AFE BABALOLA UNIVERSITY ADO EKITI

A PRESENTATION

ON

POLICY FORMULATION: DESIGN AND TOOLS

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Policy formulation is a part of the pre-decision phase of policy making. It involves identifying/crafting a set of policy alternatives to address a problem and narrowing that set of solutions in preparation for the final policy decision.

Policy formulation takes up the ‘what’ questions:

* What is the plan for dealing with the problem?
* What are the goals and priorities?
* What options are available to achieve these goals?
* What are the cost and benefits of each of the options?
* What externalities, positive or negative are associated with each alternative?

This approach to policy formulation assumes that participants in the policy process have already recognized and defined a policy problem, and moved it onto the policy agenda.

Formulating the set of alternatives involves identifying a range of broad approaches to a problem, and then identifying and designing the specific sets of policy tools that constitute each approach. It involves describing the tools – sanctions, grants, prohibitions, rights… and articulating to whom or to what they will apply and when they will take effect.

Selecting from these a smaller set of possible solutions from which decision makers will actually choose involves applying some set of criteria to the alternatives. For example; judging their feasibility, political acceptability, costs, benefits, Etc.

Basically, we expect fewer participants to be involved in policy formulation than they were in the agenda setting process and we expect more of the work to take place out of the public eye.

According to DYE, policy formulation takes place in government bureaucracies, interest group offices, legislative committee rooms, meetings of special commissions, etc.

Policy formulation is a critical phase of the policy process. This is because designing the alternatives that decision makers will consider directly influences the ultimate policy choice.

Contemporary interest in policy formulation can be traced to Dahl and Lindblom who urged scholars in 1953 to take up the study of public policies rather than to continue to focus on ideologies as the critical aspect of political systems.

APPROACHES TO POLICY FORMULATION.

Policy formulation is a direct object of inquiry in studies of policy design and policy tools. These various frameworks and theories of policy change consider the coalitions of actors taking part in (or being excluded from) the policy making process. Identifying these actors, and understanding their beliefs and motivations, their judgments of feasibility, and their perceptions of the political context, goes a long way toward explaining the public policies that take shape (Howlett and Ramesh 1995).

POLICY DESIGN

Policy design theorists argued that scholars should look further back in the causal chain to understand why policies succeed or fail, because the original policy formulation processes, and the policy designs themselves, significantly contribute to implementation outcomes.

Many of these works is an assumption of bounded rationality (Simon 1985). That is, limits to human attention, and limits to our knowledge about the social world surely lead policy makers to focus on some aspects of a problem at the expense of others, and to compare only a partial selection of possible solutions. Research on policy formulation thus seeks to understand the context in which the decision makers act and to identify the selectivity in attention that occurs. Often the aim is to bring awareness of the “boundaries” of rationality to the design process in order to expand the search for solutions, in hopes of improving the policies that result.

Some scholars have written from the perspective of professional policy analysts, exploring how notions of policy design can improve the practice of policy analysis and the recommendations that analysts make. Their purpose is an applied one—they hope to improve the process of designing policy alternatives. They propose that improving the search for, and generation of, policy alternatives will lead to more effective and successful policies. Essentially, these scholars seek to reduce the randomness of policy formulation (e.g., as portrayed in the garbage can model) by bringing awareness to, and then consciously structuring, the process. For example, Alexander recommends a “deliberate design stage” in which policy makers search for policy alternatives (1982). Typically, designing policy involves some degree of creativity, or extra rational element, in addition to rational processes of search and discovery, but Alexander argues that “a conscious concern with the systematic design of policy alternatives can undoubtedly effect a significant improvement in decisions and outcomes”

Scholars who approach policy design from an academic research perspective typically seek to develop a framework that can improve our understanding, analysis, and evaluation of policy processes and their consequences. Many of these works aim to identify aspects of policy making contexts that shape policy design. They draw on institutional theories that suggest laws, constitutions, and the organization of the political process channel political behavior and choices.

Many proposes that political environments vary in terms of the level of public attention focused upon them, having important consequences for the policy design process. The degree to which organized interests have developed ideas about an issue will entail particular dynamics and challenges in the policy design process. For instance, on some issues, many interest groups will take an active part in defining the problem and proposing alternatives; they will offer an array of opposing ideas.

The design challenge in such a scenario is to find solutions that will be acceptable to participants but also will achieve desired outcomes.

In addition to the distinction between applied and traditional scholarly work, researchers diverge in their conceptions of the activity of formulating or designing policy. Some see it as a technical endeavor, leading them to characterize policies as “more” or “less” designed, as “well” or “poorly” designed.

APPROACHES TO POLICY TOOLS

Bardarch appendix ‘things government do’ in his eight step framework of policy analysis describes policy tools as; taxes, regulation, grants, services, budgets, rights, information etc. for each tool, he suggests why and how it might be used and what some of the possible pitfalls may be, aiming to stimulate creativity in crafting policy. Hood analyses a range of government tools in signifi cantly more detail (1986) with the ultimate aim of making sense of government complexity, generating ideas for policy design and enabling comparisons across governments.

Like some of the work on policy design, research on policy tools highlights the political consequences of particular tools, as well as their underlying assumptions about problems, people, and behavior.

Salamon characterizes the choice of tools as political as well as operational: “What is at stake in these battles is not simply the most efficient way to solve a particular public problem, but also the relative influence that various affected interests will have in shaping the program’s post enactment evolution”. Additionally, tools require distinctive sets of management skills and knowledge, thus the choice of tools ultimately influences the nature of public management.

Tools also carry with them particular assumptions about cause and about behavioral motivations. For example, inducements that offer payoffs to encourage behavior assume “that individual’s respond to positive incentives and that most will choose higher-valued alternatives” (Schneider and Ingram 1990, 515). Capacity tools that provide information or training assume that barriers to desired behavior consist of lack of resources rather than incentives.

POLICY DESIGN BEYOND THE STAGES MODEL

The most recent advance in the study of policy formulation and policy tools is Schneider and Ingram’s policy design framework (1997). In their book, Policy Design for Democracy, the authors present a framework that pushes past a simple stages model by conceptualizing an iterative process. It brings the discrete stages of the policy process into a single model, and emphasizes the connections between problem definition, agenda setting, and policy design on the one hand, policy design, implementation and impact on society on the other. It offers some predictions about the types of policy designs that will emerge from different types of political processes, and it explicitly incorporates normative analysis by considering the impact of policy designs on target groups and on democratic practice. Schneider and Ingram are particularly concerned about the impacts of policy designs that result from “degenerative” political processes (see also Schneider and Ingram, this volume). During such processes, political actors sort target populations into “deserving” and “undeserving” groups as justification for channeling benefits or punishments to them. While political gain can be achieved this way, they argue that policies formulated based upon such arguments undermine democracy and hinder problem solving.

POLICY DESIGNS

Central to the policy design perspective is the notion that every public policy contains a design—a framework of ideas and instruments—to be identified and analyzed. Rather than a “random and chaotic product of a political process,” policies have underlying patterns and logics (Schneider and Ingram 1997). This framework posits policy designs as institutional structures consisting of identifiable elements: goals, target groups, agents, an implementation structure, tools, rules, rationales, and assumptions. Policy designs thus include tools, but this approach also pushes scholars to look for the explicit or implicit goals and assumptions that constitute part of the package.

POLICY FORMULATION: CONTEXT AND AGENCY

To understand and explain why a policy has a particular design, one must examine the process leading to its selection. Schneider and Ingram’s framework draws on institutional and ideational theories, the stages model, and theories of decision making, such as bounded rationality. Policy making is seen to occur in a specific context, marked by distinctive institutions and ideas. Institutional arenas, whether Congress, the courts, the executive branch, and the like, have rules, norms, and procedures that affect actors’ choices and strategies. Additionally, policy making takes place at a particular moment in time, marked by particular dominant ideas related to the policy issue, to affected groups, to the proper role of government, etc. These ideas will influence actors’ arguments in favor of particular solutions, and their perceptions and preferences when they take specific policy decisions.

CONSEQUENCES OF PUBLIC POLICY

Here, Schneider and Ingram take up the original impetus for policy design research to better understand implementation. They suggest that policy designs act as institutional engines of change, and analysis can trace how their dimensions influence political action. In doing so, designs establish incentives for some groups to participate in public life, and offer them resources for doing so. Other groups receive negative messages from policies. For example, if benefits are distributed in a stigmatizing way, individuals maybe intimidated by government, withdraw from public life, or feel alienated from it (Soss 1999).

Schneider and Ingram’s framework builds on arguments about policy feedback. These suggest a number of ways through which policies shape the course of future politics. Groups receiving benefits from government programs are likely to organize to maintain and expand them. Consequently, target groups whose understanding of the problem differs or who lack the expertise needed to use a policy’s administrative procedures, will not receive the same degree of support or legitimacy from the policy; they will have greater barriers to overcome in order to achieve their goals. The selection of a particular policy design also imposes lock-in effects. Once a choice is taken, the cost of adopting alternative solutions to the problem increase. The significance of the policy formulation process is that much greater because the barriers to change such as investments in its programs and commitments to its idea cumulate over time.

Empirical applications of the policy design framework are beginning to accumulate, and to extend and refine the perspective itself (e.g., Schneider and Ingram 2005). . Her work situates the policy design perspective within the context of federalism and posits nonprofit organizations as important mediating agents between policy design and target group members.

Soss traces the impact of several means-tested welfare policy designs on recipients’ attitudes toward government and disposition toward participation. Comparing Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with Social Security disability insurance (SSDI), he shows that programs designs have significant consequences for client perceptions, with AFDC clients likely to develop negative views of government and to avoid speaking up, while SSDI recipients think of government as helpful and interested in their views (2005).

CRITIQUE AND NEW DIRECTIONS

Critiques of literature on policy formulation and policy tools may focus on the limitations of the stages model itself. That is, the specification of policy alternatives and the selection of policy tools does not follow neatly from the agenda setting process nor lead neatly into implementation. Rather, selection of alternatives might occur prior to or during the agenda setting process, and implementation often involves reformulation of policy design as well. On the other hand, if researchers conceive of policy formulation as a function rather than as a stage that begins and ends in a certain sequence of stages, they are likely to search the empirical record of particular policy arenas more broadly. With their integrative framework that places policy designs at its center, Schneider and Ingram depart from the stages model and, with a growing community of scholars, offer a theory of public policy that directly addresses the question of who gets what, when, and how from government (Schneider and Ingram 2005). Critics charge that it lacks a clear mechanism of policy change that can be tested across cases (deLeon 2005). Although many researchers study the court’s role in public policy making and implementation, this body of work (Judiciary) is largely disconnected from theoretical work on the policy process generally, and policy formulation in particular. Many scholars argue that the work of the courts by nature constitutes policy making. Certainly courts represent a distinctive institutional setting, whose actors, procedures, language, and processes of reasoning differ from those that prevail in legislatures and bureaucracies. Yet we can conceptualize court cases as processes of policy formulation, with plaintiffs, defendants, and amici as participants proposing alternatives, and judges as the decision makers. Courts thus offer a potentially fruitful comparative case for studies of the impact of institutions on policy formulation. In the U.S. context at least, many policy issues eventually reach the court system.

Attention to the nonprofit sector’s role in policy formulation and tools has steadily increased. But non-government organizations (NGOs) also are policy makers in their own right. Research about the kinds of policy designs that NGOs formulate is beginning to emerge, building on a longstanding research tradition about the third sector (e.g., Boris 1999; Smith and Lipsky 1993).Neighborhood organizations, for example, have quite different motivations and incentives when designing policy than do legislators, so theories of policy design that presume a legislative context may not be helpful in understanding policy making at this small, and extra-governmental, scale (Camou 2005). In Baltimore’s poor neighborhoods, organizations targeted their policies to the most needy, framing individuals as redeemable, in contrast to Schneider and Ingram’s expectations that policy makers eschew directing benefits to the most marginalized groups. In cities across the country, community-based organizations have designed numerous innovative policies and successfully implemented them (Swarts 2003). More attention to policy formulation outside the bureaucracy, and below the national level can broaden our theories and substantive knowledge of this important function. Such work would build on research about national policy that increasingly finds policy formulation to occur outside of government offices—that is, in think tanks and within the loose networks of advocacy and interest groups that together with government officials make up policy communities (see Miller and Demir, and Stone, this volume).

Research on policy formulation and policy tools draws on, overlaps with, and contributes to research on agenda setting, problem defi nition, implementation, and policy coalitions, among others. Its singularity emerges in its focus on the micro-level of public policies that is the specific policy alternatives that are considered, how they differ in terms of policy tools, and how what may seem on the surface, or at a macro-level, to be small differences actually have significant consequences for problem-solving, and for the allocation and exercise of power. Attention to policy design essentially reminds us that democracy is in the details.