. At issue in the public policy debate is which groups shall win and which shall lose in the effort to shape government actions to their own interests.

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An example of the public's conflicting demands on government is interest rates. Reducing interest rates can help first-time homebuyers but can hurt older adults, whose investment income is bolstered by higher interest rates.

13.1b Perspectives on Policymaking

public policy
Whatever governments choose to do or not to do

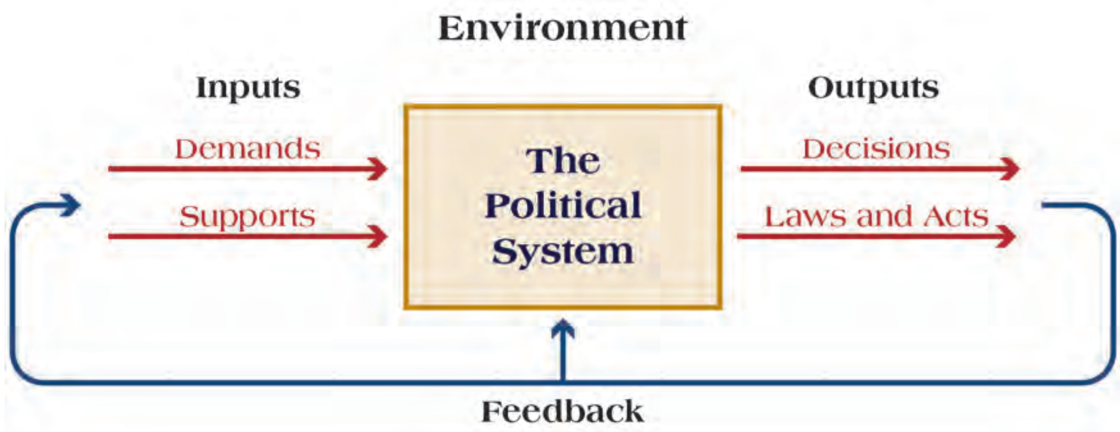
systems model
A model of policymaking that holds that policy is the product of an interlocking relationship between institutions of government and their social, economic, and political environment

The nature of politics and policy is such that a variety of models or explanations have been offered as accurate or desirable portrayals of public policymaking. Among the most familiar is the **systems model**, which holds that policy is the product of an interlocking relationship between the political system and its social, cultural, and economic environment.[2] From its environment the political system receives "inputs" in the form of demands and supports. Through its decision-making process, the political system then converts demands into "outputs," which are authoritative or official decisions. These decisions may, in turn, affect the environment and shape new inputs into the system. For example, demands that government reduce the burden of regulations may result in government decisions to eliminate some regulations. These decisions may penalize people who benefited under the old regulations, and those people may then clamor for reinstatement. As another illustration, a court decision that weakens the constitutional claim to the right to have an abortion may shift much of the political battle over abortion to state legislatures.

bureaucratic model
A model of policymaking that holds that bureaucracies play a crucial role in making policy because of their commitment and the expertise they can provide

Figure 13–1 The Systems Model of Policymaking

The systems model describes policymaking in terms of the relationship between a political system and its environment. "Inputs" (demands and supports) are converted into "outputs" (policy decisions). By affecting the environment of the political system, these outputs may generate new inputs.



Source: Adapted from James E. Anderson, *Public Policymaking,* 4th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), p. 18.

Other models view policymaking from different perspectives. The **bureaucratic model** posits the crucial role of bureaucracies and the commitment and expertise they can provide in making policy. Some models use ideological frameworks with an economic focus to explain how policies are or should be made. The **Marxism model** holds that public policy decisions in non-Marxist regimes reflect the interests of the ruling economic class at the expense of the workers. The **free-market capitalism model** sees a limited role for government, a role in which the natural forces of supply and demand are allowed to prevail in the marketplace. Other models might be discussed as well; the interplay of interests and passions that drives policy debate and the rich complexity of making public policy have produced numerous models of policymaking.

Two of the most useful perspectives are elitism and pluralism. They are particularly helpful in understanding the maze of public policy because they address a fundamental question about which there has been much debate: *Who* makes public policy decisions?

Elitism holds that public policy decisions are made by a relatively small group of individuals acting in their own self-interest.[3] The theory takes a variety of forms, depending on who is included in the elite. Some elements of the mass media, big business, and the military have been variously portrayed as making up the elite. According to the model, members of the elite—on issues of importance to them—make public policy judgments in the interest of the elite rather than in the interest of the mass of citizens.

Marxism model
A model of policymaking that holds that public policy decisions in non-Marxist regimes reflect the interests of the ruling economic class at the expense of workers

free-market capitalism model
A model of policymaking that posits a limited role for government so that the natural forces of supply and demand are allowed to prevail in the marketplace

elitism
A model of policymaking that holds that public policy decisions are made by a relatively small group of individuals acting in their own self-interest rather than in the interest of the mass of citizens

(Adobe Stock)

According to the theory of elitism, relatively small groups of individuals, such as mass media, big business, and the military, act in their own self-interest to make public policy decisions that affect all Americans.

Pluralism holds that public policy decisions are the result of struggle among contesting groups rather than a single elite.[4] The groups represent various interests in society and press for decisions responsive to those interests. Policy is determined not by a single set of values as in elitism but by a contest of conflicting values held by various groups. Even though the number of participants in the making of public policy is small, they reflect and convey the broad range of positions held by the mass of citizens. Competing elites with different values ensure democratic responsiveness. In the pluralist view, government is a broker among groups, seeking to satisfy as many as possible. Conflicts among groups produce a balance so that no single group dominates. This is sometimes called the *countervailing theory of pressure politics*.

A second issue is how decisions are made.[5] Two contrasting perspectives are the rational-comprehensive approach and incrementalism. The **rational-comprehensive model** involves a sequence of steps for "rational" decisions. Decision-makers identify problems, rank the values they wish to achieve, consider various policy alternatives that can attain these values, assess the costs and benefits of each alternative, and select and implement the policy strategy that can best achieve the stated values with the highest benefits and lowest costs. This model has been criticized for imposing unrealistic demands on people making policy decisions. Critics argue that information in the real world of policymaking is limited and uncertain, and the clash of interests makes impossible any ranking of values.

Incrementalism is an alternative model that takes these criticisms into account. In the view of critics, the tie to past policies reduces the possibility of new policy approaches. Policy makers do not begin with a clean slate but rather focus on proposed marginal changes in existing policies. Deciding on budgets is an example. Rather than creating an entirely new budget each year, budget makers focus on proposed marginal changes from the previous year's budget. The same goes for policies like environmental regulation. A change to emissions standards for next year is likely to be greatly influenced by the existing standards. Imagine how difficult it would be to conduct business if future rules were often radically different from present rules.

By highlighting marginal changes in existing policies, incrementalism poses lower information demands. In addition, incrementalism holds that a capacity to achieve agreement among contesting interests defines good public policy. This definition of good policy is in sharp contrast to the rational-comprehensive emphasis on the search for costs and benefits of alternative policy approaches.[6]

Incrementalism has been criticized for being too conservative in its implications. In addition, the sensitivity to political power and the emphasis on agreement in the model risk the exclusion of interests without power. In the effort to be realistic and pragmatic, incrementalism neglects some interests in the search for the appropriate purposes of government.

pluralism

A model of policymaking that holds that public policy decisions are the result of struggles among contesting groups that reflect the various interests among citizens

rational-comprehensive model

A model of decision-making that holds that policy makers should identify problems, consider various policy alternatives and their costs and benefits, and select and implement the policy strategy with the highest benefits and the lowest costs

incrementalism

A model of decision-making that holds that new policies should differ only marginally from existing policies

Figure 13–2 Selected Perspectives on Policymaking

Given the complexity of making policy and the sharp conflicts that can drive policy debate, a variety of models, interpretations, and approaches have been offered as portraits of how policy is or should be made.

I. Models of the Policy-Making Process

➤ Systems model

Policy is the product of an interlocking relationship between institutions of government and their surrounding social, economic, and political environments.

➤ Marxism model

Public policy decisions reflect the interest of the ruling class at the expense of workers.

➤ Bureaucratic model

Because of their commitment and the expertise they can provide, bureaucracies play a crucial role in making policy.

➤ Free-market capitalism model

The natural forces of supply and demand are allowed to work in the marketplace, and government plays only a limited role in shaping those forces.

II. Interpretations of Who Makes Public Policy

➤ Elitism

Public policy decisions are made by a relatively small group of individuals acting in their own self-interest rather than the interest of all citizens.

➤ Pluralism

Public policy decisions are the result of struggle among contesting groups, with the various interests among the masses reflected and represented in the policy process.

III. Approaches to How Public Policy Is Made

➤ Rational comprehensive approach

Decision-makers should identify problems, rank the values they wish to achieve, consider various policy alternatives that can attain these values, assess the cost and benefits of each alternative, and select and implement the policy strategy that can best achieve the stated values with the highest benefits and lowest costs. Critics of the model argue that information in the real world of policymaking is limited and uncertain and that the clash of interests in the policy process makes any ranking of values impossible.

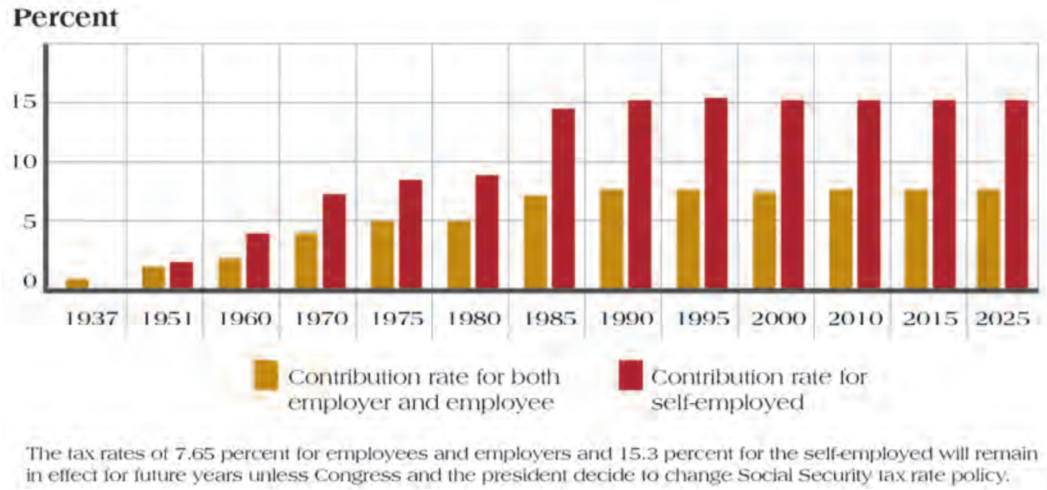
➤ Incrementalism

Since present decisions are only marginally different from past decisions, policy makers focus on proposed marginal changes in existing policies. A capacity to achieve agreement among contesting interests defines a good public policy. Critics of the model argue that the tie to past policies reduces the possibility of new policy approaches and that the sensitivity to political power and the emphasis on agreement risk the exclusion of interests without political power.

Despite these criticisms, incrementalism does raise important questions in public policy. Under what circumstances is the political system capable of fundamental rather than incremental changes in policy? What does it take to make a substantial break with the past? Changes in the number of people insured by the Social Security system and increases in taxes to pay for the program have been incremental over the past eighty-five years, as Figure 13–3 shows; but the decision to establish the system in 1935 was a fundamental break with the past. Decisions to create new agencies (or abolish existing ones) or to initiate new programs (or terminate current ones) are fundamental rather than incremental. The circumstances allowing such decisions can be the threat of crisis or substantial changes in technology, in social or economic values, or in the alignment of political power. The model of incrementalism may be as important for the questions it raises about policy as it is for the explanations it offers.[7]

Figure 13–3 **Incrementalism and Social Security Taxes**

The creation of the Social Security program in 1935 was a fundamental change in government policy. Once Social Security was established, changes in the rates of taxes to pay for the program occurred in incremental steps over time. Short of an emergency of the magnitude of the Great Depression, it is unlikely that there will be any drastic and abrupt changes in the program. Rather, adjustments will come gradually.



Data source: Social Security Bulletin, Annual Statistical Supplement, 2005, p. 87, and from Social Security Online, https://www.ssa.gov/OACT/ProgData/taxRates.html (August 27, 2024).

Whether looking at incrementalism or another policy-making model, it is good to remember that models are learning tools. By abstracting from reality, they try to explain why things happen as they do. The utility of a model lies in increasing our understanding of reality, yet no single model describes completely a complex political system. Thinking of events in terms of two or three models may be a better way to think about how policy is made and about who is influential in shaping policy.

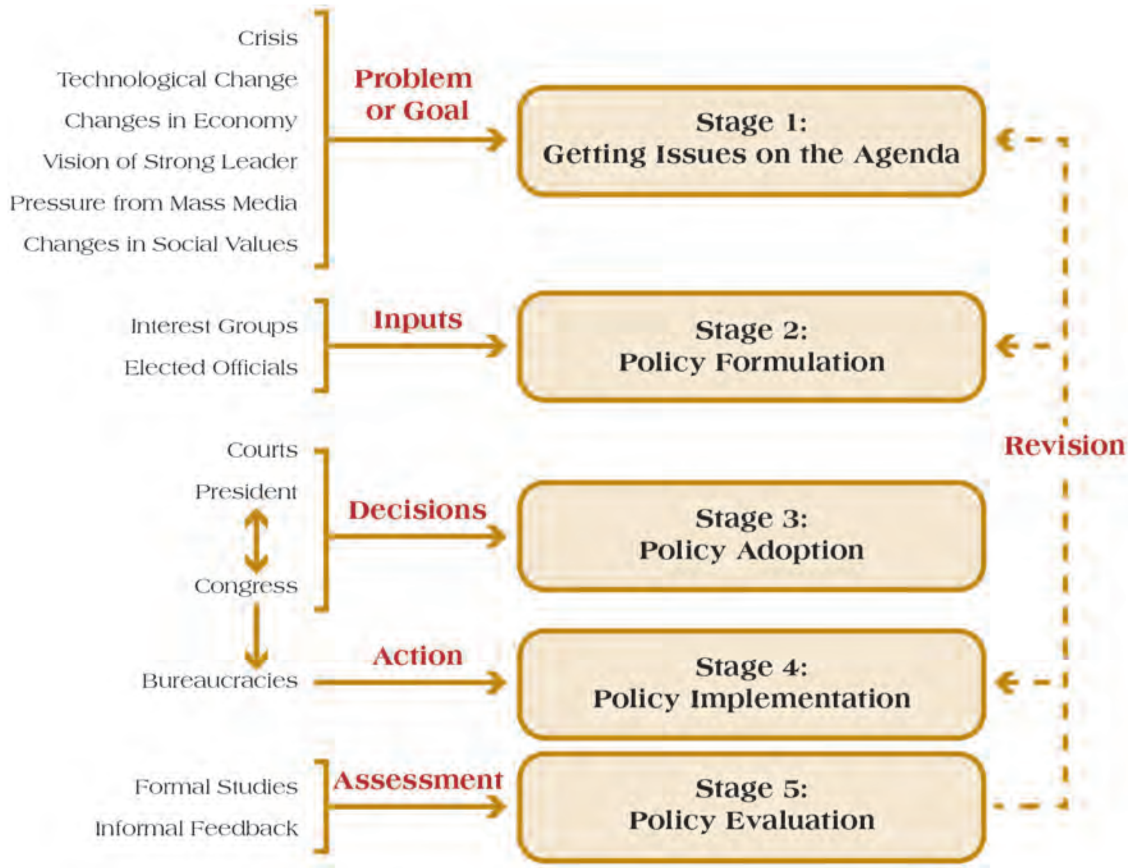
13.1c Stages in the Policy Process

In the real world of politics and conflict, the making of public policy frequently appears to be full of chaos. Groups demand or oppose, members of Congress respond or criticize, presidents agree or refuse, judges rule or defer, bureaucrats proceed or halt, and the mass media report or ignore. The making of public policy is not like a play where all the actors follow a predetermined script. Rather, in the making of policy, a group leader or a congressional representative may say and do things without knowing how others will respond or whether they will respond at all. In the efforts to shape policy, hope, uncertainty, and chance all play a role. Consequently, the policy process may seem to be a confusing clash of ideas, events, and personalities.

Public policy analysts try to break down the process of making policy into definable stages to order and make sense out of what appears to be chaotic.[8] Figure 13–4 portrays the stages in the evolution of public policies. In the real world, policies do not evolve in such neatly defined and apparently simple stages. Participants in the process make demands, offer responses, and make decisions without consciously following some analytical framework. Nonetheless, identification of these stages helps to make the evolution of public policies and the role of government procedures and institutions in the process more understandable.

Figure 13–4 Stages in the Policy Process

Although policies do not always develop in the neatly defined stages outlined below, an awareness of what happens in each stage helps us understand the process that occurs as government attempts to solve problems and accomplish goals. Any number and combination of persons and events can bring concerns to the attention of political leaders (Stage 1). Policy makers in the executive and legislative branches then study the range of choices open to them to meet those concerns (Stage 2). A variety of public officials may be involved in selecting a course of action or in deciding to do nothing at all (Stage 3). The policy then becomes the responsibility of bureaucrats to administer (Stage 4). Finally, evaluation occurs. Does the plan work? Is it worth its costs (Stage 5)? The evaluation may become a factor in encouraging further policymaking by government.



As Figure 13–4 shows, there are five stages in the evolution of policies:

1. A problem or issue must somehow get on the agenda of government.
2. Specific proposals to do something about the problem are discussed.
3. Government officials adopt a policy by choosing some specific strategy for action from among the proposals discussed.
4. Bureaucrats implement or translate into action the adopted proposal.
5. The policy is evaluated to determine whether or not it succeeded in solving or ameliorating the originally defined problem.

Stage 1: Getting Issues on the Agenda of Government

The **policy agenda** of government comprises the list of issues that engage the attention of elected officials. Obviously, governments cannot simultaneously deal with every conceivable problem. Like individuals, governments must make choices on which matters will get their attention at particular times. Issues get on the policy agenda in a variety of ways. No single explanation can capture the rich complexity of the process.[9]

Factors that contribute to moving some particular issue onto the government agenda include technological change, the demands of politically emerging groups, the evolution of social values, the threats of crisis or war, changing economic conditions, and the political will of a strong leader. Sometimes the mass media can create issues by focusing attention on particular concerns. For example, the Watergate affair, which resulted in the resignation of President Richard Nixon, became a matter of nearly constant public discussion between 1972 and 1974 as the press revealed wrongdoing. More recently, the 9/11 tragedy and subsequent war on terrorism, the economic recession, immigration, mass shootings, the racial justice movement, and the COVID-19 pandemic have all played major roles in the government's agenda.

("Gasoline Shortage Hit the State of Oregon," October 1973, by David Falconer, National Archives at College Park, US-PD, via Wikimedia)

After the Arab oil embargo in the 1970s put an end to cheap energy, competition between the search for new energy sources and the quest for environmental quality dominated the government's agenda.

Further, the issues on the policy agenda are always changing. Those that get resolved or lose relevance in a changing society are simply no longer discussed. For example, slavery was the most bitterly divisive issue of the nineteenth century, yet one consequence of the Civil War was that slavery is no longer a matter of public debate. Some issues in their demise simply give rise to other issues. Slavery is no longer an issue, but the economic and social status of African Americans is a matter of continuing policy debate and discussion.

Different sets of issues have dominated policy discussion at different times. The severe economic problems of the Great Depression of the 1930s moved government officials to spend much of their efforts on programs to deal with high unemployment, bank failures, and factory closings. During the 1960s, poverty, hunger, and despair in urban ghettos were targets of major policy initiatives before the war in Vietnam intervened. In the 1970s, concern about the quality of the nation's physical environment emerged as a major policy issue. The Arab oil embargo of that decade also put a sudden end to cheap energy; consequently, the competition between the search for new energy sources and the quest for environmental quality dominated the agenda of those years.

Thus far in the twenty-first century, two issues seem to be overwhelming and affecting practically all others on the policy agenda: the use of money as a public resource and the role of the United States in the international arena. Domestically, how much the government should spend (and on what), how much and whom government should tax, the impact of budget deficits and surpluses on the economy, and how far the reach of the federal government (as opposed to that of states and private parties) should extend in such areas as Social Security, welfare, health care, and global climate change are the questions that drive most policy debate. In foreign affairs, how to respond to terrorism, whether and how to take unilateral military action in a world of increasing multinational organization, and the ethical responsibilities of superpower status are the concerns driving policy. When new, large-scale concerns like the COVID-19 pandemic emerge they can create questions

policy agenda
The public issues that engage the attention of elected officials

for both the money and international arenas. The policy agenda of government is like a kaleidoscope: The turn of decades results in constantly shifting patterns of issue concerns.

Stage 2: Policy Formulation

Once an issue gets on the agenda of government, public debate centers on specific proposals on what government ought to do and how to do it.[10] To say that government ought to "do something" about budget deficits, the needs of children in poverty, climate change, or drug addiction is only a beginning. To achieve results requires a specific **policy strategy**, some specific course of action designed to deal with the originally defined problem.

If the budget deficit is a problem, should we increase taxes, decrease spending, or press for a balanced budget amendment? If the needs of children in poverty are a problem, should we increase family assistance payments, track down absent fathers, or build orphanages? If climate change is a problem, should we ban the use of certain fuels, or should we tax their use to pay for research on alternative energies? If drug addiction is a problem, should we open more treatment centers, eradicate drug-producing crops around the world, or legalize the use of drugs? Of course, several policy strategies to deal with a problem might be pursued simultaneously, but the relative emphasis on one or another strategy can provoke intense controversy.

Confused by the contradictory claims politicians sometimes make about public policy?

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Questions of what government should do, who should benefit, and who should bear the costs of such action make up the raw material of policy debate. Groups with different ideological beliefs are likely to propose different solutions to policy problems. To reduce budget deficits, for example, conservatives are likely to propose cuts in social welfare spending, and liberals are likely to propose cuts in defense spending or the closing of tax loopholes for the wealthy. The groups that benefit from one proposal will suffer under the other. The demands of interest groups, debates in Congress, requests by bureaucracies, conflicts between political parties and candidates, presidential speeches, and reporting in the mass media all focus on the question of what government ought to do in some specific policy area.

Stage 3: Policy Adoption

Although an issue can get on the policy agenda and various policy strategies can be debated and discussed, nothing happens until institutions of government **adopt a policy** that started as a proposal. At some point a formal, authoritative decision must be made on the action government will take to address a particular concern. Ultimately, the institutions of government exist to make such formal, authoritative decisions.

Formal adoption occurs in several ways. A bill passed by both houses of Congress and duly signed by the president is an example of formal adoption. For example, if growing budget deficits are deemed an important issue on the

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policy strategy
A specific course of action designed to deal with a public problem

policy adoption
A formal, authoritative decision, such as the enactment of legislation, made by institutions of government to address an issue on the policy agenda

policy agenda, one specific strategy to deal with the problem might be a tax bill designed to raise revenue. If both houses can agree on a bill and if the president concurs on the wisdom and necessity of the measure, the resulting law is the formal adoption of a strategy for action. Similarly, decisions by the Supreme Court and the declaration of regulations by bureaucracies are also illustrations of adoption in the making of policy. If the Court requires busing to eliminate racially segregated schools, it is—by making an authoritative, formal decision—in effect adopting a strategy for action. If a regulatory agency requires the installation of air bags in automobiles, it too is adopting a strategy for action.

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The warning label found in all cars with air bags resulted from the government's formal adoption of policy.

Adopting some policy strategy does not end the debate, however. The losers (both inside and outside the government) in the adoption process may retreat to other units in the political system and seek to have the decision changed or revised. A tax law may become an issue in a subsequent electoral campaign, or a regulatory decision on air bags may end up in the courts. Alternatively, those who have lost may simply wait for another day, when events or changing times or different officials will allow their position another hearing. In the short run, few issues are resolved by the adoption of some particular strategy for action. Rather, the discussion usually continues as revisions are proposed or as the consequences of the adopted strategy become matters of debate. The wheel of policymaking turns endlessly. Moreover, failure to adopt a policy proposal is, in itself, policymaking. It represents a formal, authoritative decision to leave policy where it was before the debate began, with the effect that taxes do not go up or air bags are not required.

Stage 4: Policy Implementation

Policy debate is really debate over *ideas*. For example, Congress and the president may decide that sending retired persons monthly checks funded by people currently employed is a good idea and formally adopt a strategy. However, that idea or strategy for action must be *implemented* before anything happens. A bureaucracy must be charged with the task of actually getting the right checks to the right people. Bureaucracies play the central role in this stage in the policy process, for they are ultimately responsible for **policy implementation**, or translating policy ideas into action. The difficulties and obstacles that frequently accompany the implementation process are suggested by the expressive (if lengthy) subtitle of a classic book: *How Great Expectations in Washington Are Dashed in Oakland; Or, Why It's Amazing That Federal Programs Work at All, This Being a Saga of the Economic Development Administration as Told by Two Sympathetic Observers Who Seek to Build Morals on a Foundation of Ruined Hopes*.[11] Clearly, implementation is neither automatic nor predictable.[12]

Continuing debate frequently accompanies the implementation process. In the judgment of the opponents of some particular policy strategy, a bureaucracy may outrun, or even contradict, the intent of Congress. For example, efforts in Congress to invalidate regulations of the Federal Trade Commission by legislative veto were attempts to put controls on the agency. Alternatively, a bureaucracy may not be vigorous enough in discharging its task. For example, in 2001, some members of Congress charged the Environmental Protection Agency with being too vigorous in enforcement of prohibitions in rural areas, but far too lax in enforcing violations in places with greater political clout, like the metro Washington, DC, area.[13] A bureaucracy

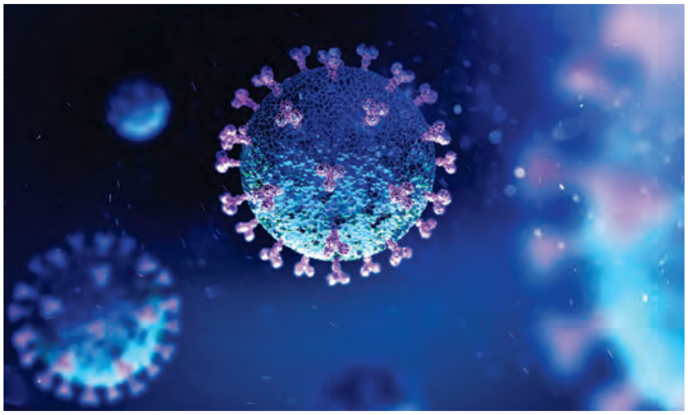
policy implementation
The translation of policy ideas into action

can be caught in the same crossfire of conflicting demands that were present in the debate before a strategy was formally adopted. On pollution control policy, for example, the EPA can be in the middle of conflict between environmentalists and business interests fearful of the costs of environmental regulations. In any case, the implementation stage in policy is frequently a continuation of the political struggle that surrounds an issue from the time it first gets on the policy agenda.

Stage 5: Policy Evaluation

The final analytical stage in the evolution of policies is evaluation.[14] This stage logically follows from the others because of the reasonable expectation that we ought to know whether a particular policy strategy "worked." Determining whether the formally adopted, implemented strategy in fact ameliorated or solved the originally defined problem is the goal of **policy evaluation**. However, the expectation that policy strategies ought to be evaluated definitively is more easily stated than actually met.

Formal evaluation of policies has received increased attention since the late 1960s. As the national government attempted to do more policymaking, criticism surfaced that government did not deliver on its promises. Consequently, demands for policy evaluation intensified. The techniques of such formal evaluation range from simple before-and-after studies to more sophisticated controlled experiments. Do innovative education programs (new curricular efforts, charter schools, the expenditure of additional funds, etc.), in fact, improve learning skills among disadvantaged children? Do rehabilitation programs (employment, training, special counseling, etc.), in fact, reduce the likelihood that individuals released from prison will commit crimes again? In a controlled experiment, do individuals who receive a guaranteed income behave any differently from another group of individuals who do not?



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Coronavirus COVID-19 under the microscope in a 3-D illustration.

Such questions are legitimate, but formal evaluation efforts almost never give unequivocal answers that end debate over the policy. In fact, debate frequently swirls about evaluation results, especially if the answers do not coincide with the expectations of the people who want the policy to work. Unfavorable results can almost always be explained away by citing inadequate research instruments, insufficient time to assess the policy, or inaccurate interpretations of the findings.[15] For example, people who want school vouchers to work might criticize negative findings on vouchers because the study was based on too short a time span. Evaluation results are more likely to continue, rather than end, policy debate.

Not every government policy goes through a formal evaluation procedure. There may be insufficient time and money as well as analytical difficulties. For example, are nuclear weapons policies preventing nuclear war? The answer may be that they are for now; but if such a war should occur, the assertion would obviously be proved wrong, with dire consequences few wish to even contemplate. In this instance, the policy relies on hope rather than on unattainable evaluation results. In the absence of a cure for cancer or COVID-19, is the nation's medical research policy working? No reasonable person would suggest that cancer or COVID-19 research should be halted because individuals continue to die of the disease. Again, hope for success sustains the policy, yet the very existence of some policies constitutes almost a definition of success. The Social Security program, for example, is working as long as the checks are regularly sent out.

policy evaluation

The act of determining whether a formally adopted and implemented policy ameliorated or solved a public problem

Politics and Economics

The Road to a New Cabinet Department

America's response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks illustrated both the speed with which public policy can be enacted and the hurdles that must be overcome in the public policy process. On September 20, 2001—just nine days after the tragedy—President George W. Bush announced that he would be establishing an Office of Homeland Security, headed by Pennsylvania Governor Tom Ridge, in an effort to prevent future terrorist attacks on the United States. Although the office was established quickly via an executive order on October 8, 2001, the president's goal of making the office a cabinet-level department would require a much longer route. The first step of the policy process, getting the issue on the policy agenda, was certainly the easiest. Domestic security was in the forefront of every government official's mind in the autumn of 2001.

President Bush delivered the second stage, developing a policy strategy, during his address. He proposed a course of action to address the problem of terrorism. Specifically, he suggested a cabinet-level office designed to prevent future terrorist attacks, reduce American vulnerability, and help in recovery efforts for attacks that do occur.[1] In this case, strategy development occurred very quickly; this speed was a result of the gravity of the problem the policy addressed.

Policy adoption became a sticking point for homeland security. Although President Bush was able to swiftly establish an executive office without the need of additional approval, creation of a full-blown cabinet department requires a congressional act. Thus, on June 24, 2002, Representative Dick Armey (R-TX) introduced the Homeland Security Act of 2002 in the House of Representatives. Although the Republican-led House of Representatives voted to approve the bill just one month later (quick adoption by congressional standards), the Democratic majority in the Senate voiced reservations about the extent of the proposed department's powers. Senator Robert Byrd (D-WV) cautioned that "Congress must never act recklessly," as he and others voiced concerns about civil service employee protections in light of the bill's proposed merger of twenty-two federal agencies into a single department.[2] Eventual adoption would depend on the ability of Congress and the president to reach a compromise. This compromise was finally reached when the Senate passed a revised bill on November 19, 2002, and President Bush signed it into law.

Policy implementation involved a large-scale restructuring of existing offices and agencies, affecting over 170,000 federal employees. Even though an executive office was already in place, coordinating and organizing such a large number of workers into four newly created divisions took a considerable amount of time. Initial stages of policy implementation tend to be measured in months, but completion of large-scale policy changes can sometimes take years.

The final stage of the process, policy evaluation, started to take place as soon as President Bush announced his intentions. From the moment his speech ended, journalists, politicians, and policy analysts began assessing success and failure. In addition to formal evaluation, such as the annual appropriations process in Congress, informal evaluation of Homeland Security continues to occur every time security in the US is threatened. Although policies are tested constantly, only time can tell whether they will ultimately succeed or fail.

The speed of the public policy process varies. What aspects seem too fast? Too slow? Which perspective on policymaking, discussed earlier in this chapter, provides the best description of efforts to create a Department of Homeland Security?

1. The Department of Homeland Security, http://www.whitehouse.gov/deptofhomeland (September 23, 2002).
2. "Democrats Urged to Act on Homeland Security Bill," September 18, 2002, http://www.cnn.com/2002/ALLPOLITICS/09/18/homeland.security.ap/index.html (September 23, 2002).

Although most policies are not evaluated formally, they are often appraised *informally* during the process of implementation. Some informal assessments of government programs include congressional budget and authorization hearings, the sharp policy conflicts between opposing candidates in electoral campaigns, presidential speeches to set the nation's policy priorities, and the eternal demands of interest groups. Ultimately, most evaluation of government policies is the product of the endless interplay of political passions at the root of all political conflict.

13.2 The Purposes and Presence of the National Government

Readers of newspapers and viewers of television newscasts are told almost daily of a bewildering array of national government actions. The Air Force presses to keep a new bomber program alive. NASA announces plans for a mission to Mars. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission publishes a new set of rules on certification procedures for the operation of nuclear power plants. The Supreme Court hands down a decision on the constitutionality of a campaign finance law. Congress continues to wrestle with budget deficits. The president's budget director defends a plan to eliminate the inheritance tax. This blizzard of activity reflects the pervasiveness of the national government as well as the complexity and scope of its work.

foreign policy

A nation's collective decisions about relations with other nations

domestic policy

A category of public policy that is composed of policy decisions about matters affecting individuals within a political system

13.2a Views of Public Policy

No single set of categories can adequately capture everything government does. However, some divisions among policies can help make the scope of government activity more comprehensible. The identification of policy categories defines patterns of government action to clarify what government does and how it goes about its work.

Perhaps the most common sets of policy categories are **foreign policy**, decisions about relations with other nations, and **domestic policy**, decisions about matters affecting citizens within the United States. Some foreign policies can have important domestic consequences. For example, international trade policy with China can affect the prices of goods in the United States. In general, however, public officials make foreign policy decisions in ways different from those used in social welfare policies. The president is less constrained by other officials and groups in the international arena than he is in seeking changes in the Social Security system. Interest groups tend to be less concerned about foreign policies than about domestic policies, which affect them more immediately and directly.[16] Domestic policy can be further subdivided into functional areas, such as education, health, transportation, energy, and environment.

(junrong / Shutterstock)

Foreign policies, such as an international trade policy with China, can have important domestic consequences, such as affecting the price of international goods sold in the United States.

13.3 Politics and Economic Self-Interest

The presence or absence of *economic self-interest* can also be a useful criterion for differentiating policies. Economic self-interest plays little or no role in the disposition of issues such as abortion, the legal drinking age, same-sex marriage, and the draft. In each of these cases, money would not resolve the conflict. Some people, for example, vehemently believe that abortion is an undeniable evil while others see abortion as an inalienable right of women. Proponents of abortion argue that women should be able to decide not to have children for economic as well as personal reasons. However, money concerns are not paramount in this debate.

Another category includes government actions on matters in which money plays a central role. For example, debates over taxes and budget deficits are essentially economic questions. Who shall pay for government, and who shall receive how much out of it? Which states shall receive more than others in federal grants? Which groups shall bear the brunt of cuts in social welfare spending? Does inflation merit more government action and attention than unemployment?

Finally, in some policy debates economic self-interest and assertions of principle are mixed. Money plays an important but not exclusive role in these issues. Policies on civilian nuclear power, civil rights, and pornography are examples. Electric power companies have an economic interest in favorable governmental policies on nuclear plant construction. Similarly, groups like women, African Americans, and Americans with disabilities see active civil rights policies on hiring and promotion as favorable to their economic self-interest; but assertions of principle also play an important role in the debates. The opponents of civilian nuclear power see nuclear power plants as a threat to public health and the quality of the environment. Civil rights advocates see the enhanced status of certain groups as a matter of right and justice. Finally, while the producers and sellers of pornography assert the principle of freedom of speech, their opponents see the defense of pornography (from which money is made) as a defense of economic self-interest.

13.3a Categories of National Government Policies

No single set of categories can adequately capture everything government does. However, even though overlaps occur, some divisions among policies can help make the scope of government activity more comprehensible. Over time the national government has taken on new functions and responsibilities in response to crises, changing technologies, citizen demands, and political pressures. Six substantive categories can help to bring some order to the scope of national government policies.

Foreign and Defense Policies

The oldest functions of the national government are to conduct relationships with foreign nations, such as trade negotiations with Mexico and Canada, and to maintain national security against threats from other nations, using physical force if necessary, such as the use of troops in the 1991 Persian Gulf War or the Iraq War (2003–2011).

Politics and Economics

The President and Economic Policymaking

Nowhere is the gap greater between what the public expects and what the president can do than in economic policy. Accustomed to general prosperity, the American public demands full employment, stable prices, and an increased standard of living. Presidents who fail to provide all of these things usually do not get reelected. Herbert Hoover, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, and George H. W. Bush—all defeated incumbents—stand as examples. Hoover presided over the Great Depression; Ford served during a period of high unemployment; Carter contended with double-digit inflation; and Bush served during a recession and a slow recovery.

How much blame presidents should share for such conditions is unclear. They act under severe constraints, and it may seem unfair that they must take responsibility for things they cannot control. What are some of these constraints? First, the president can propose a budget and tax plan, but the Congress must approve it. The president must deal with a complex congressional budgeting process and the powerful special interests that influence Congress. Often the budget the president does finally get from Congress does not resemble the one requested (see Chapter 14). Second, the president's budget must be prepared sixteen months before its enactment; during that period the economy can change dramatically. Third, the president must share power with the Federal Reserve Board, which sets interest rates and controls the supply of money in the economy. Fourth, much of the budget (approximately 75 percent) is controlled by legislation that is supported by powerful interests and hard to change—Social Security payments, Medicare, Medicaid, military pensions, and farm support subsidies, to name a few. The interest on the national debt, another legal obligation, now consumes more than 10 percent of the budget.

In addition to the problems of budget making, the president must contend with the economy itself, which is complex and unpredictable. The cycles of inflation and recession frequently elude economists' crystal balls. In addition, the US is part of the international economic system and is affected by events beyond the president's reach. The sharp increase in oil prices by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) contributed to the high inflation of the 1970s.

Over the past four decades, Japan, the European Union, China, and South Korea have emerged as major economic powers, providing steep competition for key US industries such as steel, automobiles, textiles, and electronics. In the 1980s, the US became dependent on Japanese purchases of government bonds to assist in financing its deficits, and upon Japanese investments in the private sector to help in sustaining its economic growth. Changes in the behavior and economic fortunes of countries such as Japan, and more recently China, can have a significant impact on our economy. The downturn in several Asian economies in the late 1990s, for example, created significant fluctuations in the American stock market.

Over the past four decades, presidents have devoted increased time and energy to economic policy. Their economic advisers have become major players in their administrations. The role of the OMB director in providing the president with budgetary advice and negotiating the budget with Congress has grown. The treasury secretary, who must advise the president on international economic policy and the supervision of the savings and loan industry, is usually a close confidant of the president. The president must also develop a good working relationship with the chair of the Federal Reserve Board. Whether or not the economic conditions that prevail during an administration are the results of the president's policy, the public will hold the president accountable.

Is affording the president praise and blame for the economy reasonable? How can the American public best hold politicians accountable?

Social Welfare

In terms of the amount of money spent by the national government, the growth of social welfare activities was the most significant policy change in the role of government in the twentieth century. Like a huge check processor, the national government takes money from taxpayers or borrows it and disburses cash or in-kind benefits, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, to millions of people who qualify because of old age, disability, unemployment, or poverty.


(Courtesy of the George Bush Library, National Archives, July, 1990, via Wikimedia)

The protection of legal and constitutional rights, through such measures as the Americans with Disabilities Act, has been a principal focus of national government activities in recent years.

Protection of Legal and Constitutional Rights

The protection of legal and constitutional rights has been one of the principal sets of national government activities over the past generation. Supreme Court justices, presidents, and members of Congress have all brought to bear, to varying degrees, the power and influence of the national government to protect the rights of a variety of groups, such as political, religious, and ethnic minorities; the LGBTQ community; Americans with disabilities; and people accused of crimes.

Promotion of Science and Technology

Basic research, new technologies, and changing public expectations have drawn the national government into efforts to achieve certain public policy goals with the help of science and technology. Examples of such policies include the civilian space program, continuing research efforts on diseases such as HIV/AIDS and cancer, the use of stem cells in research, therapeutic cloning, and the development of new civilian technologies to help the nation be more competitive in the world economy of the twenty-first century.

Regulation

Regulations are among the tools government uses to shape sectors of the economy. However, because their purposes go beyond economic goals, regulations can be considered a specific category of policy. As the chapter on bureaucracies indicated, government regulations are designed to structure relationships in specific industries, such as broadcasting and the marketing of securities, or to ensure social objectives, such as clean air and worker safety.[17]

Economic Policies

Given a national budget that now exceeds $6 trillion, what the national government does (or does not do) in its spending, taxing, and borrowing policies has enormous consequences for the economy. Spending on education and on transportation and communication networks will shape the kind of economy the nation has in coming decades. Tax laws that eliminate or create tax deductions and tax credits influence investment decisions made by individuals and corporations. Large deficits can encourage higher interest rates, just as higher government spending can reduce unemployment rates. Through its control of the money supply, the Federal Reserve can also affect interest and unemployment rates and private investment decisions. Government efforts to shape the economy through its spending, taxing, borrowing, and money supply decisions make up a major part of the policy agenda.

Chapter Review

1. Public policy is whatever government chooses to do or not to do. Ultimately, political activity springs from conflict within society over what government ought to do and for whom or to whom it ought to do it. The elitism and pluralism models offer different explanations of who should make public policy decisions. The rational-comprehensive approach and incrementalism raise fundamental questions about how decisions are made.
2. Definable stages of policymaking include: getting issues onto the agenda of government, formulating policy proposals, formally adopting policy, implementing policy, and evaluating policy.
3. Public policies can be distinguished from one another in a variety of ways. Economic self-interest is a useful criterion in distinguishing among policies. Six substantive categories differentiate national government policies: foreign and defense policies, social welfare, protection of legal and constitutional rights, promotion of science and technology, regulation, and economic policies.

Key Terms

bureaucratic model 407
domestic policy 417
elitism 407
foreign policy 417
free-market capitalism model 407
incrementalism 408
Marxism model 407
pluralism 408
policy adoption 413
policy agenda 412
policy evaluation 415
policy implementation 414
policy strategy 413
public policy 406
rational-comprehensive model 408
systems model 406

Readings for Further Study

A good overview of public policy analysis and the stages of the public policy process can be found in James E. Anderson's *Public Policymaking,* 9th ed. (Boston: Cengage, 2023).

John Kingdon's *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies,* 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 2011) is an interesting discussion of the changing shape of the public policy agenda.

An excellent account of policymaking, and an attempt to explain the apparent contradictions involved in the process, is Deborah A. Stone's *Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making,* 3rd ed. (New York: Norton, 2012).

The theories behind public policy are addressed in Paul A. Sabatier and Christopher M. Weible, eds., *Theories of the Policy Process: Theoretical Lenses on Public Policy,* 5th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2023), and in Thomas A. Birkland, *An Introduction to the Policy Process,* 5th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2020).

The causes for the rise and fall of public policies over time are explored in Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones, *Agendas and Instability in American Politics,* 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

Two quarterly journals of the Policy Studies Organization, the *Policy Studies Journal* and the *Review of Policy Research,* are sources of current scholarship on the field of policy analysis and on specific policy areas.

Notes

1. Thomas R. Dye, *Understanding Public Policy,* 10th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2001), p. 2.
2. For a comprehensive statement of the systems model, see David Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).
3. For a classic statement on elitism, see C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite,* 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
4. An analysis of pluralism that helped set the terms of the debate with elitism is Robert Dahl's *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1961).
5. For a review of different analytical approaches to decision-making, see James W. Fesler and Donald F. Kettl, *The Politics of the Administrative Process* (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1996).
6. The classic argument for incrementalism and its comparison to the rational-comprehensive approach is Charles Lindblom's "The Science of 'Muddling Through,'" *Public Administration Review 19* (1959): 79–88.
7. For a review of the criticisms of the rational-comprehensive approach and incrementalism, see Amitai Etzioni, "Mixed-Scanning: A 'Third' Approach to Decision-Making," *Public Administration Review* 27 (1967): 385–392.
8. James E. Anderson, *Public Policymaking,* 5th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 203), pp. 30–31.
9. See John W. Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies,* 2nd ed. (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1995).
10. For a discussion of the contributions and limits of knowledge in efforts to resolve policy problems, see Peter deLeon's *Advice and Consent: The Development of the Policy Sciences* (New York: Russell Sage, 1988).
11. Jeffrey L. Pressman and Aaron B. Wildavsky, *Implementation,* 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).
12. On the heightened attention that policy analysts have given to implementation over the last two decades, see Dennis Palumbo's *Public Policy in America: Government in Action,* 2nd ed. (Stamford, CT: Thomson, 1997).
13. "EPA Criticized for Selective Enforcement," *Environment and Climate News,* September 2001.
14. See Pressman and Wildavsky's *Implementation* for a discussion of the relationship between evaluation and implementation, pp. 181–205.
15. See, for example, Dye's *Understanding Public Policy.*
16. See, for example, Aaron Wildavsky, "The Two Presidencies," *Trans-Action* (December 1966): 7–14.
17. For a discussion of the purposes of regulation, see *Federal Regulatory Directory,* 10th ed. (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2001).

Pop Quiz

1. Debates over procedures and rules are really debates over ____________________.
2. A specific course of action designed to deal with the originally defined problem is called a policy ____________________.
3. The ________________________ model of policymaking holds that policy is the product of an interlocking relationship between institutions of government and their surrounding social, economic, and political environments.
4. One approach to policymaking is that of ____________________, in which policy decisions vary only marginally from previous policy.
5. The goal of ____________________ is to determine whether the formally adopted, implemented strategy did in fact solve the original problem.
6. Policies that are designed to protect some common good always affect everyone in the same way. T F
7. The political will of a strong leader may help move some particular issue onto the government agenda. T F
8. When a policy is formally and legally implemented, debate over the issue usually ends. T F
9. It is required by law that every government policy go through a formal evaluation procedure. T F
10. Which of the following is true of public policy making?
    a) It is nonconflictual in a democratic system.
    b) It involves debate over rules but not procedures.
    c) It has varying consequences for different groups.
    d) It is designed to protect the common good.
11. The decision to deal with the drug abuse problem by opening more treatment centers would be an example of a policy _________.
    a) agenda
    b) strategy
    c) adoption
    d) implementation
12. The idea that policy decisions reflect the interest of the ruling class at the expense of the workers is a tenet of the ____________________ model.
    a) elitism
    b) pluralism
    c) Marxism
    d) free-market capitalism
13. Bureaucracies play a central role in the policy process during the ____________________ stage.
    a) agenda building
    b) policy proposal
    c) policy adoption
    d) implementation
14. The final analytical stage in the evolution of policies is ____________________.
    a) evaluation
    b) agenda building
    c) implementation
    d) adoption
15. Which of the following is true of policy evaluation?
    a) It is required by law.
    b) It formally ends the policy debate.
    c) It usually occurs informally during the implementation process.
    d) It has become increasingly accurate with precise measures.

Answers:
1. policy 2. strategy 3. systems 4. incrementalism 5. policy evaluation 6. F 7. T 8. F 9. F 10. C
11. B 12. C 13. D 14. A 15. C