THEORIES OF THE POLICY CYCLE

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PCS406 POLICY ANALYSIS AND ADVOCACY

INTRODUCTION

A policy cycle is a systematic process or structure showing how societal issues or public problems are acknowledged followed by step-by-step sequences depicting how the identified problem issues should be solved. The policy cycle, or sequenced policy process, was initially proposed by Harold Laswell in 1950s. policy analysis has been tightly connected with a perspective that considers the policy process as evolving through a sequence of discrete stages or phases.

The term policy cycle refers to the recurrent pattern shown by procedures that ultimately lead to the creation of a public policy. Progression through the policy cycle is intentionally iterative in a sense that policy activities are recurrent and instruments are also used repetitively to effectively solve the pressing problem. Policies are formulated through a policy process that engages stakeholders in producing new or revised policies within a particular institutional context, policy making is characterized by presence of multiple constraints, [e.g. shortage of time and resources, public opinion, and of course the constitution], existence of various policy processes different departments that overlap and compete with each other], and an infinite cycle of decisions and policies [processes of a policy cycle], whereby the last stage leads straight back to the first, indicating that the policy cycle is continuous and unending.

THE POLICY CYCLE—A SIMPLIFIED MODEL OF THE POLICY PROCESS

Modeling the policy process in terms of stages was first put forward by Laswell. It was an attempt to establish a multidisciplinary and prescriptive policy science, Laswell introduced in 1956 a model of the policy process comprised of seven stages: intelligence, promotion, prescription, invocation, application, termination, and appraisal. While this sequence of stages has been contested in particular that termination comes before appraisal, the model itself has been highly successful as a basic framework for the field of policy studies and became the starting point of a variety of typologies of the policy process. Based on the growth of the field of policy studies during the 1960s and 1970s, the stages models served the basic need to organize and systemize a growing body of literature and research.

Laswell’s understanding of the model of the policy process was more prescriptive and normative rather than descriptive and analytical. His linear sequence of the different stages had been designed like a problem-solving model and accords with other prescriptive rational models of planning and decision-making developed in organization theory and public administration.

According to a rational model, any decision-making should be based on a comprehensive analysis of problems and goals, followed by an inclusive col- lection and analysis of information and a search for the best alternative to achieve these goals. This includes the analysis of costs and benefits of the different options and the final selection of the course of action. Measures have to be carried out (implemented) and results appraised against the objectives and adjusted if needed. One of the major reasons of the success and durability of the stages typology is therefore its appeal as a normative model for ideal-type, rational, evidence-based policy making. In addition, the notion is congruent with a basic democratic understanding of elected politicians taking decisions which are then carried out by a neutral public service. The rational model therefore also shows some tacit concurrence with the traditional dichotomy of politics and administration, which was so powerful in public administration theory until after World War II.

The stages of policy-making were originally conceived as evolving in a chronological order—first, problems are defined and put on the agenda, next. policies are developed, adopted and implemented; and, finally these policies will be assessed against their effectiveness and efficiency and either terminated or restarted. Combined with Easton’s input-output model this stages perspective was then transformed into a cyclical model, the so-called policy cycle. The cyclical perspective emphasizes feed-back (loop) processes between outputs and inputs of policy-making, leading to the continual perpetuation of the policy process. Outputs of policy processes at t1 have an impact on the wider society and will be transformed into an input (demands and support) to a succeeding policy process at t2. The integration of Easton’s input-output model also contributed to the further differentiation of the policy process. Instead of ending with the decision to adopt a particular course of action, the focus was extended to cover the implementation of policies and, in particular, the reaction of the affected target group (impact) and the wider effects of the policy within the respective social sector (outcome). Also, the tendency of policies to create unintended consequences or side-effects became apparent through this policy process perspective.

Hogwood and Peters (1983) suggested the notion of policy succession to highlight that new policies develop in a dense environment of already existing policies. Therefore, earlier policies form a central part of the systemic environment of policy-making; frequently other policies act as key obstacles for the adoption and implementation of a particular measure. At the same time, policies create side effects and become the causes of later policy problems across sectors (e.g., road construction leading to environmental problems) as well as within sectors (e.g., subsidies for agricultural products leading to overproduction) and, hence, new policies to arise.

THE STAGES OF THE POLICY CYCLE

STAGE 1.

AGENDA-SETTING: PROBLEM RECOGNITION AND ISSUE SELECTION

Problems identified attract public attention and compel public officials to respond. problems come to the attention of governments Policy agenda constitutes public problems that are chosen and recognized by the decisions makers in the political system. Two different aspects of policy agenda can be identified i.e. the public agenda depend of pubic opinions and the formal agenda depend on decision-makers-officialsand politicians in any section or level of government.

 Therefore, agenda setting can be from bottom up public opinion or top down by elites. Although it has proven difficult to answer whether public opinion has an influence on public policy, some policy options arise from people’s opinions. Agenda setting is not automatic because it involves generating public interest in a problem; making it a socially constructed process, in which actors and institutions, influenced by their ideologies, play a fundamental role in deciding what issues will be decided, what problems will be addressed by government majorly done by elites. Societal problems that need attention are many, yet space on the agenda of government policy making is scare this is why agenda setting involves non-decision making and decision making to prioritize and chose those problems that need immediate interventions. Just because an item reaches the formal agenda does not mean a decision will be made only a small number will be given official attention by legislators and executives and a policy will be formulated basing on those issues decided on the agenda

The concept of agenda setting results in a *selection* between diverse problems and issues. It is a process of structuring the policy issue regarding potential strategies and instruments that shape the development of a policy in the subsequent stages of a policy cycle. If the assumption is accepted that not all existing problems could receive the same level of attention and some are not recognized at all, the questions of the mechanisms of agenda-setting arise. What is perceived as a policy problem? How and when does a policy problem get on the government’s agenda? And why are other problems excluded from the agenda? Moreover, issue attention cycles and tides of solutions connected to specific problems are relevant aspects of policy-studies concerned with agenda-setting. The confluence of a number of interacting factors and variables determines whether a policy issue becomes a major topic on the policy agenda. These factors include both the material conditions of the policy environment (like the level of economic development), and the flow and cycle of ideas and ideologies, which are important in evaluating problems and connecting them with solutions (policy proposals). Within that context, the constellation of interest between the relevant actors, the capacity of the institutions in charge to act effectively, and the cycle of public problem perception as well as the solutions that are connected to the different problems are of central importance.

STAGE 2.

POLICY FORMULATION AND DECISION-MAKING

Policy options within government are formulated at this stage. It involves developing policy proposals to resolve issues and ameliorate problems. At this stage possible policy actions are defined, discussed, accepted or rejected aiming at assessing and developing possible alternative solutions to problems on the agenda list. However, the stage involves substantive or procedural political constraints. Substantive constraints refer to the nature of the problem, while procedural constraints are about procedures involved in adopting a policy.

Policy formulation occurs in government bureaucracies; interest group offices; legislative committee rooms, meetings of special commissions; and policy-planning organizations otherwise known as think tanks Policy recommendations are thereafter formulation disseminated among responsible agencies and public through mass media with a purpose of laying the groundwork for making policy into law. The relationship between the government and social actors is thus a significant factor influencing the formulation of public policies. Planning, analysis [documentation of the problem], policy design [development of a political solution] and consultation [to test the acceptance of the policy by different interest groups] are core functions of this stage

During this stage of the policy cycle, expressed problems, proposals, and demands are transformed into government programs. Policy formulation and adoption includes the definition of objectives— what should be achieved with the policy—and the consideration of different action alternatives. Some authors differentiate between formulation (of alternatives for action) and the final adoption (the formal decision to take on the policy). Because policies will not always be formalized into separate programs and a clear-cut separation between formulation and decision-making is very often impossible, we treat them as substages in a single stage of the policy cycle.

In trying to account for different styles, patterns, and outcomes of policy formulation and decision-making, studies on this stage of the cycle framework have been particularly theory-ori- ented. Over the last two decades or so, a fruitful connection with organizational decision theories has evolved (see Olsen 1991). A multiplicity of approaches and explanations has been utilized, ranging from pluralistic and corporatist interest intermediation to perspectives of incrementalism and the garbage can approach. Others are public choice approaches and the widely utilized neo- institutionalist perspectives (both in its economical and historical-institutionalist variant; for an overview.

Political scientists argued from the beginning that decision-making comprises not only information gathering and processing (analysis), but foremost consists of conflict resolution within and between public and private actors and government departments (interaction). In terms of patterns of interdepartmental interaction, Mayntz and Scharpf (1975) argued that these usually follow the type of negative coordination (based on sequential participation of different departments after the initial policy program has been drafted) rather than ambitious and complex attempts of positive coordination (pooling suggested policy solutions as part of the drafting), thus leading to the typical process of reactive policy-making. The aim of political science-based policy analysis was, therefore, to suggest institutional arrangements which would support more active policy-making.

A crucial aspect of policy formulation represents the role of scientific policy advice. While earlier models differentiated between technocratic (policy decisions depending on superior knowledge provided by experts) and decisionist (primacy of politics over science) models of the science/policy nexus, the dominant normative understanding favored a pragmatic and cooperative interaction at eye level (pragmatic model, see Habermas, 1968). Empirically, policy advice was recognized as a ‘diffuse process of enlightenment’, in which politicians and bureaucrats (contrary to conventional wisdom, especially in the academic world) are not influenced by single studies or reports. Instead, policy advice has an impact on the middle- and long-term changes of general problem perceptions and world views. Moreover, scientific research is only one of diverse sources of information and knowledge that is being brought into the policy-making process

Over the last years, the role of think tanks in these processes has formed a focal point in debates on changing ways of policy-making, for example in the formulation of neoliberal policies in the 1980s.Think tanks and international organizations are regarded as catalysts fostering the exchange and transfer of policy ideas, solutions, and problem perceptions between governments and beyond). Some have argued that policy transfer has become a regular, though distinctive, part of contemporary policy formulation. However, while the practice and existence of processes of transfer and learning are hardly deniable, the literature has difficulties in drawing clear boundaries between policy transfer and other aspects of policy-making, especially as the notion of lesson drawing (as one pattern of policy transfer) resembles the rational model of decision-making (cf. James and Lodge 2003). The study of policy transfer and learning has been advanced by insights drawn from organizational theory, in particular the notion of institutional isomorphism that differentiates between coercive, mimetic and professional mechanisms of emulation (DiMaggio and Powell 1991; for applications see, among others. Most studies dealing with the role of knowledge in policy formulation agree that, in the con- temporary age, knowledge is more widely spread beyond the boundaries of (central) governments than some decades ago. Experts and international institutions (like the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD]) are said to play an increasingly visible role in communicating knowledge within the public debate on political issues. Therefore, the perception of a monopoly of information on the side of the bureaucracy. Policy formulation, at least in western democracies, proceeds as a complex social process, in which state actors play an important but not necessarily decisive role.

The possible alternative solutions designed in the policy formulation stage are legalized as policies but rather depending much on the acceptance of those proposed solutions by the public, interest groups, and agencies or organizations. Decision making is the process by which governments adopt a particular course of action or non-action choosing from among a relatively small number of alternative policy options to resolve public problems. It involves selecting a proposal, developing political support for it, enacting it into law, deciding on its constitutionality. However, we need not to overlook the fact that decisions made may be positive [aimed at creating change by solving the problem] or negative [leaving the problem at hand the way it is]. When decisions are accepted and constitutionalized, the policy is then adopted. In contrast to preliminary stages of decision-making, the final adoption of a particular policy alternative is determined by government institutions which are affected by many factors under which key policy actors operate Constraints related to public adoption, policy instruments and resources are predetermined as actors look forward to implementing the policy.

Solution to the problem and six questions, it 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

At the stage of the policy cycle, expressed problems, proposals and demand are transformed into government program. In includes definition of objectives. What should be achieved with the policy consideration of different alternatives?

Policy formulation have long been strongly influenced by efforts to improve practices within government by introducing techniques and tools of more rational decision making. Policy analysis was a part of reform coalition engaged in developing tools and methods for identifying effective and cost-efficient policies.

Political scientist argued that decision making comprises not only information gathering and processing analysis but foremost consists of conflict resolution within and between public and private actors and government departments (interaction)

PPBS (planning programming budgeting system) the united statement government introduced PPBS, European government engaged in similar efforts for long term planning.it was a basis for rational planning and hence decision making. During the 70s and 80s traditional theories of pluralism in policy making (many, competing interests without privileged access) where at least in west Europe substituted by theories of corporatist policy-making. This policy network are categorized by non-hierarchical, horizontal relationship between actors inside the network.

Despite the considerable level of self-governance within the policy network, government plays any important role in influencing the actor’s constellation within these networks, example given altering the portfolio of ministries, creating new ones for establishing/ abolishing agencies. Patterns of interaction between governments and society in policy networks are regarded as an omnipresent phenomenon, the particular constellation of actors within policy networks vary between policy domains, as well as between nation states with different political/administrative cultures, traditions of law (cf. Feick and Jann 1988) and differences regarding the wider constitutional setting.

Which of the proposed policy options that will be finally adopted depends on a number of factors; two of them should be highlighted. First, the feasible set of policy options is reduced by basic substantial parameters. Some policies are excluded because of scarcity of resources—not only in terms of economic resources, but also because political support presents a critical resource in the policy-making process. Second, the allocation of competencies between different actors (e.g., government) plays a crucial role in decision-making.

Most studies dealing with the role of knowledge in policy formulation agree that, in the contemporary age, knowledge is more widely spread beyond the boundaries of (central) governments than some decades ago. Experts and international institutions (like the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD]) are said to play an increasingly visible role in communicating knowledge within the public debate on political issues.

STAGE 3

IMPLEMENTATION

 As a general concept policy implementation can be defined as the third stage of policy cycle it means the stage of the policy process immediately after the passage of a law, or the action that will be taken to put the law into effect or that the problem will be solved. Implementation, viewed most broadly means administration of the law in which various actors, organization, procedures, and techniques work together to put adopted policies into effect in an effort to attain policy or program goals.

Implementation can be also defined in terms of outputs, or the extent to which programmatic goals are supported or perused, like the level of expenditures that committed to the programs. The decision on a specific course of action and the adoption of a program does not guarantee that the action on the ground will strictly follow policy makers’ aims and objectives. The stage of execution or enforcement of a policy by the responsible institutions and organizations that are often, but not always, part of the public sector, is referred to as implementation. Policy implementation is broadly defined as “what happens between the establishment of an apparent intention on the part of the government to do something, or to stop doing something, and the ultimate impact in the world of action” (O’Toole 2000, 266). This stage is critical as political and administrative action at the frontline are hardly ever perfectly controllable by objectives, programs, laws, and the like (cf. Hogwood and Gunn 1984). Therefore, policies and their intentions will very often be changed or even distorted; its execution delayed or even blocked altogether.

An ideal process of policy implementation would include the following core elements:

Specification of program details (i.e., how and by which agencies/organizations should the program be executed? How should the law/program be interpreted?);

Allocation of resources (i.e., how are budgets distributed? Which personnel will execute the program? Which units of an organization will be in charge for the execution?);  
Decisions (i.e., how will decisions of single cases be carried out?).

The detection of the implementation stage as a missing link in the study of policy- making can be regarded as one of the most important conceptual innovations of policy research in the 1970s. Earlier, implementation of policies was not recognized as a separate stage within or element of the policy-making process. What happens after a bill becomes a law was not perceived as a central problem—not for the decision makers and, therefore, also not for policy analysis. The underlying assumption was that governments pass laws, and this is where the core business of policy-making ends. Implementation studies of the first generation thus shared a hierarchical, top-down understanding of governance, at least as a normative yardstick for the assessment of outcomes of implementation. Implementation research was interested in developing theories about what works. One way to do this has been to assess the effectiveness of different types of policy instruments based on particular theories about cause and effect relations.

Implementation research played a major role in triggering the move of policy research away from a state-centered endeavor, which was primarily interested in enhancing the internal administrative and governmental capacities and in fine-tuning program design and implementation.

Implementation means to carry out, to fulfil, produce, and compete. This is different from creating a policy. A policy is often a broad statement of goals, without specific objectives. Implementation is the action plan to bridge the gap between the two. Policy implementation is the process of putting policy into action. Implementation is the phase between a decision and operation. That is, policy implementation is the stage of the policy process immediately after the passage of a law, or the action that will be taken to put the law into effect or that the problem will be solved. Implementation, viewed most broadly means administration of the law in which various actors, organization, procedures, and techniques work together to put adopted policies into effect in an effort to attain policy or program goals. Policy implementation is carried out by primarily by administrative agencies however there are other factors and institutions also involved in the in the process of policy implementation such as legislatures, political executive and courts. And this is because of the difficulty or the complication of implementation of policy. It is the process that involves translating the goals and objectives of a policy into an action

There are two main approaches in policy implementation namely; the top-down approach and bottom-up approach.

**TOP-DOWN APPROACH**

This is a policy also known as the ‘Autocratic Leadership’. Top – Down approach is the process by which an executive decision maker or to person makes the decision of how something should be done. It is essentially the breaking down of a system to gain insight into its compositional sub-system in a reverse engineering fashion. In this approach, an overview of the system is formulated, specifying, but not detailing, nay first-level subsystems. This process usually starts with a big picture and then broken-down form there into smaller segments.

**BOTTOM-UP APPROACH**

Bottom-up approach is the restoring together of systems to give rise to more complex systems, thus making the original systems sub-systems of the emergent system. This approach is a type of information processing based on incoming data from the environment to form a perception. The bottom-up implementation approach initiates with the target groups and service deliverers, because they find that the target groups ae the actual implementors of policy.

These approaches are methods used to analyze and choose securities. However, the term also appears in many other businesses, finance, investing and economics. Generally, each can be quite simple. The top-down approach goes from the general to the specific, and the bottom-up approach begins at the specific and moves to the general. Also, these methods can be possible approaches for a wide setting, budgeting and forecasting. Generally, top-down approaches generally refer to using comprehensive factors as a basis for decision making. It will seek to identify the big picture and all of its components, which are usually the driving force for the end goal. While the bottom-up approach generally focus its analysis on specific characteristic and micro attributes of an individual stock. In this approach.

STAGE 4.

EVALUATION AND TERMINATION

The evaluation of public policies is a decision-making support tool that provides useful information on current public policies. By judging the effects of a measure, the evaluator seeks to understand and explain how these effects occur. Policy evaluation focuses on the effects produced by the measure, whether desired or not, direct or indirect, over the short or long-term. It may also concern the way in which the measure is implemented. In order to make a value judgement on its implementation or its effects, the evaluator relies on criteria such as effectiveness, relevance, fairness, sustainability, consistency, etc. For example, is the bonus for the beautification of façades effective? In other words, does it contribute to speeding up the renovation of façades? In this way, reflecting on the effectiveness, relevance or sustainability of a measure is a central objective of a public policy evaluation.

Policy-making is supposed to contribute to problem solving or at least to the reduction of the problem load. During the evaluation stage of the policy cycle, these intended outcomes of policies move into the center of attention. The plausible normative rationale that, finally, policy-making should be appraised against intended objectives and impacts forms the starting point of policy evaluation. But, evaluation is not only associated with the final stage in the policy cycle that either ends with the termination of the policy or its redesign based on modified problem perception and agenda-set- ting. At the same time, evaluation research forms a separate subdiscipline in the policy sciences that focuses on the intended results and unintended consequences of policies.

Evaluation research emerged in the United States in the context of political controversies centered on the social reform programs of the Great Society of the 1960s. This early debate was concerned with methodological issues and sought to demonstrate its own relevance. Moreover, the role of evaluation in the policy process goes far beyond the scope of scientific evaluation studies. Policy evaluation takes place as a regular and embedded part of the political process and debate. Therefore, scientific evaluation has been distinguished from administrative evaluations conducted or initiated by the public administration and political evaluation carried out by diverse actors in the political arena, including the wider public and the media

The main types of evaluation are process, impact, outcome and summative evaluation. Before you are able to measure the effectiveness of your project, you need to determine if the project is being run as intended and if it is reaching the intended audience.

**IMPACT EVALUATION**

Impact evaluation is used to measure the immediate effect of the program aligned with the program’s objective. Impact evaluation measures how well the program objectives and sub-objectives have been achieved. In impact evaluation question such as:

* How well has the project achieved its objectives and sub- objectives?
* How well have the desired short-term changes been achieved?

It basically measures the program’s effectiveness immediate after the completion of the program.

**OUTCOME EVALUAION**

Outcome evaluation is concerned with the long-term effects of the program and is generally used to measure the program goal. Consequently, outcome evaluation measures how well the program goal has been achieved.

In outcome evaluation gets questions like:

* Has the overall program goal been achieved?
* What, if any factors outside the program have contributed or hindered the desired change?
* What, if any unintended change has occurred as a result of the program?

Outcome evaluation measures changes at least six months after the implementation of the program (Long-term). Although, outcome evaluation measures the main goal of the program, it can also be used to assess program objectives over time.

**SUMMATIVE EVAUATION**

At the completion of a program, it is may be valuable to conduct summative evaluation. This considers the entire program cycle and assists in decision such as:

* Do you continue the program?
* How sustainable is the program?
* What elements could have helped or hindered the program?
* What recommendation have evolved out of the program?

Also, the method of evaluation is selected according to the measure to be analyzed, the stage of its implementation, criteria used to judge its effects, the data collection tools available, or the topic being addressed (health, mobility, housing, the employment market, urban planning, etc.). Consequently, methods of evaluation are varied, and may be combined. The evaluator may, for example, use ‘before/after’ comparison methods, or comparisons between a group that has benefited from a measure and one that has not. These methods use quantitative data e.g. Questionnaire-based surveys, databases or qualitative data e.g. Interviews, discussion groups in a rigorous and scientific way.

Policy termination has several dimensions. It may refer to policy redirection, program elimination, agency termination, fiscal retrenchments, etc. (Stewart, Hedge and Lester 2008). Scholars such as Brewer (1978) and Kaufman (1976) hold that policy termination became an area of study in the mid of 1970s upon scholars focus on the termination of organizations as a means of ending outworn or inadequate policies or programs. Discourse on policy termination, however, is overshadowed by the common and familiar policy processes such as policymaking, implementation and evaluation. Eugene Bardach (1976) characterizes such oversight as “underattended” subject.

Traditionally, the common stages used to complete the loop and organizations and their managers rarely bother about policy termination. But termination is the difficult phase of the policy cycle. Once put in place, policies, programs, and agencies have a life of their own, as there is no incentive to admit past mistakes (Stewart, Hedge and Lester 2008). Conceptually, policy termination conveys the message that a policy that has been in place for sometimes is no more important or relevant than deciding to terminate it and replace it by a new one. Daniels (1997) further argues that policy termination is a “premeditated ending behavior, with the intent of a particular public organization or policy”. To Bardach, “termination occurs, and when it occurs, it is either with a “big-bang” or a very “long whimper” (pp.123-131). This implies that policy termination is either concluded with unexpected discontents, or with long-term dissatisfactions that comes into final divorce.

CRITIQUE

Various empirical studies and theoretical debates concerned with *single* stages of the policy cycle have substantially contributed to a better understanding of the prerequisites, elements, and consequences of policy-making, they also have triggered a rising critique challenging the under- lying policy cycle framework. This critique is primarily questioning the analytical differentiation of the policy process into separate and discrete stages and sequences. As mentioned above, implementation research has played a crucial role in preparing the ground for that critique; implementation studies revealed that a clear-cut separation between policy formation and implementation is hardly reflecting real-world policy-making, neither in terms of any hierarchical or chronological sequence (first formation, then implementation), nor in terms of the involved actors.

While the numerous empirical studies and theoretical debates concerned with single stages of the policy cycle have substantially contributed to a better understanding of the prerequisites, elements, and consequences of policy-making, they also have triggered a rising critique challenging the underlying policy cycle framework. This critique is primarily questioning the analytical differentiation of the policy process into separate and discrete stages and sequences.

Implementation research has played a crucial role in preparing the ground for that critique; implementation studies revealed that a clear-cut separation between policy formation and implementation is hardly reflecting real-world policy-making

Starting from empirical observations referring to single aspects of the cycle model an increasingly fundamentalist critique evolved, challenging the whole cycle framework

While the role of the stages heuristic in transforming political research and allowing the analysis of different stages of the policy process involving various institutional actors has been acknowledged even by its fiercest critics, it is said that the model has outlived its usefulness and should be replaced by more advanced models

According to Sabatier, the uncritical application of the stages model prevents scientific progress rather than promotes it with regard to description, the stages model is said to suffer from descriptive inaccuracy because empirical reality does not fi t with the classification of the policy process into discrete and sequential stages.

In terms of its conceptual value, the policy cycle lacks defining elements of a theoretical framework. In particular, the stages model does not offer causal explanations for the transition between different stages. Hence, studies of particular stages draw on a number of different theoretical concepts that have not been derived from the cycle framework itself

The policy cycle is based on an implicit top-down perspective, and as such, policy-making will be framed as a hierarchical steering by superior institutions. And the focus will always be on single programs and decisions and on the formal adoption and implementation of these programs by adopting the policy cycle perspective, the elements of the policy process that are not related to problem-solving activities are systematically ignored Symbolic or ritual activities and activities purely related to the maintenance of power (Edelman 1971) do not feature in the stages model. However, rather than being the main objective of political action, policy-making frequently results as a by-product of politics.

While the political process could be analyzed in terms of its impact on problem-solving, this should not be confused with an interpretation that regards actors as primarily taking a problem-solving orientation.

Finally, the policy cycle framework ignores the role of knowledge, ideas and learning in the policy process as influential independent variables affecting all stages of the policy process (and not only in the evaluation stage).

**LIMITATIONS AND UTILITY OF THE POLICY CYCLE PERSPECTIVE**

The policy cycle perspective has proven to provide an excellent heuristic device. Studies following the policy cycle perspective have enhanced our understanding of the complex preconditions, central factors influencing, and diverse outcomes of the policy process. The diverse concepts developed in studies seeking to understand specific parts of the policy cycle have offered a number of useful tools to classify various elements of the whole process. Hence, the policy cycle perspective will continue to provide an important conceptual framework in policy research, as long as the heuristic purpose of the framework is considered and the departure from the hierarchical top-down perspective and the receptivity for other and new approaches in the wider political science literature is taken into account.

The critique of the policy cycle, which is centered on general criteria for frameworks, theories and models, neglects the crucial role of the perspective in providing a base-line for the ‘communication’ between the diverse approaches in the field. In that respect, we agree with Schlager (1999, 239, 258), who highlights the openness of the cycle perspective for different theoretical and empirical interests in the field of policy studies (and agree with the critique of any application of the cycle perspective as a theoretical framework or model in a strict sense), but would add and emphasize the vital role of the cycle perspective for the integration of the diverse literature.

Numerous empirical studies and theoretical considerations have been conducted along the lines of single stages; these studies made important contributions not only to the policy literature, but also to the wider political science literature. For example, the whole debate on (new forms of) governance and the development from government to governance builds on results of and debates within policy research

In terms of democratic governance and from the perspective of public administration research, it remains of central relevance in which stage which actors are dominant and which are not. Which role do parties, parliaments, the media, interest groups, single agencies, or scientific communities play in defining which problems should be addressed or how laws should be applied and enforced? Could it be that, contrary to our normative models, crucial policies are formulated without major interference of elected politicians, which then are only capable to initiate minor adaptations during implementation? The risk exists that empirical findings concerning the complex policy process—pictured as a densely entangled space in which numerous parallel processes operate with frequent interactive feedback loops—leads to the negligence of these central research questions concerning actors’ different roles in the different stages of the policy process. Elected officials and appointed bureaucrats, interest groups and corporations, and scientists and experts have different responsibilities in democratic processes—and these roles are linked to the different stages of the policy process, with the maturity of the respective policy.