The Study of Public Policy Processes
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Many who study, teach, or practice policy analysis have experienced a growing dissatisfaction with the widely used concepts and metaphors of the policy process. Those concepts and metaphors—dubbed the "textbook approach" (Nakamura, 1987)—represent a broadly shared way of thinking about public policy. The shared language channels the way scholars frame research projects concerning the policy process and the way practitioners conceive the role of policy analysis. In our view, although the textbook approach has made important contributions and retains some heuristic value, it has outlived its usefulness as a guide to research and teaching.

In this chapter we will first discuss the historical contributions of the textbook approach to the study of public policy as well as why it has ceased to be a fruitful frame of reference for analyzing the policy process. Next, we shall present the rudiments of an alternative approach—the advocacy coalition framework of policy change—that holds greater promise. The final section will briefly outline the plan of the book.

I. THE TEXTBOOK APPROACH AND ITS LIMITS

Policy researchers, practitioners, and teachers have broadly accepted a stages heuristic to public policy, derived from the work of Harold Lasswell, David Easton, and others. Briefly put, the familiar stages model breaks the policy process into functionally and temporally distinct subprocesses. Easton (1965) elaborated a "systems model" of politics, which specified the functioning of input, throughput, output, and feedback mechanisms operating within broader "environments" (ecological, biological, social, personality, etc.). Lasswell (1951) developed a more policy-specific set of stages, including intelligence, recommendation, prescription, invocation, application, appraisal, and termination.

The functions and stages set out by Easton and Lasswell have been diffused throughout the literature of public policy, although the
specification and content of the stages vary considerably. Among the most authoritative statements of the stages heuristic is Jones's *An Introduction to the Study of Public Policy* (1977) and Anderson's *Public Policy Making* (1979). Both of these works, leaning heavily on Lasswell and Easton, make distinctions among the stages of problem identification, agenda setting, adoption, implementation, and policy evaluation. Both cast these stages within a broader environment characterized by federalism, political institutions, public opinion, political culture, and other constraints. Each of the stages in the process involves distinct periods of time, political institutions, and policy actors.

The widespread acceptance of the stages model results from important contributions made by that heuristic. As it evolved from the works of Easton (1965) and others, the concept of a process of policy making, operating across the various institutions of government, has provided an alternative to the institutional approach of traditional political science that emphasized analysis of specific institutions—such as the presidency, Congress, or the courts—or of public opinion. By shifting attention to the “process stream,” the stages model has encouraged analysis of phenomena that transcend any given institution. Implementation of federal legislation, for example, typically involves one or more federal agencies, congressional policy and appropriations committees, federal court decisions, a multitude of state and local agencies, and the intervention of interest groups at multiple levels of government.

The reconceptualization accomplished by the stages heuristic has also permitted useful analysis of topics that were less readily perceived from within the institutionalist framework. Perhaps the most important of these has been its focus on policy impacts, that is, the ability of governmental institutions to accomplish policy objectives, such as improving air quality or assuring secure energy supplies, in the real world. Traditional institutional approaches tended to stop at the output of that particular institution—whether it be a law, a court decision, or an administrative agency rule—without specific attention to the ultimate outcome or impact of the policy.

Finally, the stages heuristic has provided a useful conceptual disaggregation of the complex and varied policy process into manageable segments. The result has been an array of very useful “stage focused” research, particularly regarding agenda setting (e.g., Cobb et al., 1972; Kingdon, 1984) and policy implementation (e.g., Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973; Bardach, 1977; Mazmanian and Sabatier, 1989).

In addition to the ready division of scholarly labor, scholars find the stages heuristic congenial because it fits the self-consciously rational method of the policy science disciplines. Bureaucrats find it attractive because it portrays a rational division of labor between the executive and legislative institutions of government, thereby legitimizing the role of the bureaucracy within representative systems. And for policy makers the stages model provides a view of the policy process that is in accord with democratic theory. According to the model, the decision maker

draws on the inputs of the broader society to make policy, which is in turn handed over to other government players for implementation.

Despite its conceptual strengths and broad acceptance, we believe the stages heuristic has serious limitations as a basis for research and teaching.

1. First, and most important, the stages model is not really a causal model at all. It lacks identifiable forces to drive the policy process from one stage to another and generate activity within any given stage. Although it has heuristic value in dividing the policy process into manageable units for analysis, it does not specify the linkages, drives, and influences that form the essential core of theoretical models. This lack of a crucial component of causal models is why we prefer to refer to it as the “stages heuristic.”

2. Because it lacks causal mechanisms, the stages model does not provide a clear basis for empirical hypothesis testing. Absent such a basis, the means for empirically based confirmation, alteration, or elaboration of the model are lacking. For example, even in the most recent edition of his text, Jones (1977) does not provide a coherent set of hypotheses about the conditions under which the policy process will move from one stage to the next.

3. The stages heuristic suffers from descriptive inaccuracy in its positing of a sequence of stages starting with agenda setting and passing through policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation. Although proponents often acknowledge deviations from the sequential stages in practice (see, e.g., Jones, 1977:28–29), a great deal of recent empirical study suggests that deviations may be quite frequent: Evaluations of existing programs often affect agenda setting, and policy making occurs as bureaucrats attempt to implement vague legislation (Lown, 1969; Majone and Wildavsky, 1978; Nakamura and Smallwood, 1980; Barrett and Fudge, 1981; Hjerm and Hull, 1982; Kingdon, 1984; but see Sabatier, 1986:31).

4. The stages metaphor suffers from a built-in legalistic, top-down focus. It draws attention to a specific cycle of problem identification, major policy decision, and implementation that focuses attention on the intentions of legislators and the fate of a particular policy initiative. Such a top-down view results in a tendency to neglect other important players (e.g., street-level bureaucrats), restricts the view of “policy” to a specific piece of legislation, and may be entirely inapplicable when “policy” stems from a multitude of overlapping directives and actors, none of them dominant (Sabatier, 1986).

5. The stages metaphor inappropriately emphasizes the policy cycle as the temporal unit of analysis. Examination of a range of policy areas demonstrates that policy evolution often involves multiple cycles. These are initiated by actors at different levels of government as various formulations of problems and solutions are conceived, partially tested, and reformulated by a range of competing policy elites against a background of change in exogenous events and related policy issue areas (Jones, 1975;
Heclo, 1974; Nelson, 1984; Sabatier and Pelkey, 1990). Thus, rather than focus on a single cycle initiated at a given (usually federal) governmental level, a more appropriate model would focus on multiple, interacting cycles involving multiple levels of government.

6. The stages metaphor fails to provide a good vehicle for integrating the roles of policy analysis and policy-oriented learning throughout the public policy process. The metaphor tends to confine analysis to the evaluation stage and to post-hoc assessments of the impacts of a given policy initiative. This approach is much too simple. Analysis clearly plays a large role in policy adoption (Jenkins-Smith and Weimer, 1985; Jenkins-Smith, 1990), agenda setting (Kingdon, 1984), and other stages. The practical result, in policy studies, has been to “ghettoize” the perceived role of analysis and learning, as evidenced by the development of two distinct literatures: one that focuses on the interplay of self-interested policy actors pursuing rational strategies in pursuit of predetermined goals (Riker, 1962; Niskanen, 1971, 1975) and another that elaborates the processes by which analysis and learning are integrated into policy making (Weiss, 1977a, 1977b; Caplan et al., 1975).

In general, then, while the stages metaphor served a useful purpose in the 1970s and early 1980s, it has outlived that usefulness and needs to be replaced or substantially revised. We believe that the most promising replacement will be one that attempts to integrate the literature on the politics of the policy process with that on the utilization of policy analysis.