The Policy Process and Policy Theories

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POLICY RHETORIC AND REALITY

It is logical to approach the study of public policy thinking that policy is about two choices: for or against a particular issue, since that is so often how policy choices are framed. Indeed, we are taught from a young age that you are either for something or against it. Think about other, long-standing policy issues, such as capital punishment. It would seem that one is either for it or against it. As is often the case, though, reality is far more complicated than policy rhetoric might lead you to believe. After all, consider your own view on capital punishment. Some of you might have clear-cut positions that are absolute; however, you may likely find yourself among the majority of Americans whose views on these issues are far more complex or nuanced. For instance, you might think the death penalty may be an appropriate punishment in certain circumstances, but you may still express trepidation about how it is carried out or the disproportionate representation of minorities that are on death row.

Now think about another, seemingly less politically charged topic and the rhetoric around it: the response to wildfires. During the summer and early fall of 2020, record-breaking wildfires ravaged large swaths of the Western United States, including more than three million acres of land in California alone—or an area about the size of Connecticut (Silverman 2020). The smoke and ensuing poor air quality effected states as far away as upstate New York. Wildfires are not new to the western part of the United States, but the 2020 fires were exceptionally bad and caused by myriad circumstances ranging from an abnormally hot summer, little rain, existing forest management practices, human behavior, and a changing climate. Dozens of people died, homes and businesses were destroyed making the economic losses difficult to calculate, and there is untold destruction to animals, plants,

and the ecosystem, which leads to a conclusion that wildfires are bad and should be stopped. Or should they? Fire ecologists and forest management professionals will tell you that wildfires are an important part of forest management. So where does that leave policymakers and the government? Do we acknowledge that fires are necessary and let them burn when they start or do we prevent them no matter what, indicating that fires are either acceptable or they are not? And these questions do not even begin to address who should do whatever has been decided. The point is that while it may seem like policy issues result in a binary choice—being for or against something—policy issues are far more complicated in reality than the rhetoric might imply.

WHAT REALLY IS POLICY?

The term *public policy* is ubiquitous. Whether it is the discussion of public policy that comes with the arrival of new presidents, such as Donald Trump, to the White House in 2017 or the circumstances that ushered in Franklin Delano Roosevelt's administration in the midst of the Great Depression, conversations about public policy abound. In particular, discussions of new policy directions and initiatives range from political circles, elected officials, the news media, to the classroom. But what really is public policy? Is it simply new leadership at the federal level in Washington, DC, or in a state capital? Is it the process of how a bill becomes a law? Is it a new regulation? Quite simply, public policy is all of this and much more.

Public policy, as introduced in the last chapter, is a course of action adopted or created by the government in response to public problems. As we will see in the coming pages, public problems are those issues identified by the public and elected leaders as worthy of a coordinated response from the government. A response could entail the passage of laws or may involve an executive, such as the president or a governor, directing a government agency to do something. Just as problems often beget action, it is important to recognize that public policy is just as much what a government decides to do as it is what a government decides not to do. Ultimately, public policy is all about choices.

Government policies are not always easy to spot. Of course, public policy includes the laws passed by legislative bodies, whether they are statutes or local government ordinances, including the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act from 2020 or the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, better known as Obamacare (see Chapter 8 for a discussion of health policy). But policy is much more. Policy also encompasses the regulations promulgated by executive agencies that translate the often vague statutes into actionable steps, which is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4. More broadly, policy is also the priorities of government entities, since policy is just as much about what a government does not do as what it does. Public policy was manifested in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's MyPlate nutrition guidance, or in the U.S. Forest Service's campaign to prevent forest fires with Smokey the Bear.

In this chapter, we introduce the process of government initiating action around public problems and supporting theories. The foundation here is instrumental for the

remainder of the textbook and your ability to apply the core concepts from this chapter to various areas of public policy, such as education policy and criminal justice policy. We begin by focusing on the context for policymaking before delving into the realm of policy theories and efforts to explain the often convoluted process that produces public policy. The most common policy theory, the stages model, is discussed, along with some alternative theories to understand policymaking. Finally, the chapter ends with an assessment of whether or not policy theory helps advance our comprehension of policymaking.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT OF PUBLIC POLICY

Before delving into the policy theories that offer insight into the policy process, it is essential to point out that public policy does not happen in a vacuum—it does not happen in isolation. Whether it is health-care policy or reforms to the tax code, public policy happens in a broader context with other concerns, priorities, and issues swirling about. Even though our subsequent chapters deal with particular areas of policy seemingly independent of other areas, this is not how policy exists in real life. What happens in immigration policy, for example, has implications for health-care policy and education policy, and vice versa. Policy areas are all interrelated. As a result, policy action on a particular, even seemingly unrelated issue may be competing with action on another issue. Just as you can only deal with a certain number of courses each semester, the government can only handle a certain number of policy options at any given time. What this exact number is varies and is ill-defined, but the point is that all sorts of policies compete with one another to become priorities of the government. Not every issue can be the government's—or society's—top priority (Photo 2.1).

PHOTO 2.1
Smoke From Forest Fires Over Missoula, Montana

Additionally, the priorities of a government can change rapidly and dramatically with focusing events. **Focusing events** are significant episodes or experiences that catapult particular issues to prominence on the public's agenda. The rapid emergence of the coronavirus (COVID-19) in 2020 is a clear example of a focusing event, and the effects of this event are still unfolding and will be for some time. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 is another one. Airport security and the threat of terrorism were

issues prior to the attacks, but the prominence of those concerns changed decisively afterward, prompting new security measures and a new agency, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA).

More recently, mass shootings at a grocery store in Boulder, Colorado, spas in Georgia, a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, or at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida have renewed debates about gun control. The 2010 explosion and sinking of the *Deepwater Horizon* drilling rig in the Gulf of Mexico precipitated conversation about offshore drilling and environmental protection. Sometimes, focusing events have significant staying power in the national consciousness and result in policy action, such as the terrorist attacks, and other times, there are too many competing priorities and the nation's attention does not stay focused enough to compel action, as has been the case with the latest mass shootings. It is very difficult to determine in real time whether or not a focusing event will bring about policy change in the moment, but retro-spectively, looking for focusing events can help us understand movement on public policy issues.

With a realization of competing priorities and focusing events, we discuss four factors that affect the context of policymaking: (1) the economic environment, (2) the social and cultural environment, (3) the political environment, and (4) the adminis-trative environment. We unpack what each of these contexts means for creating policy.

The Economic Environment

The condition of the economy is a major factor when it comes to policymaking. After all, we all understand that money plays a large role in many situations. The health and overall well-being of both the American economy and the global economy can also have a significant effect on policy. When the economy is not performing well, Americans and their elected leaders are often focused on "fixing" the economy, and any other policy priorities are likely to be secondary.

These circumstances were evident during the Great Depression, which saw Franklin Delano Roosevelt's administration propel policies under the New Deal designed to stimulate the economy. Another example is the Great Recession of 2008 and 2009, when the downward spiral of the automotive industry and the housing crisis brought sweeping policy actions to save major car manufacturers and bolster the financial markets—the explanation being that the health of the economy is paramount. And more recently, the effects of COVID-19 on the American and world economies are still being felt. During these times, policy conversations about other issues, such as environmental efforts or education policies, were pushed aside.

On the flipside, when the economy is performing well, the nation is willing to engage in other policy issues that may be construed as being more "quality of life." For example, environmental or social policies are likely to gain more traction when the economy is robust because the thought is that these policies might cost money—regardless of the accuracy of these perceptions—and the public is more willing to entertain such action. Remember, much of the economy is based on faith and perceptions, just like the value of money. If people perceive that the economy is doing well, then it will be a self-reinforcing cycle and the economy will do well

(for more on the contours of economic policy, see Chapter 5). But if people are worried that the economy is trending downward, they will be less inclined to spend money. These realities are related to the social and cultural environment as Americans espouse and their priorities around policy.

The Social and Cultural Environment

A second component of the policy context is social and cultural values. The norms of a society and what is culturally acceptable drive policymaking. Who we are as a country helps set the boundaries of what types of policies are likely to be enacted and successfully implemented. Consider the following scenario to illustrate this point. Perhaps scientists and engineers in the next year determine that in order to protect the planet from carbon emissions the most efficient and effective course of action would be for all Americans to drive Toyota Priuses. Accordingly, Congress takes up a bill to mandate that all other cars and trucks on the road nationwide have to be phased out over the next five years and replaced with Priuses. Let us also stipulate that Americans are desperate for action to curb emissions and politicians also support such steps. Would a policy like this one ever pass? In a word, no. And this conclusion is grounded in an understanding of Americans' culture and social values.

Since the creation of the interstate highway system during President Dwight D. Eisenhower's time in office, Americans' love affair with their cars has only grown. Moreover, nostalgia surrounds the freedom of the open road and even driving Route 66 across much of the nation. Additionally, fundamental to our identities as Americans is a belief in freedom and the free market. Therefore, when it comes to consumption, we value choice. We do not want to be told what kind of car to drive. Among your own friends and families, it is probably safe to assume that there are divergent opinions about the preferred style of car, much less the color selection. Some of us prefer American-made cars; others will only drive foreign cars. Still others like small, compact cars, while others want cars capable of hauling lots of people and their stuff. These realities about who we are as Americans and our preferences lead to the conclusion that there is no scenario—at least not at the present time—that can be envisioned in which Congress stipulates we all drive Priuses. It should be noted that values can and do change over time. These values feed the political environment, which is a third influence in policymaking.

The Political Environment

The political environment, or the politics of it all, deeply affect policymaking. In a polarized political climate, the role of politics is significant. More specifically, the priorities of political parties and elected officials do much to shape the policymaking agenda. For example, at the start of Donald Trump's administration in 2017, a stated policy priority was to repeal the Affordable Care Act, better known as Obamacare, which was enacted in 2009. Republican leaders in Congress pursued these objectives and scheduled a vote. This vote was pulled on the day it was scheduled; however, as it became clear the bill would not pass. And subsequent votes in the months that followed all failed to achieve that campaign promise.

This example brings up another dimension of the political environment—the cycle of elections. Politicians coming up on reelection can be more reluctant to take a position on controversial issues that their challengers in the race might use against them. Also, after an election, the new party in control—and particularly if that political party controls multiple branches of government—will try to work quickly to action many of the priorities its members campaigned on during the election season. The issues that are particularly salient to the electorate, as well, are likely to help shape the priorities of elected officials and influence the policy options that are pursued. In the 2020 presidential election, the salient issues for supporters of Joe Biden included the fight against COVID-19, protecting Obamacare, and economic relief. The early days of the Biden presidency demonstrate an administration making concrete steps to fulfill those, and other, campaign pledges. As Chapter 8 explores, the public opinion data do not support the construction of the wall, but only time will tell the outcomes of these policy efforts.

The Administrative Environment

The final environmental dimension of the policymaking context has to do with the practical, administrative side of policies. Put succinctly, the administrative environment concerns who in government (or the broader public sector, for that matter) will implement the policy; what level of government will be responsible for it? Many of these administrative and implementation details play an important role in public policy. It might be easy to argue at this juncture that these nitty-gritty details are of less significance, but we should recall the rollout of the Obamacare website, healthcare.gov, in October 2013. By almost every measure, the implementation of the nationwide marketplace website for health-care exchanges was atrocious. The website crashed repeatedly, frustrating many on all sides of the issue. The implementation challenges were steep, considering that the website had to work with various state websites that had created their own exchanges. The website also had to work with the Internal Revenue Service's systems, as income and tax information for potential enrollees was required. And unlike the norms of the information technology industry, healthcare.gov was not phased in in pieces or tested in certain markets the way other Internet retailers, such as Amazon.com, might do; rather, the website went live nationwide all at once.

A more contemporary example is President Trump's executive order in August 2020 to cut taxes, or more accurately, defer taxes since only Congress can cut taxes. This presidential order defers the collection of payroll taxes through the end of 2020 but it created a logistical nightmare. People who make less than $4,000 per two-week pay period may defer the tax collection until 2021, but that is only if their employers halt the collection of those taxes. Some employers have opted not to defer the tax collection. And if Congress does not make those cuts permanent—and at the time of writing there is little evidence that Congress will—then those employees whose employers defer those taxes will be on the hook for them in 2021, settling up an administrative nightmare for employees, employers, and the IRS.

Although these seemingly less important details are not as pervasive in public debate about a particular policy issue, they are extremely significant as policy ideas are
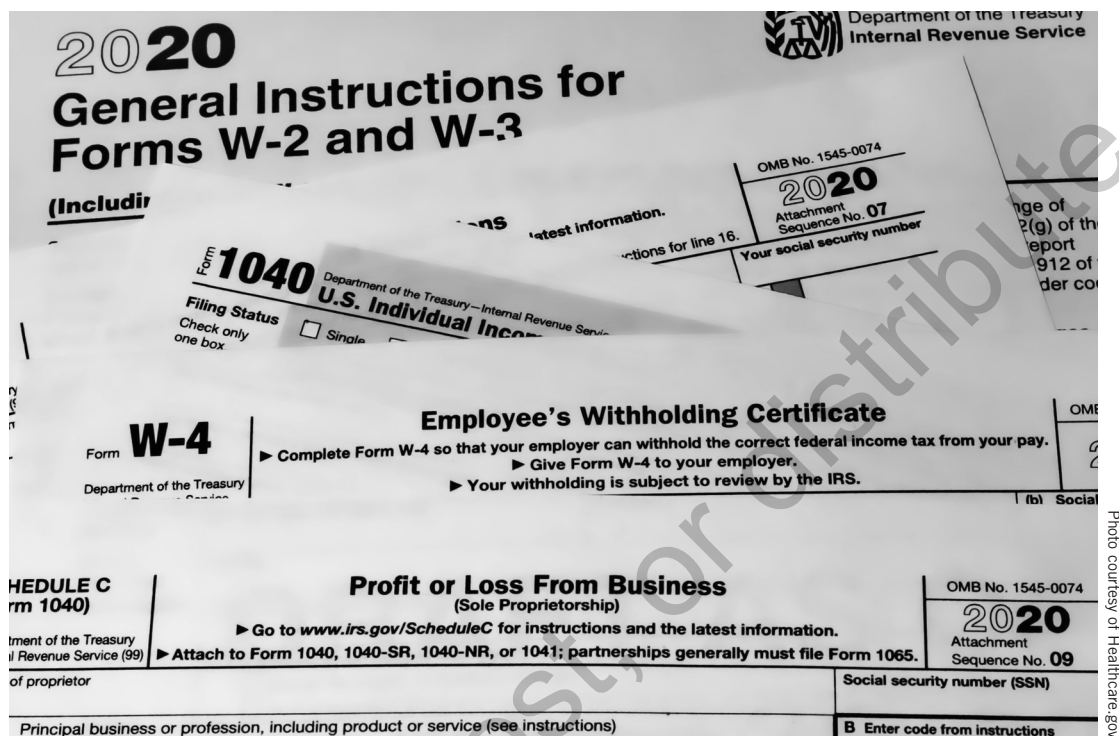
PHOTO 2.2

being offered to solve a public problem. Sometimes the debate is less about a government doing something and more about what level of government should do about something. A large portion of Americans would concede that much needs to be done about public education in this country, so the policy conversation becomes less about whether something should be done and instead more about who should take action. A particular area of that divide concerns the role of the federal government and fifty state governments in education. Depending on one's viewpoint about which level of government should be at the forefront of education, policy reforms will drive discussions about policy actions. Oftentimes there is consensus that action is needed on a particular issue, but the challenge becomes how something should be done; therefore, this context of policymaking is significant, even if it is a bit less glamorous (Photo 2.2).

The key idea to take away from this discussion of the policymaking context is that policy action does not happen in isolation—many factors affect a particular policy idea that may have little to do with the merit or validity of a policy. At any given time, multiple policies in different areas are always competing with one another for the attention of people and their lawmakers; the politics of the moment are likely to play a role, just as the economic conditions will as well. Finally, questions about the administration of a policy solution are also intertwined with social and cultural values.

It is essential to keep these points in mind as we turn our attention to the path a particular policy idea must travel to be created and implemented.

THE QUEST FOR PUBLIC POLICY THEORY

With the complexities of the policy environment, it is unsurprising that there is a desire to produce theories that explain when policies will or will not move forward. Indeed, this quest for public policy theories drives many scholars and practitioners throughout their careers. But before we delve into the work of these scholars, we should start at the beginning: What is a theory? According to Google, a theory is "a supposition or a system of ideas intended to explain something, especially one based on general principles independent of the thing to be explained." Theories help us understand phenomena, conditions, and events that seem to escape explanation. Even with just our brief discussion of what policy is in both this chapter and the last, it is already apparent that public policy is something that craves explanation. Moreover, since public policy can and does have significant effects on our day-to-day lives, it is unsurprising that we want theories to explain it.

More formally, Professor Paul Sabatier (2007) maintains there are five reasons why we seek theories of public policy. First, there are a great deal of people and organizations who are involved in public policy issues. Within this complex array of actors, individuals have various interests, values, perceptions, and preferences that can and do have tremendous effects on the creation and implementation of public policy. After all, if some actors do not even perceive an issue as being a problem, there are significant ramifications to any effort to enact policy to solve that problem. With this complexity, policy theories should help us better grasp the multitude of actors involved and what their impact might be on policy.

Second, policymaking encompasses significant time spans, so theories can help us grasp the timeline for policies. Think about some of the policy issues that have already been mentioned, including health care and air pollution. Neither of these issues is likely to be addressed quickly, and the existing policies about these topics go back decades. Arguably, the role of government in health care dates back to at least the 1930s, and the federal government has been involved in environmental policy since the 1950s and 1960s. Policy theory can help us account for the timelines of these policy issues.

As is evident in the brief examples in the previous paragraph, health care and environmental concerns are not encapsulated in just one policy. This inter-policy complexity is a third reason why theories are useful in understanding policy. In the discussion above, there are multiple policies and programs that may or may not align well with one another. It is not just the Affordable Care Act from 2009; there are numerous laws dealing with the creation of Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, the Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (creating COBRA), the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, the State Children's Health Insurance Program, or the Medicare Prescription Drug Act. The point here is that there are lots and lots of policies in any particular policy area, not just one policy, and theories that can help us understand how they fit together.

A fourth reason why theories are helpful is they account for all the different ways public problems are approached and understood. At first glance, it may be fairly simple for you to think about a public issue and what should be done about it. But as you reflect on that topic, you realize that your ideas about that problem are *your* ideas and others are likely to understand the problem differently, think about the problem differently, and offer a range of other solutions. And this leads to the final reason Sabatier offers about the value of policy theory: theories can help us understand and consider what government should and should not be doing. The debates surrounding public policy are rooted in our varying ideas about the role of government in society, how the government should fulfill that role, and what resources it takes to accomplish its objectives. To put it more succinctly, "understanding the policy process requires knowledge of the goals and perceptions of hundreds of actors throughout the country involving possibly very technical scientific and legal issues over periods of a decade or more while most of those actors are actively seeking to propagate their specific 'spin' on events" (Sabatier 2007, 4).

Of course, it may be appealing just to apply common sense or take an ad hoc approach to a policy, but that is limited in that you are unable to extrapolate from one particular policy topic at one particular time to any other instance of policymaking. Accordingly, numerous policy scholars have sought theories to explain policy in more than just one case. Theories can help us identify similarities and patterns across multiple cases that enable us to understand what is happening presently and perhaps even predict what might happen in the future. They provide an organizing framework and a vocabulary in which we can talk about policy. So with that in mind, we introduce next some specific policy theories, starting with the most common: the stages heuristic model. After a robust discussion of this pervasive policy theory, we also introduce several other theories that have gained traction in the policy community more recently.

THE STAGES HEURISTIC MODEL OF PUBLIC POLICYMAKING

The stages heuristic model of public policymaking, as described in Chapter 1, is without doubt the most common theory that endeavors to explain policy. It is worth pointing out that theories to describe policymaking are relatively new, as studying public policy in a formal, academic setting only began in the middle part of the twentieth century. Granted, this may not seem new to readers of this text, but keep in mind that biologists and theologians have been hard at work in their fields for centuries. Political scientist Harold Lasswell was the first scholar to describe a "decision process" for public policy and articulate "policy sciences" (Lasswell 1951, 1956). Although the language used to describe the steps of the policymaking process have evolved over the intervening decades, the steps of making public policy can be thought of in the following terms (as introduced in the last chapter): (1) problem identification and definition, (2) agenda setting, (3) policy formulation, (4) policy legitimation, (5) policy implementation, and (6) policy evaluation (see also Figure 2.1).

FIGURE 2.1

The Policymaking Process

Problem identification and definition → Agenda setting → Policy formulation → Policy legitimation → Policy implementation → Policy evaluation → (cycle back to Problem identification and definition)
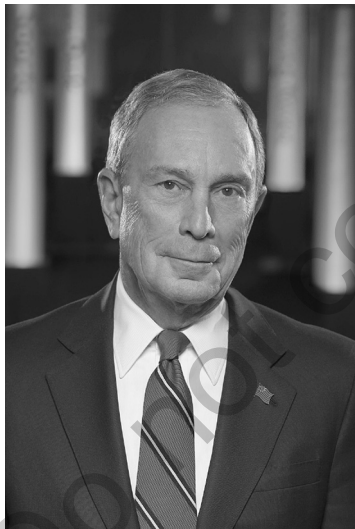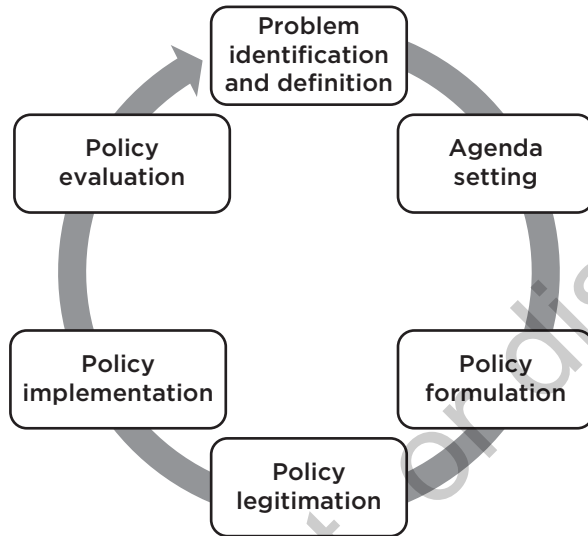
PHOTO 2.3
Mayor Michael Bloomberg and the Sugary Drinks Portion Cap Rule Effort

Sugary Drinks

As we consider each of these six steps, it is helpful to have an example to walk through each stage of the process. For our purposes, we have selected a fictitious and somewhat ridiculous example, but it is based in real life. In 2013, Michael Bloomberg was New York City's mayor and led an effort to limit the size of drinks sold in the city that were sweetened. The Sugary Drinks Portion Cap Rule, promulgated in 2013 for New York City, limited the size of drinks that were sweetened (e.g., sodas) to no more than 16 ounces. The thought was that by limiting the size of drinks with added sugar that people could buy, the intake of sugar would decrease. It is worth noting that this effort did not appear as part of his 2020 run for the presidential nomination of the Democratic Party, probably because the attempts were unsuccessful, as New York state courts ruled that the city exceeded its authority in instituting the limits. Nevertheless, let us use this as a foundation to employ an example that helps us understand the policy process (Photo 2.3).

Stage 1: Problem Identification and Definition

You have likely heard the old adage, "The first step in solving a problem is recognizing there is one." This is absolutely essential to policymaking. The first stage of the policy process is to figure out what the problem is and to define it. A key component of figuring out the problem is determining a public problem. Just because you think an issue may be a problem does not necessarily make it a public problem. For instance, not having enough movie theaters nearby or figuring out which pair of shoes to wear might be a problem for you, but it does not rise to the level of a public problem. Therefore, public problems are what constitute policymaking efforts. For example, public problems might include the rise of opioid abuse nationwide or concerns about the proper disposal of batteries and outdated technology. Of course, it bears remembering that just because you think any of these aforementioned challenges are public problems does not mean there is widespread agreement among others that they are problems. A particular region of the country or a state might champion a particular issue, but that may not capture the attention of the nation, for instance.

Over time, issues gain traction and become public problems through a variety of ways including through the media, advocacy organizations, politicians, and even average citizens. There are many ways we come to understand public problems through these channels. Sometimes it is a new research study that documents the growing abuse of opioids in the country, or perhaps it is cell phone footage capturing police officers using deadly force. Other times a natural disaster, such as Hurricane Maria or the 2020 western wildfires, can galvanize attention on storm readiness, disaster response, and needed revisions to building requirements. And in other instances, it may be a handful of policy entrepreneurs who focus all of their efforts on a particular issue and compel others to address the problem.

Once problems are raised by society, we have to define them. After all, we have to have a common understanding of the problem so we can figure out how to solve it. On the surface, this seems simple enough, but this is where the challenge begins. How you understand a challenge or a problem may be different than how your roommate comprehends it. Returning to the example of opioid abuse, you might think the problem is a function of physicians too readily prescribing painkillers for people who then become addicted because the medical professional should have better controlled access to the substance. Your roommate, however, may think that it is not the medical community's fault because people just need to "toughen up" and cope with pain from an injury or a chronic condition. Similarly, wildfires may just be nature's way of managing the forest, or they may be the result of expecting parents' gender reveal pyrotechnics, or they be the result of climate change. Of course, the issue is far more complicated, but our understanding of the problem and how we define it could be expressed in these underlying terms. The point is that how we think of a problem and define the contours of that problem can often be a social construction (see Berger and Luckman 1966 for the theoretical underpinnings).

Simply put, our ideas about problems come from our own experiences, our own perceptions of situations and institutions, and this affects our approach and attitude about public problems (Schneider and Ingram 1997). Given the variability in

constructing and defining public problems, it is unsurprising that we end up with many competing definitions of a problem; and with these different conceptions, there are very significant implications for the remaining five steps of the policymaking process.

To see the complexities associated with this very first step of the policy process, let us return to the Sugary Drinks Portion Cap Rule example. In our efforts to understand more fully this part of the policymaking process, let us take this real-life example and go further with it. What actually is the problem with soda and other sugary drinks, and concern over Americans' health? One way to look at the issue of extra-large sodas might be that Americans are always thirsty and can never get enough to drink, so portion sizes have to increase. Another way to consider the issue might be that Americans have a sweet tooth and prefer beverages that have added sugar, like soda. Perhaps the government should not care whether Americans drink soda. And who cares what is in soda, whether it is sugar or some poisonous chemical. Or maybe there is concern that Americans' health is declining while obesity rates are climbing, and the major culprit is sugar—and soda is one of the primary ways Americans absorb extra sugar in their diets. There are not a lot of national public data on sugary drinks both in terms of portion sizes and taxes. A 2017, a Politico-Harvard poll found that 57 percent of respondents were in favor of taxing soda and other sugary drinks to raise funds for children's health programs (Evich 2017). And, a Gallup Poll back in 2013 found that 69 percent of respondents disapproved of laws limiting sodas over 16 ounces (Gallup 2013). Americans are seemingly divided on what, if anything, to do about sugary drinks (Kliff 2016).

These comments vary in their plausibility; nevertheless, the point is that there are lots of different directions from which a discussion of soda portions can be defined. Accordingly, this is where the importance of definition comes into focus. If we can agree that obesity is linked to sugary sodas (which, of course, is a stretch, but let us continue with this intellectual exercise), what should be done? Should sodas be banned, for public health concerns? Should there just be limits to the size of sodas that can be purchased? Should Americans be better educated about their beverage choices? Should the government place warning labels on sodas, as it does for many other products, and let consumers decide for themselves? Should nutritional guidance and labels on sodas be changed? Should Americans be able to drink whatever they want, since freedom in consumption is a basic tenet of U.S. society? What you should be gathering from this fictitious example are the complexities associated with even a basic understanding of the public problem. With all these questions, the remaining five steps of the policy process appear all the more daunting.

Stage 2: Agenda Setting

Once a problem has been identified and definitions offered, it moves to the agenda of government for action. Or maybe not. It is at this stage of the policymaking process where most policy options never get any further. After all, just because a problem has been acknowledged and defined does not mean anything will get done about it. The problem has to captivate the attention of the government and the public to compel action. And the government only has so much bandwidth in which to consider a

problem. Just like you are unlikely to take twelve classes in a particular semester, the government can only handle so much on its agenda.

A variety of circumstances can bring a particular public problem to the attention of the government. Focusing events may be discrete incidents that captivate the attention of citizens and policymakers alike. For example, a focusing event might be a mass shooting, such as the one at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, on Valentine's Day 2018 or the often-cited example of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. They can also be dramatic and evolving changes in society, like the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020. Focusing events do not always galvanize action around a particular topic. To date, there has not been policy action around guns, and access to them, that is directly attributable to the event, but the terrorist attacks in 2001 brought widespread and dramatic change to everything from how security for commercial air travel is conducted to the creation of new government agencies. We will see what lasting policy changes result from COVID-19.

Dramatic and often terrible acts of violence are not the only kinds of focusing events, however. Public problems can also come to the forefront and demand attention because the public demands action or has had enough of a particular circumstance. Interest from citizens may also be accentuated, or even driven, by the work of interest groups and other **policy entrepreneurs** who make it their professional objective to get the public and their policymakers to focus on addressing a particular public problem. It is worth noting that a multitude of actors can and do involve themselves in the policy process. Obviously, our elected political leaders are the individuals who make decisions about public problems, but lobbyists who work for interest groups, advocacy groups, the media, and the general public also can and do call attention to public problems. Additionally, the results of researchers and scientists often help society understand issues that need to be addressed as well.

Oftentimes it is a combination of many of these factors, and perhaps even a little bit of serendipity, that brings a problem to the agenda of the government. Sometimes it is easy to understand why a problem is now the focus of the government, and other times it is less clear. Regardless of how an issue gets to the agenda, it must get to the agenda and exhibit staying power to progress through the policy process.

Public policy scholar Thomas Birkland (2016) points out that there are different levels of the policy agenda that help us understand how and why some issues do not stay in the public spotlight while others work their way through the layers of the agenda and make it further in the policy process. At the most macro level, Birkland discusses an agenda universe in which all the ideas about all the public problems are discussed in the political arena. Some issues, such as Social Security reform or tax code modifications, often persist at this level and find it difficult to progress to the sys-tematic agenda. This second layer of the agenda constitutes those public problems that policymakers are actually willing to consider as part of their reach and issues that could potentially be addressed. The boundary between the agenda universe and systemic universe is porous, and policy issues flow back and forth.

Beyond the agenda universe is the institutional agenda, which comprises all the policy problems and possible policy options that are being considered and might reasonably stand a chance of action. For the last several presidential administrations,

environmentalists have been anxious for Congress to take up legislation to address climate change at a national level. But in recent years, the issue has made little further progress toward the final level of agenda: the decision agenda. The decision agenda—as the name indicates—describes those problems for which the government is actively debating a solution and taking specific actions and making decisions, like taking a vote. So far, it could easily seem that defining a problem is the harder of the two steps of the policy process covered, but you can start to see that just because a problem has been identified and is being discussed does not mean it is gaining the attention of policymakers, either.

Returning to our example of sugary drinks helps us further understand the importance of this stage of the policy process. While the health risks of over-consumption of sugar have been well established, and soda has long been a staple of Americans' diets, what might compel the government to discuss action about the issue? With the recognition of the obesity crisis in the United States, pretend that Congress has decided to take action to get Americans to reduce their intake of sugary drinks such as soda. The belief is that if Americans drink less soda, then the obesity crisis will be mitigated. These discussions may come about from a variety of sources. Professionals in the health community, including government scientists, may release reports that document rising rates of not only adult obesity, but childhood obesity as well.

Additionally, there may be a new docudrama on reality television that depicts a family's decision to drink nothing but soda for six months to see what happens (much like how real-life filmmaker Morgan Spurlock decided to eat nothing but McDonald's food for thirty days to see what happened to his health for the 2004 film *Super Size Me*). There could also be ongoing efforts by juice manufacturers to promote their products over soda as a less sugary option. Or perhaps one state bans soda and sees dramatic improvements in a range of health outcomes. Any of these scenarios are plausible ways that the concern over soda and its increasing portion sizes is making its way to the agenda of the government. The challenges associated with both problem identification and agenda setting may already seem daunting in bringing about policy action, but keep in mind: these are only the first two steps of six in the policy process.

Stage 3: Policy Formulation

The third step of the policy process, policy formulation, entails devising ways to solve—or at least ameliorate—public problems. Once the government's attention is adequately piqued, work is focused on crafting the solution to the public problem. This is the stage of the policymaking process where specific, concrete actions about how to address an issue are brainstormed, discussed, and debated. For very technical matters, such as building safety in areas prone to natural disasters like earthquakes, hurricanes, or floods, this is the stage of the process where experts come together to discuss what the government can and cannot mandate and what those building standards might look like.

In other areas of policy, such as prevention of terrorist attacks on airplanes, the technical aspects of policy options have to move forward alongside debates surrounding what levels of invasion Americans are willing to contend with regarding their privacy.

For example, in 2009, the TSA introduced body scanners to be used at airports nationwide that could more effectively screen passengers to see if they were attempting to carry prohibited items on board a commercial aircraft. Critics charged body scanners, which captured images of passengers beneath their clothing, were too invasive. This controversy ignited debate about the need to maintain safety while also protecting a person's privacy. These sorts of advanced scanning technologies are still in use in the nation's airports. The point here is that just because there is a technical solution to an issue—we need to screen passengers for weapons more easily and effectively—that does not always mean the options are viable. After all, the best way to prevent destruction from hurricanes is not to build structures anywhere near where hurricanes might strike; but what is the likelihood that all construction near beaches ceases? This demonstrates that policy formulation is far more than technical solutions to problems; it also involves reconciling competing goals and values, not to mention specific choices among policy tools.

As indicated in the previous examples, devising a solution to a public problem involves a variety of goals and values that are often in competition with one another. Consider the values of American society that political scientist Deborah Stone (2012) articulates: equity, efficiency, welfare, liberty, and security. It is reasonable to conclude that Americans widely hold these values, but can all of these values be held to their highest ideals at the same time and for each policy issue? Returning to the issue of safety in commercial air travel and body scanners: How are we to reconcile our desire for security with our desires for efficiency in screening processes as well as our liberty not to have our privacy invaded? Can we be completely safe and completely free at the same time? If not, as the answer likely is, what balance between safety and liberty are we willing to accept? On one hand, these might seem like existential questions more appropriate in political theory and philosophy classrooms, but they are just as relevant questions for policymakers trying to take action surrounding issues facing the general public.

In addition to these questions, policy formulation also entails selection among policy tools to address problems. The government uses a variety of tools and techniques to compel action from individuals and organizations, and we turn to political scientist B. Guy Peters' (2019) useful typology of those tools. Peters offers six broad categories of policy tools at the disposal of government: laws, services, money, taxes, other economic instruments, and suasion.

Laws encompass acts of legislative bodies, like Congress, as well as regulations promulgated by executive agencies. These decrees tell individuals and organizations what they can and cannot do. For instance, the amount of effluent that can be released into a stream from a manufacturing company is the result of the Clean Water Act and subsequent regulations that implement the law.

The government can also provide services as a way to coax behavior. For example, the government ensures the safety of the skies by providing air traffic control and monitors weather through the National Weather Service in the Department of Commerce.

Money is a third tool available to policymakers. All levels of government—federal, state, and local—provide money to citizens and organizations through transfer

payments, such as via the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or Social Security payments to those individuals retired or unable to work due to injury or medical condition, grants to researchers, other governmental entities to study and solve a problem, or through contracting out. Increasingly, the government pays other firms to provide services on behalf of the government. For example, contracting out includes everything from your local municipality paying a large waste management company to collect your trash and recyclables, to some states paying privately run prison companies to incarcerate those individuals convicted of crimes. With this policy tool, governments use money to address public problems.

A related fourth tool policymakers have is the power to tax. Taxes are used in myriad instances where the government wants to change the behavior of people and organizations without expressly telling them what to do. A case in point is cigarette taxes. The evidence is clear that smoking cigarettes can be hazardous to one's health, and in aggregate, a public health problem as well. But instead of governments forbidding citizens from smoking, many governments add taxes to the price of cigarettes to discourage people from smoking.

Another category of tools identified by Peters and related to money are assorted economic instruments. There are other ways governments employ funds to affect policy outcomes, including the use of loans and subsidies. Perhaps you are furthering your education with the assistance of federal government student loans. Here the government is encouraging people to advance their education by making money readily available, and traditionally at lower interest rates, for students to take loans. Subsidies are also used by the government, including for farmers, to keep the nation engaged in agriculture and keep prices affordable.

A final category of tools is more nebulous: the use of suasion. This category of tools refers to all the indirect means the government might employ to encourage behaviors of individuals and organizations it wants and discourage behaviors it does not. For example, we are all familiar with public service announcements (PSAs) that encourage citizens if they "see something, say something" in an effort to prevent violence and attacks and other announcements about the perils of drug abuse. These are some of the broad categories of tools that are available for policymakers to consider when endeavoring to craft a solution to a public problem. As is evident from this discussion list of tools, there are many different ways to go about compelling action in response to public challenges. And how a particular issue is defined and how it comes to the government's agenda will go a long way in helping us understand the tools that are selected to address the problem.

It should become increasingly clear that the policy process (at least in this model) is sequential and one step builds on another; therefore, the previous steps impact future steps. Returning to our example of sugary sodas, think about how a policy could be designed. One option could be for the government to curb consumption of sodas by doing what New York City endeavored to do—limit the size of sodas available for purchase. So a proposal might employ laws and regulations that ban the sale of any soda larger than 12 ounces, thereby making large fountain sodas, liters, and so forth illegal. Of course, this does not preclude someone from buying eight sodas every morning, but instead of carrying one extra-large cup, an individual might have to carry

eight now. This policy option would be indicative of a problem definition centered around the notion that people consume too much soda because the portion sizes available to them are too large, so if the size is curtailed, so will the intake of soda.

Another policy option might be to allow individuals to buy whatever size soda they want but to use taxes as a means of discouraging behavior. This policy option might be the addition of a $5 per soda tax on any and all sodas bought in the United States. Such an option would be predicated on the idea that people buy and consume soda because it is cheap and therefore if it is made to be more expensive, people will consume less of it. Still another policy option might be to launch a widespread education campaign and encourage people to limit their consumption of soda through persuasive techniques. This approach is based on the problem definition that people consume as much soda as they do because they do not fully understand the risks of drinking so much soda. Therefore, in addition to the creation of an anti–soda drinking mascot, new labels might adorn soda cups and cans that show people who have become obese because they drank too much soda. The point of these examples is that the way the public problem is constructed and how it comes to the agenda will likely affect the kinds of policies that are designed and the tools that are called upon to address the problem. It is becoming increasingly evident just how complicated the policy process is—we are only at step three, and nothing has actually been enacted.

Stage 4: Policy Legitimation

The fourth step of the policy process, policy legitimation, is probably the step of the policy process you best understand, as this is the point at which a policy is decided and enacted. In other words, this is the step in which a bill becomes a law. At the federal level, policy legitimation occurs when Congress passes a bill; at the state level, policy legitimation occurs when a state legislature passes a bill; and at the local level, policy legitimation occurs when a local legislative body, such as a city council, passes an ordinance. For a brief refresher about the lawmaking process: a bill has to be drafted, introduced into one chamber (House or Senate at the federal level), referred to committee, and then usually referred to a subcommittee for hearings and investigation. Then those committees make changes to the bill before voting on whether to refer it to the entire chamber. From there, the entire legislative chamber debates a bill and votes. If all of these pieces fall into place, the process starts in the other chamber. And then, if the entire legislative body supports the bill, the bill moves to the executive (president or governor, for instance) for signature or a veto. Only after both legislative and executive branch involvement does a bill actually become a law and a policy legitimated. It is worth pausing for a moment and thinking about the difficulties associated with passing legislation, particularly at the federal level, in recent years. The policy process is incumbent on decisions being made at this stage of the process.

With our example of government intervention surrounding soda consumption, what would it take to get Congress to pass one of the policy options discussed in the last section? Congress might take up a bill entitled the No Extra-Large Sodas Bill. Recall that this option would ban the sale of sodas above a certain size. Even if the best health and scientific information aligns to support this bill, there are going to be lots of

actors who would mobilize to challenge the bill. For instance, the soda and beverage industry would likely lobby members of Congress to thwart such a bill. And it is likely that representatives of other similar industries, like the candy industry, would rally to support the soda lobbyists because if Congress limits sodas, it might seek to curb candy bar sizes next. An alternative may be banning soda outright; perhaps Congress would draft legislation to outlaw soda. An argument could be made that Americans are not in a position to make the best choices about what kinds of beverages to drink, so Congress should make those decisions for them. While this may seem extreme, remember that it was not that long ago that the United States endeavored to outlaw alcohol through constitutional amendment. A range of other options exist to limit Americans' consumption of soda, from bans, to size or portion limits, to taxes and other means of persuasion. Whatever policy options are offered, though, they must make it through the process of becoming legitimized by the decisions of our political leaders. At this juncture, the policy process seems daunting, but remember: this is not the end of the process.

Stage 5: Policy Implementation

Oftentimes, widespread attention to public problems and corresponding policy options stops by this stage of the process. The news media are usually focused on the process of identifying issues and the path to devising options to address those challenges. And the politics associated with how a bill becomes a law in step four makes for good news stories. Policy implementation, the fifth stage of the policy process, is the doing of policy, the executing of decisions to bring about change to address a public problem. After a policy has been decided on, the general presumption is the implementation just happens and is far less interesting. However, anyone who studies public policy at all knows that policy implementation—which is the process of carrying out policies—and accomplishing the actual policy, is often far more intriguing and indicative of the overall success or failure of a policy. Policy scholars Jeffrey Pressman and Aaron Wildavsky note that common perceptions hold that policy "implementation should be easy; [people] are therefore upset when expected events do not occur or turn out badly" (Pressman and Wildavsky 1973, xi–xvii).

There are many factors that make policy implementation just as complex as each of the preceding steps in the policy process. Although we devote an entire chapter to rulemaking (Chapter 4), here we provide an overview of the basics of implementation. Recall where we were in the policy process: a legislative body made a decision and chose among many competing policy options to address a problem. Typically, when bodies, such as Congress, pass a law, those laws are vague and rather general. For example, the 1972 Clean Water Act addresses water pollution in the nation's waterways by mandating the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) make those waterways "swimmable" and "fishable." This might seem a great description of how we want our bodies of water in the United States, but what does it mean to make a river or a lake "swimmable"? Your definition of what makes something swimmable may vary dramatically from the person next to you in class. Policy implementation becomes about operationalizing terms like these. You might be thinking, Why did Congress not

get more specific about what makes a waterway swimmable? But remember, it takes a lot of consensus building to pass legislation, and the product of those negotiations typically has to be somewhat vague or more general in nature in order to gain enough votes to pass. Moreover, members of Congress, in this case, are not necessarily experts in water quality, as most of them are highly trained lawyers rather than ecologists and environmental engineers. As a result, Congress leaves the specifics to the experts who work at government agencies such as the EPA.

To implement policy decisions, various government agencies get involved in translating statutory language into actionable regulations that achieve the policy objectives in the legislation. This is called rulemaking and conducted by the civil servants who are employed by government agencies. These individuals are the experts who work for the government, who are not given jobs due to political affiliation but because they demonstrate competence in a particular area. While one agency is often given the primary task of implementing a policy, that agency often has to work with a host of other agencies, and many times, those agencies may be at the federal, state, and local level. Already you can see that implementation is not as simple as decreeing that the nation's waterways should be cleaned up. Lots of agencies at the federal level, agencies from the fifty states, and all the organizations that might discharge into waterways or otherwise use the nation's water bodies become involved.

As we have in the previous steps of the policy process, let us incorporate our ongoing example about sugary drinks. For the purposes of this example, remember that Congress decided to pass the No Extra-Large Sodas (NELS) Act despite strong opposition from the soda industry and convenience stores nationwide. Public opinion is split, with many Americans supportive of the efforts to improve the health of their fellow citizens and a large portion annoyed that the government is overreaching and trying to control their lives. With these political currents in the background, Congress, through the NELS Act, told the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to work with the U.S. Department of Commerce to determine exactly what size soda constituted "extra-large" (e.g., number of ounces) and then to develop a plan to phase it out. While the media and news pundits may be less interested now that the law has passed, the work is just beginning. HHS and Commerce, tasked with two very different missions (one concerning public health and welfare and the other, job creation and economic growth), now have to come together to figure out the threshold for extra-large sodas. Many convenience stores sell (and have trademarked) their extra-large soda sizes, which range from 20 ounces to 50 ounces. What information should be used or be considered to decide what is too big? Should it be a universal declaration, or should what is too big be dependent on how old you are or your physical health? And once—or if—a decision can be made about the cup size, how do you make it happen? Should it be a phased-in ban—perhaps making super-sized cups collectors' items that sell for lots of money on eBay? Or should it be mandated effective January 1 of a given year? And what happens if people bring their own cup to fill a fountain drink at their favorite snack shop? What are the consequences? And what is to stop someone from buying three drinks to equal the size of the drink cup that was banned? Does this policy option really address the underlying problem as conceived originally? All these questions, and many others, demonstrate the challenges associated with policy

implementation. And these issues only comprise the fifth step of a six-step policy process.

Stage 6: Policy Evaluation

The final step in the policy process is policy evaluation. Assessing whether or not a policy is successful is critical, as the entire policy process strives to address, and perhaps even solve, public problems. But as has been true in the other stages of this process, this step is highly complex and riddled with challenges. Policy evaluation, simply put, is figuring out if the policy is working. Yet what does it mean to be "working"? As we have seen regarding the importance of defining a problem in the initial stages of policymaking, defining "working" is critical in this stage. Politicians and members of the news media often leave our heads spinning, as they all have different assessments of whether the same policy is working. The reason why they can all have different conclusions about a policy is their definitions of "working" vary. Along these lines, conceptions of "success," "effectiveness," and even "efficiency" have to be defined. Just as we saw with step one of the policy process, arriving at common definitions can be a challenging process.

Despite the complexities of policies, we all seem to quickly decide whether a policy is working or not. For example, conclusions were reached almost immediately about whether or not the Affordable Care Act was successful. But on what would you base your assessment about Obamacare? Is it having more people insured who did not previously have health insurance? Is it driving down costs of health insurance plans over time? Or is it better health outcomes for people to make for a healthier citizenry? Whichever of these questions you focus on, you will likely have different answers about the success of the law. Furthermore, when the health-care exchange website, administered by the federal government, was unveiled in October 2013, there were quick conclusions that Obamacare was a failure because the website crashed repeatedly. Conclusions were also reached rapidly about the 2020 CARES Act as to whether or not it was successful based on whether or not the law provided "enough" support to those affected by the economic havoc wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic. But what is "enough"? What period of time should we conduct that evaluation? Or should we determine success by how efficiently payments were distributed? The point is that evaluating policy options that strive to solve complex policy problems is not as simple as the yes and no assessments we frequently hear attached to policies.

Beyond definitional complexities, systematically consider how policy evaluation is conducted and the problems inherent in it. Much like the problem definition stage of the policy process, policy evaluation requires an articulation of what about the policy is going to be assessed. Then, policy evaluation typically involves a multitude of actors to gather data; find out about how the policy is being implemented on the front lines; and analyze how the policy is working across time, cases, individuals, or even water bodies. Then, analysis of the data has to be conducted, findings summarized, and conclusions reached. Just as you have learned in your research methods courses, decisions have to be made in each phase of the investigation, and there are implications to those decisions. And sometimes data may not be readily available, particularly for interested parties.

Even though Obamacare passed in 2010, that did not stop politicians from running in the 2018 midterm elections declaring whether or not it was a success or failure. You can already see from our discussion of questions around what aspect of Obamacare we might be evaluating, there is little chance that many answers to those questions were readily available in 2018 (indeed policy analysts are still working to determine what aspects were successful and which were not), but that did not stop candidates for office from claiming otherwise.

Regarding data, there are additional challenges obtaining them as well. Cost–benefit analysis is routinely employed to figure out if a policy is worthwhile. But the challenge lies in figuring out costs and calculating benefits. For example, if a new food safety policy details safety practices for processing dairy products, reasonable questions might be, "How much would these new requirements for farmers and producers cost?" and "What are the benefits?" If new equipment is required for farmers and producers of milk, cheese, and so forth, we can figure out how much they cost and add it up. But what about figuring out the benefits to compare against the costs to see if the new policy is a good idea? How do you figure out in a comparable unit—likely dollars in this case—what the benefit is for people who do not get sick from dairy products? Do you estimate health-care costs? Do you also add in time at work people may miss because they got sick from contaminated dairy products?

These questions bring up another critical aspect of evaluation: **risk assessment**. In determining costs and benefits, questions usually arise surrounding how much risk we are willing to accept. Risk refers to the likelihood that an adverse situation will occur and evaluating its magnitude. In our case of the dairy products and new safety mechanisms, should the government create policy that guarantees no one will get sick from dairy products, indicating a zero tolerance for risk? Or is it reasonable to go with 98 percent of people will not get sick? It might be reasonable to mandate regulations where there is only a 2 percent risk of getting sick, but if you are one of the 2 percent, you are unlikely to agree.

Numerous other problems present themselves during policy evaluation, but that does not mean evaluation is not important. Lots of resources, time, and energy are expended implementing policy and we want policies to solve problems, so evaluation is crucial. Consider a handful of additional challenges in the evaluation process. First, as we have seen, uncertainty over goals and definitions is a perennial challenge in evaluation. Ambiguity around what is being assessed and the evaluative criteria create problems for evaluation from the start. Second, if clear criteria can be established, it is very difficult in social science research to isolate all of the factors that could be influencing a policy. And isolating causation is often integral to assessing whether or not a policy is working. For instance, if a determination is trying to be made about whether or not taxes on tobacco products are discouraging tobacco use, it is impossible to rule out any other reasons besides the tax alone that might be contributing to declining rates of tobacco use. While the taxes may be higher on tobacco products, perhaps the primary driver for declines in tobacco product consumption have to do with bans on advertising these items and not the increased taxes. A third factor is that isolating the effects, positive or negative, of a particular policy might be diffuse and intertwined with other policies. This challenge points out that some policy options

have unintended consequences. Fourth, evaluations of policy are contingent on data and sometimes data are far harder to gather than one might think.

Finally, policy evaluations, as do all good social science research, take time. However, time is often not in ready supply when citizens and their elected leaders want answers about whether or not a problem is actually being solved. Moreover, credible evaluations often need data that span over many years, and that may not always be feasible. These are just some of the many issues that arise in trying to assess whether a policy that has made it through the entire policy process is working.

Returning to our example of the NELS Act, think about the aforementioned challenges of evaluation in this scenario. With congressional action limiting the size of sodas available to purchase, a reasonable assessment of this policy might be if rates of obesity among Americans are falling. So data could be gathered that track obesity rates pre- and postimplementation of the policy. But this evaluation is challenging because rates of obesity might have little to do with consuming sodas. And since Americans would no longer be able to buy large sodas, could they still be drinking the same amount of soda, just buying more cups? This increased consumption of smaller containers may have implications for solid waste as well. Furthermore, consumption patterns of soda may have changed because new, groundbreaking research proves that drinking coffee is the healthiest beverage for you and coffee producers have responded by making all sorts of palate-appealing coffee flavors for reluctant coffee drinkers. Additionally, making determinations about whether a policy is working often involves calculations around costs and benefits. How do we put a dollar figure on the costs associated with obesity so we can compare the costs associated with the benefits of the law? How do we calculate the lost soda sales convenience stores might experience—along with the bag of chips bought with a large soda—if this law takes effect? The point is, evaluating the success of our policy option is hard. And to top it off, policy evaluation can often compel a restart of the entire policy process.

Assessing the Stages Model

The stages model of public policymaking is very common owing to a variety of advantages that will be discussed shortly; but at the conclusion of this overview of the six steps, it should also be evident that there are flaws in this particular policy theory. Pause and consider the pros and cons of this approach.

There are numerous advantages to this model, as evidenced by its continued use in policy studies and by the many pages spent discussing it here. In particular, this model offers a linear, methodical introduction to the complexities of policymaking. It provides a vocabulary to help discuss and comprehend policy, and its neatly divided stages of the policy process help foster understanding for those new to policy studies. After all, there is something to be said for a simple explanation of a complicated process.

However, there are drawbacks to this approach. While it could be argued that a simple model is helpful, perhaps this model is too simple and does not adequately account for the reality of public policy. The model offers steps that appear discrete and sequential, but many times various steps occur simultaneously and even out of order during real-life policymaking. Additionally, the six steps of the model would make it

seem that each step takes a similar amount of time; however, that is not the case, and it varies wildly from policy to policy. The model does little to account for the web of actors who play a role in the policy process and provides no predictive value as well in helping forecast when and if a policy will make it to the next stage of the process. Finally, this model can lead to the conclusion that policymaking is methodical and rational when, in reality, government action is often not intentional and perhaps irrational.

Regardless of the pros and cons associated with this model, this approach does have staying power and few other models are as widely studied and used as this one—perhaps it is the best policy model we can hope for, as we are unlikely to find a perfect model (Smith and Larimer 2009, 35). Although this model is the foundation to understanding policy, in the next section we explore some alternative models that have been developed in response to the critiques offered about the stages heuristic model: the Multiple Streams Framework and Punctuated Equilibrium.

ALTERNATIVE POLICY PROCESS MODELS

In the final pages of this chapter, we introduce two of the many alternative policy models that have been advanced in an effort to address some of the disadvantages of the stages model. John Kingdon's **Multiple Streams Framework** is an effort to account for the lack of sequential order of public policymaking; **Punctuated Equilibrium Theory**, advanced by Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones, speaks to how policymaking is often described in periods of stability and incrementalism while at other times it can be described in rapid and massive change.

Multiple Streams Framework

The Multiple Streams Framework (MSF) of policymaking speaks to the messy nature of the policy process and how policy is not often made in a neat, orderly fashion. Working in the 1970s and early 1980s, John Kingdon was studying health care and transportation policy at the federal level, and through these investigations he sought an understanding of the agenda setting process, or step two as discussed earlier (see Kingdon 1984, 2010). But what he ultimately crafted in the MSF is a theory of policymaking in its own right. This model is built on three different "streams" that can converge in a "policy window," which is where policymaking can occur. Consider each of the three streams and how they all may coalesce with a policy opening (see Figure 2.2).

Think of a flowing stream. In the *problem stream* of the MSF, all sorts of public problems, issues, and challenges are flowing, mixing, and circulating. Some of the problems rise up to the surface of the stream; others sink toward the bottom. Actors in the policy process become cognizant of problems through indicators, or data and statistics about an issue, focusing events, and feedback on existing problems. Different problems captivate the attention of different policy actors, but all the problems exist together in the problem stream. The problem stream helps describe the mixing of problems that exist simultaneously and account for the interconnected problems.

FIGURE 2.2

Multiple Streams Framework
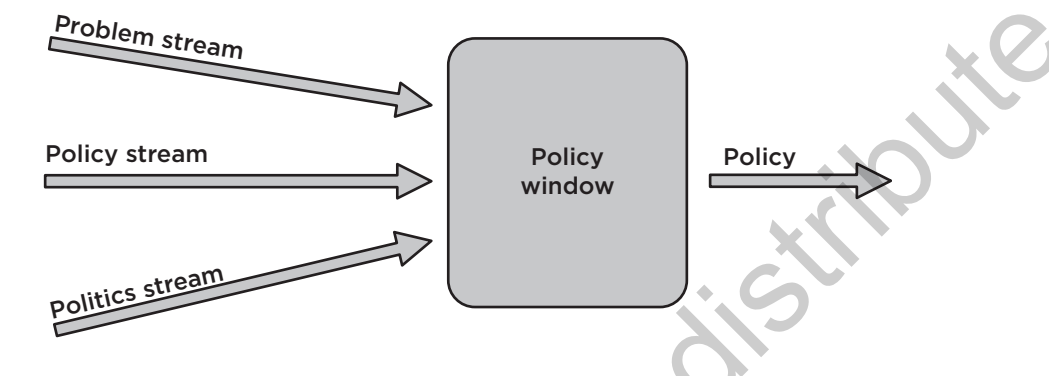
Another flowing stream exists alongside the problem stream; this is the *policy stream*. This stream, which Kingdon referred to as the "policy primeval soup," is the mix of ideas and solutions that vie to win traction and acceptance by policymakers in response to a particular problem. In other words, these are all the different ways any particular public problem might be addressed. These policy options may be in search of a particular problem or they may be in direct response to a given problem. These ideas come in all shapes and sizes from everywhere you can imagine. They originate in hearings, the presentations and publications of researchers, or the ideas of policy actors. Some of the ideas evolve a lot in the stream, while other ideas exist in the stream in a more static manner.

The third stream running beside the other two streams is the *politics stream*. This is the stream that deals with all of the political aspects and considerations of policy-making. For example, this stream encapsulates the nation's mood—what the citizens want or have the willingness to embrace. Additionally, this stream incorporates campaign and election cycles, which political party is in power, and the politics of the political institutions. Here is where all the considerations surrounding politics come into play in the policy process. As in the other streams, different political facets surround different issues, and some rise to the top while others do not.

Each of the three streams described previously exists independently of one another in the MSF. Figure 2.2 provides a visual representation of these streams. But these streams can and do come together, and this coupling of the streams results in a *policy window* opening. When the streams converge—and it is difficult to predict or know what it will take for the streams to come together surrounding a particular issue—policy gets created. You can think of this as when all the stars—or streams, if you will—align and something happens. How long the policy window opens is uncertain, but it happens. If two streams come together, though, policymaking does not happen, according to this model. All three streams have to come together to result in a policy window.

Pros and Cons of the MSF

Kingdon's MSF is a policy model that is frequently presented in contrast to the stages heuristic model. Consider some of the advantages of this particular model over the stages approach. With the MSF, the unpredictability that is lacking in the stages model is (somewhat) addressed. Here, policymaking happens in a less orderly, more ad hoc manner. Furthermore, this model demonstrates that efforts surrounding problems, policy options, and politics happen simultaneously and may or may not be connected to one another. For some, this model is far more descriptive of policymaking in the real world. And the concept of the streams in this approach helps account for the ebbing and flowing of ideas and approaches that may not fit nicely into the six steps of the stages model. Yet, much like the stages model, the MSF does not help us predict when policy windows may open and policy gets made. In other words, there is little predictive value associated with this model as well. This model does not advance our understanding of who is included in policy debates and who is left out. Perhaps a strength *and* a weakness of this model is that the MSF conveys that policymaking is messy and often hard to describe.

Punctuated Equilibrium

Around the same time that the previous model was being developed, Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones sought to account for why policymaking often seems stable, while at other times rather dramatic. Before we get into their Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET) outright, we need to start with the theoretical underpinnings of this approach. During the middle part of the twentieth century, the work of two scholars endeavored to explain decisions and action in government. Charles Lindblom advanced the idea of "muddling through," or **incrementalism**, arguing that decision-making and governmental action are governed by small, incremental steps (Lindblom 1959). Paul Schulman responded to Lindblom, arguing that incrementalism is not a universal explanation for government action (Schulman 1975). Instead, Schulman contended that **nonincrementalism** is more a way to understand. In his explanations, he pointed to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration during the 1960s in its quest for a moon landing as evidence that swift and significant action is possible. PET endeavors to incorporate both perspectives on government decision-making and actions.

First published in 1993, *Agendas and Instability in American Politics* is the foundation for PET. Baumgartner and Jones argue that periods of stability (drawing on Lindblom) are periods of "equilibria" in policymaking. And periods of instability (drawing on Schulman) are periods of "punctuations." Equilibrium is the most common. During these times, policymaking can and does happen, but it happens beneath the surface, if you will, often among policy subsystems. **Policy subsystems**, sometimes called issue networks, refer to the networks of actors working to achieve policy goals. Typically, these actors include representatives from interest groups, congressional staffers, and even those individuals working in government agencies. This type of policy work could be thought of as steady work among low-profile actors. Examples abound of policymaking during equilibrium, ranging from the next generation of

airbags for passenger cars to updates on nutrition labels on food packages. While these issues undoubtedly garner attention from relevant industry sectors, government agencies, and even some politicians, the issues are worked on beneath the surface, and rarely do the debates boil up to the surface commanding national attention.

By contrast, policymaking during periods of punctuations is characterized by high-profile and dramatic action—or at least more dramatic than "business as usual." During punctuations, which are typically far shorter and less common than periods of equilibria, a particular public problem or issue has galvanized attention from high-profile actors and commands national attention. Large-scale change happens during these periods at the macropolitical level. A classic example of a punctuation is the period after the Great Depression when the nation's attention and energies were fixated on economics (c.f. Kettl 2013). Additional examples include efforts to replace Obamacare, particularly with the election of Donald Trump, and Republican control of Congress might be judged over time to be another period of punctuation. This leads to an important point about PET. Knowing how or when a punctuation will occur is very difficult, and it is typically only after a punctuation and significant policy change that a period of punctuation can be defined. In other words, it is hard to know when we are in a period of punctuation until after it is over.

Much like Kingdon's MSF endeavored to address the less orderly process of policymaking, PET strives to explain why most of the time policymaking is incremental and moves along gradually, while during other times massive change can and does occur. Both theories stand in contrast to the stages heuristic model we spent the bulk of our time discussing.

These two models are not the only alternative theories, either. Policy observers and scholars are still trying to make sense out of the policymaking process and crafting different explanations. While we could fill the remaining pages of this entire book covering all of those perspectives, we opted to focus on MSF and PET; however, we also want to call attention to a couple of perspectives that might be intriguing. The Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) emerged in the early twenty-first century and its focus is what role do narratives play in the policymaking process (c.f. McBeth and Shanahan 2004; McBeth, Shanahan, and Jones 2005). We see all around us the importance of stories in conveying and perpetuating ideas and the realm of policy is no different. NPF provides a systematic way to study the influence of those stories. Deborah Stone's Policy Paradox takes issue with the rational approach to policy theory arguing that policy is not rational and often paradoxical.

Policy studies has come a long way in trying to make sense out of the policy-making process in the United States, but it is also far from complete in that we do not have a definitive public policy theory. We have a variety of theories that do a credible job explaining how policy happens in some instances, but we lack one with universal applicability. At this juncture, the struggle policy scholars have with making sense of the policy process is understandable. Policy scholars also are grappling with how we consider which actors are included in policy debates and which actors are not. Much like not doing something is a policy action, exclusion of actors (intentional and unintentional) has implications. Perhaps you will come up with a policy model in the near future that replaces all of these models!

ACTORS IN THE POLICY PROCESS

Part of the challenge in devising public policy models has to do with the sheer number of actors, or individuals, who are involved in the creation and implementation of public policy. The remaining section of this chapter introduces the major categories of policy actors. In the subsequent chapters that focus on specific areas of public policy, those actors and their roles will be examined in greater detail. Think for a moment about all the individuals and organizations that might be involved in passenger cars and their safety features, like seat belts and airbags. Who might be on that list? Of course, there are the car manufacturers, the companies that make the safety equipment that car manufacturers install, there are drivers, there are auto repair mechanics, police officers, first responders (including paramedics and fire fighters who respond to traffic accidents), the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, Center for Auto Safety, Safe Kids Worldwide, *Consumer Reports*, Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety, the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, Automobile Manufacturers Association, the American Automobile Association, and the list goes on and on. The point is, there are far more actors involved than you might initially think, and we did not even include elected leaders, other government agencies, researchers, and even the media.

In an effort to ease our understanding of all the actors involved in policy, we start by introducing two broad categories of actors: official and unofficial. **Official actors** are those individuals and organizations in the policy process that have a constitutionally defined role in creating legislation. This category of actor includes legislative bodies, including Congress and state legislatures; executives, including the president, governors, and executive agencies; and the courts. This group of actors is responsible for passing laws, implementing laws, and evaluating the legality of those laws.

During the 1960s, public pressure mounted on lawmakers to make cars and the nation's highways safer, and Congress responded. In 1966, Congress passed laws requiring seat belts in cars and created the Department of Transportation. Then, in 1970, the Highway Safety Act was passed, which, among other things, created the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration within the Department of Transportation. These steps required the action from Congress and the president. Since their passage, executive agencies have gone to work implementing these policies and the courts have reviewed the government's work.

The category of **unofficial actors** refers to all the other people involved in policymaking, ranging from citizens, state legislatures, governors, and the media to lobbyists and representatives of a variety of organizations. Actors in this category may be the experts in a particular area, like automotive safety, and do extensive research about the latest safety methods and standards. Researchers in universities or "think tanks" may spend a good deal of time understanding the complexities of problems and coming up with possible solutions to those problems. Interest groups are very common, such as the American Automobile Association, better known as AAA; in addition to its efforts to provide services such as roadside assistance to stranded drivers, and educate the public about various subjects, it also lobbies lawmakers to take action on particular issues. Automobile manufacturers also have interests to represent, and they

band together with other companies and lobby lawmakers as well. These actors were involved in the passage of the legislation mentioned above and continue to be active calling attention to safety concerns and the needs of drivers, auto manufacturers, and insurance companies, among others.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This chapter has provided the foundation and the language we need to talk about public policymaking in the United States. It should be evident how complex the process is to create policy, as it is far more complicated than the legislative work of a bill becoming a law. To help us understand the intricacies of this process, we looked at the stages model of policymaking that is encapsulated in six steps: (1) problem identification and definition, (2) agenda setting, (3) policy formulation, (4) policy legitimation, (5) policy implementation, and (6) policy evaluation. We recognize policymaking is not entirely explained by this model, as it has strengths and weaknesses; therefore, we considered two alternative models: the Multiple Streams Framework and Punctuated Equilibrium Theory. While none of the models is perfect, they do provide us a means of talking about and analyzing policymaking, which are necessary for understanding the substantive policy chapters within this text. Part of the complexities of policy creation has to do with the number of actors—both official and unofficial—involved in the process. These discussions provide a foundation for us to explore in greater detail the nature of policymaking *after* a legislative body creates a law. The next chapter brings our attention to the multiple layers of government at work in public policy in our federal structure. Then, Chapter 4 details how legislative language is translated into actionable regulations.

KEY TERMS

Focusing events 21
Framework 41
Incrementalism 43
Multiple streams 41

Nonincrementalism 43
Official actors 45
Policy entrepreneurs 31
Policy subsystems 43

Public policy 20
Punctuated equilibrium theory 41
Risk assessment 39
Unofficial actors 45

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Of the six stages outlined in the stages heuristic model of public policymaking, which is the most complicated and likely stage where a policy might fail? Why? Which stage is likely the easiest for a

policy working its way through the process?

2. The stages heuristic model of public policymaking persists as arguably the most

common model of policymaking. What are the advantages of this model? Where does this model fall short? In light of that evaluation, should this model continue to be used to introduce the policy process?

3. How do the policy models presented in this chapter help us understand who is and, perhaps more importantly, who is not included in policy debates? How does access to the policy debates among lawmakers affect policy outcomes?

4. There are many public policy models that strive to explain policymaking, but a universally accepted one remains elusive. What are the essential elements of a

policymaking model? Which elements are the most important to include versus other elements?

5. One of the challenges of policymaking is the multitude of actors involved in the process. Which actors do you think are the most influential and why? Which actors are the least? Does the level of influence vary depending upon the policy issue? Which actors are likely to be the most vocal in the example of sugary drinks?

6. With your understanding of the policy process and actors involved, what types of careers might you pursue if you want to play a role in policymaking?

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

Suggested Websites

Congressional Bill Tracker, http://www.congress.gov.

Government Accountability Office, http://www.gao.gov.

National Conference of State Legislatures, http://www.ncsl.org.

Pew Research Center, http://www.pewresearch.org.

Suggested Books or Articles

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Weible, Christopher M., and Paul A. Sabatier, eds. 2018. *Theories of the Policy Process*. 4th ed. New York, NY: Routledge.

Suggested Films

I'm Just a Bill (Schoolhouse Rock!), Disney (1973: United States), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tyeJ55o3El0.

Super Size Me, DVD, directed by Morgan Spurlock (2004: United States), http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0390521/.

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