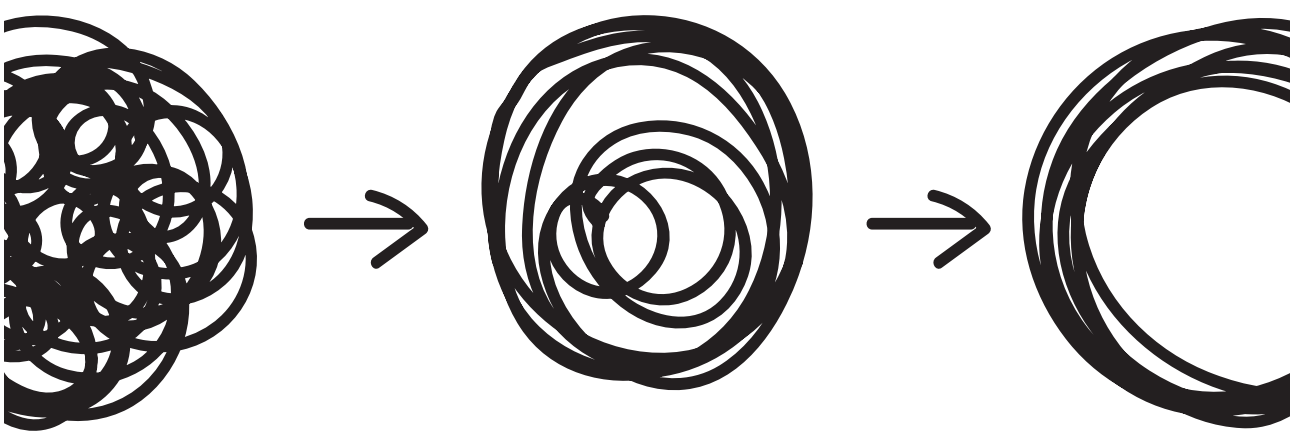
ARJEN BOIN & MARTIN LODGE

The POLITICS of POLICYMAKING

an Introduction



Sage

Public policy textbooks that provide insight in how public programs are actually crafted, negotiated, implemented, adjusted and terminated are extremely rare, but Boin and Lodge have pulled it off. This earthy and at times gritty gem provides its users with penetrating insights into how the cookies are cut in the real world of policymaking whilst at the same time offering them a helpful introduction to the toolkits that policy craftspeople – analysts and designers – may deploy to make sense of it all.

Paul 't Hart, Professor of Public Administration, Utrecht University

This lively account takes us from the pinnacles of power to the frontlines of policy delivery and everywhere in-between to illuminate the strange journey of a public policy. The craft of policymaking, we learn, lies in fathoming the journey!

Christopher Ansell, Professor of Public Organization and Administration, University of California Berkeley

A book cheerleading the way for students seeking to make a difference as policymakers but not knowing where to start. It informs and stimulates – the perfect combination – in the face of a world of complex policy/political problems and solutions.

Allan McConnell, Professor Emeritus (Public Policy), University of Sydney

This textbook is welcome for its innovative capacity to help students navigating the complexity in policy making and, above all, for showing that Public Policy focuses on real problems and that policy makers can change the world.

Giliberto Capano, Professor of Political Science and Public Policy, University of Bologna

Through illustrative examples, Boin and Lodge explore the politics of government policymaking – giving a real insight into how policy is made and unmade, by whom, and for which purposes. Dispensing with complicated models, the reader is presented with a refreshingly optimistic guide to how the most pressing societal problems can be solved with smart policies, and the necessary skills and knowledge to be a good policymaker.

Tamara Tubakovic, Fellow in Public Policy and Administration, London School of Economics and Political Science

This textbook provides an optimistic but also realistic introduction to policy making, including the myth of rationality and the role of politics and institutions. It is an excellent guide for all prospective policy makers in undergraduate and master programmes.

Christel Koop, Reader in Political Economy, Kings College London

This book should be an essential part of any public policy course. Written by two leading experts in the field, it covers the big questions of policy making from agenda setting and success, to the moral dimensions of doing policy.

Ben Worthy, Lecturer in Politics, Birkbeck College

This is a terrific book, which I would strongly recommend to undergraduate and post-graduate students of public policy and/or public administration. In particular, the authors do a great job of showing how concrete examples of policymaking relate to academic theories, and vice-versa.

Peter Eckersley, Senior Research Fellow in Public Policy and Management, Nottingham Trent University

CONTENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Arjen Boin is Professor of Public Institutions and Governance at the Institute of Political Science, Leiden University, where he teaches an introductory class on policymaking to freshmen. He has published widely on issues related to crises, disasters and other 'wicked problems' that policymakers face. He is also a consultant with Crisisplan (where he has worked with many policymakers).

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PREFACE

Academics have written many books, articles and reports on the venerable topic of public policymaking. This scholarly attention makes sense, for any government governs through the policies it formulates and maintains. If you want to understand what governments do and why (to paraphrase James Q. Wilson, 1989), understanding the policy process is an excellent start.

Many students in universities all over the world take courses to learn about the policy process. Unfortunately, many of the existing textbooks are not written for absolute beginners. When we say beginners, we refer to those students who are thinking about entering the world of policy but have no idea what to expect; we are thinking about students who must take a class on policy or public administration but have no inkling what these terms mean and why they might matter.

Many of these textbooks are written with the aim to explain the *theories* of the policy process. There is also a strand of books specifically written for a particular group of *advisors* (they are called policy analysts) who want to improve their craft and become better policy analysts.

We love those books and we learned a lot from studying them (as you will see throughout the pages of our book). But we think most of the existing textbooks underserve the large group of students who might want to work in a policymaking organization and are less interested in the specifics of this or that theory. They simply wish to understand how government works and how policies are made.This book seeks to fill that gap. Its aim is to explain how policymakers govern through policymaking. It is a road map for the world of policy – the world where 'everyday policies' are created and delivered.

We do not start at the political apex of the system, which grants a central place to politicians in the policymaking process. Our world of policy is quite a distance from the White House or Whitehall. We don't mean to suggest that politics are not important. Politicians make critical choices that give rise to policies – or fail to do just that. But we are interested here in the machine room, where policies are actually made. It's the realm where the political rubber hits the societal road. It is where political ideas get legs; it's also the place where political ideas die. It's the place where young people can make a real difference.

It is a deeply political world. Choices are made that affect the shape and effects of a policy, for better or worse. Most people in this world are not elected, but together they exercise an outsized influence over the fate of a political promise. Intriguingly, and perhaps alarmingly, there is very little politicians can do to control this world of policy. It is a political world in which elected politicians have surprisingly little sway.

In the work of policy scholars, there is a long-standing tradition of noting trends that make it harder to govern. We will also describe a few of these trends and developments. But it is good to remember that policymaking has always been a challenging task. Political ambitions have been rather grandiose, and it's been up to policymakers to turn these ambitions into workable rules, budgets and actions that together make up policy. The products of policymaking have been scrutinized and criticized by both their recipients and the leaders who formulated the goals. We should take note of these constraints and keep an eye out for potential game changers, without losing sight of the patterns and processes that define the world of policy.

To provide an understanding of this world, we draw heavily from classic works of political science, public administration, and policy studies. We use and explain theoretical insights that will help students understand the workings of the policy world, the effects of policies, and how citizens and politicians relate to this world and its products. We do not list each and every theory that policy scholars may find important. Moreover, we won't talk much about the difference between this or that definition, problems of conceptualizations in this or that theory, theoretical weaknesses and convergences between theoretical approaches, the use of proper research methods or future research agendas. To be sure, we draw on these theories and we hope that students interested in the topics that we discuss will venture to the back of the book, consult the reference list and start studying the literature that helped us write this book.

The book is also based on our own insights, earned through years of interacting with policymakers as both researchers and consultants. In addition, we build on years of teaching undergraduate and graduate students.

We are writing for people who have an interest in the workings of government and the policy process. Policymakers can change the world, which is what many students want to do. We do not presume any beforehand knowledge. We sketch the rules and regularities of this peculiar world, using plenty of examples. Above all, we write for people who have a – perhaps latent – interest in working for the government to make the world a better place. We want to provide a road map, identifying the barriers but also the destinations – creating a sense of enthusiasm for starting that journey.

We have written the book with teachers in mind. Each chapter can serve as the basis for a class. Teachers can teach the various topics in a different order than the one we use in this book. Each chapter has been written in such a way as to enable a modular use of the book.

We were raised and educated in European liberal democracies. We realize that policy systems differ across the world. We have studied other policymaking systems (and worked in different countries). It is inevitable, however, that this book reflects our own

unique experiences with governance and policymaking. This book does not present a definitive statement on the world of policy. The world changes constantly and all too often quite dramatically. Constant change imposes a continuing stream of new challenges for policymakers. This book therefore can only be work in progress. It's an ongoing project. We would love to hear feedback: fresh insights, new and better examples, things we missed or misunderstood.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Anyone who writes a textbook stands on the shoulders of giants. The bibliography in the back of this book is more than a list of references. It is a homage to all those scholars who have contributed to our understanding of the policy world.

We could not have written this book without the help of our colleagues. We are particularly indebted to Christopher Hood, Todd LaPorte, Paul Nieuwenburg, Werner Overdijk and Kai Wegrich for their continuous support, advice and friendship. Some colleagues have gone beyond the call of duty, reading and commenting upon individual chapters. We very much appreciate the excellent comments of Paul 't Hart, Sarah Pralle, Nadine Raaphorst, Thomas Schillemans, Daniel Thomas, Wouter Vandenabeele, Hendrik Wagenaar and Niels van Willigen. We are especially grateful for the detailed comments of Uriel Rosenthal, scholar and practitioner, who read the entire manuscript and helped us rethink many parts of the book. Finally, we thank the three reviewers who read the manuscript and provided us with superb suggestions and corrections.

We wish to send a big thank you to the students who attended our policy classes over the years. We learned so much from them. Despite the grim prospect of living in a world of polycrisis, we can only be optimistic about the future, as we encounter so many talented and enthusiastic students who really want to make the difference. We wrote this book with them in mind.

Finally, we wish to thank the people who helped turn our manuscript into a book. Katerina Galanopoulou, Bjarne von Lampe and Henry Shields did background research for the book. Lavinia Cadar was our eagle-eyed super editor, critical commentator, and fact checker. We thank our editor at Sage, Andrew Malvern, for initiating this project, keeping the faith, providing us with excellent feedback on early drafts and driving us toward the deadline. We also thank other members of the Sage team, Daniel Price, Mary Dalton and Rabia Barkatulla, for bringing this book to the finish line.

Finally, we thank our families for endless love and support.

1

THE IMPORTANCE OF POLICYMAKING

When voters elect politicians into office, they bestow upon them the power to make things happen (or stop things from happening). Incumbent politicians may pursue an ideal or seek to solve entrenched problems. They may have to address an acute threat. Whatever they seek to accomplish will require the formulation and execution of policy. The makers of policy can have tremendous effects on a society. They do so by turning political promises into policies that work. This book explains how policymakers can make policies work and why they fail. This first chapter introduces the key aims and questions that animate this book. It offers criteria for policy successes and familiarizes the reader with a set of common misconceptions that can easily misinform our ideas about policymaking. We conclude the chapter by arguing that an optimistic perspective on policymaking is warranted.

Learning goals

- Why policymaking is important
- What is policy and where can we find it?
- Who are the policymakers?
- How to define policy success and policy failure
- Common misconceptions in thinking about policymaking
- Why we should be optimistic about policymaking

Introduction: Why We Need Successful Policies

Even in the richest societies, there are plenty of serious problems. The list includes deep inequity, entrenched poverty, damaging pollution, shortages of affordable housing,

overwhelmed and underperforming education systems, polarization, widespread substance abuse, violent crime, and chronic public health problems (including mental health issues).

Those are just today's problems. Serious threats cloud the horizon: climate change, energy transition and rising water, the explosion of artificial intelligence and cryptocurrencies, old and new viruses, traditional and modern forms of terrorism (Roberts, 2019). There is enough to worry about and worry we do. Rich countries have become 'risk societies', as Ulrich Beck (1998) famously explained. We live in a world of existential threats and discomforting uncertainty. Thinking about the future may cause a sense of trepidation.

In many societies, people look to their government to address these problems and keep them safe. Governments make policies to achieve that goal. Governments also make policies to create capacities and facilities that the market will not provide, at least not without financial backing from the state. Think of police organizations and the armed forces, street lights and traffic lights, roads and education, drinking water and public healthcare. Political scientists call these 'public goods' (Ostrom & Ostrom, 1979; see Box 1.2). Without governmental policymaking, these public goods will be in short supply.

Box 1.2

'Public goods' are services and capacities that typically exist because the government provides them. It is very hard to exclude citizens from the benefits of a public good. That's why private parties do not offer them (they cannot make consumers pay for their product). Without the organizing power of a well-functioning government, it becomes a lot less likely that a society enjoys paved roads, streetlights, clean tap water and a law-abiding army.

The governments of liberal democracies also make policies in pursuit of political ideals – ambitious goals that a society wishes to achieve. Freedom is an example of such an ideal. In liberal democracies, government protects the freedom of citizens to live their lives as they see fit (as long as they don't harm others). There are other ideals that most – but not all – people think are responsibilities of the state: think of the alleviation of poverty, the education of citizens, the enhancement of general well-being, the emancipation of minorities, or the cultural elevation of citizens.

A prospering society does not emerge by some magic. It is not the result of good luck (although a little luck certainly helps). It is the result of smart thinking about problems and designing solutions, which are then enabled and applied. We call this policymaking (Goodin et al., 2006). Policymaking is, to use the words of our colleague Allan McConnell,

the Swiss army knife of politicians who seek to accomplish something good for a society (for an example, see Box 1.3).

Box 1.3 Addressing Poverty in Brazil through Policymaking

In 2003, Brazil launched the Bolsa Família government programme. It aimed to address structural inequality and poverty, problems that Brazil had been struggling with for decades. The Bolsa Família programme provided many low-income families with an opportunity to escape the vicious transgenerational cycle of economic hardship, fostering positive health and educational outcomes. The Bolsa policy of conditional cash transfer programmes reduced the percentage of people living below the international poverty line from 13% to 3%, decreasing the number of people suffering from hunger by 10 million (Centre for Public Impact, 2019).

Policy can make a profound difference, for better or worse. In this chapter, we will discuss policies that improved entire societies. But governments have also produced policies that have terrible consequences for many people. Some of these bad effects wreak havoc across generations. We should therefore keep in mind that policies are not necessarily or inherently 'good'.

This opening chapter explains how we define policy, how we can recognize it, and where we can find policy. We discuss why a policy can be called a success or a failure. We then introduce a set of common conceptions that intuitively make sense but can cloud our understanding of the policymaking process. We end the chapter with an argument for a positive outlook on policymaking.

What is Policy, Who Makes it and Where Can We Find it?

There are many definitions of public policy. What most of these definitions have in common is that they refer to a government-sponsored solution for a societal problem or a political ambition. A policy reflects what a government intends to do (or what it will avoid doing); it also explains *how* the respective ambition will be pursued. In this book, we will use the following definition, which is in line with the one offered by the renowned policy scholar Guy Peters (2015): A public policy is a set of activities that a government employs to accomplish a certain aim.

Most people have, at best, a faint idea what their country's policy on crime, higher education or foreign policy is. One could read the official documents that introduce the aim of a policy, how it will be accomplished, what the budget is, who will do it and when we should see results. But these documents are not always easy to understand nor do they tell

the whole story. Some policies – welfare and agriculture policies, for instance – are very complex. They have been in place for so long and have been amended so often that you really have to study what they aim to achieve and how.

In some cases, a policy document does not even exist. The policy has to be deduced from the actions (or non-actions) of civil servants. One must study their behaviour to understand the rules that they follow and thus infer the policy. For instance, a local policy towards vagrants or street criminals is not always set out in a policy document. We have to study how police officers behave in their encounters with them to understand what the policy entails. Sometimes the existence of a policy must be deduced from a symbol or lack thereof. For example, the French policy of *laicité* advocates a strict separation between state and religion. The policy can be observed by the *absence* of religious symbols in schools, courts and government buildings.

Policymakers are the people who initiate, design, enable and deliver the activities that make up a policy. These activities include doing research, listening, making decisions, writing documents, working with citizens, providing leadership, evaluating, explaining and learning. Nobody can do all of this. In the world of policy, there is a task division: many actors play very different parts that together make up a policy (we will return to this in Chapter 3).

When we talk about policymakers in this book, we refer specifically to the actions of public officials. We can find them in a variety of organizations, including local administrations, regional authorities, national ministries and oversight agencies, and international organizations.

Our definition of policy puts a lot of stock in the role of government. This is not to say that a government must or does have a monopoly on solving problems. Citizens can and do join hands to improve their living environment. In some cases, private businesses or philanthropists lead the way. But people often do not or cannot address societal problems without a guiding and sustaining hand. Many citizens look to their governments to provide that kind of guidance, leading the way to address perennial problems and new risks. Of course, that does not mean that their government will try to address the problems and risks that they want to see resolved.

The Power of Policy

The powerful effects of policymaking are sometimes best observed in the absence of a working policy. 'One of the great moral stains on the United States is that the richest and most powerful country in history has accepted staggering levels of child poverty', *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof (2021, p. 1) complained. He pointed out that Bangladesh had made 'extraordinary progress', with a life expectancy of 72 years. 'That's longer than in quite a few places in the United States', Kristof wryly observed. As we will see in this book, even rich countries can fail to make policies that might address clear-cut problems.

This becomes most evident in the response of rich countries to the existential threat of climate change. The effects of climate change – ranging from droughts to natural disasters

and food shortages – are increasing in both frequency and intensity. Many people are already suffering as a result. Governments have been dragging their feet in adapting their critical infrastructures, industrial activities, leisure, education and tax bases. Such changes are costly. But little is likely to happen if these countries don't deliver policies that work.

Writing sound policies is not enough. Governments must make sure their policies are properly executed. After an earthquake killed tens of thousands of people in Turkey and Syria in February 2023, it was quickly discovered that many buildings had not been constructed to withstand the deadly force of an earthquake. This was not because of a lack of policy. In fact, Turkey had learned from previous earthquakes and had the right building codes in place. Unfortunately, builders did not follow the building codes and local administrators let them get away with it (Yeginsu et al., 2023).

Critics are quick to point out when governments fail to deliver working policies. What is often forgotten is that governments can deliver amazing policy successes.

Consider the success of the Montreal Protocol. In 1985, British scientists called attention to the rapid depletion of the ozone layer, which protects the Earth from the sun's damaging ultraviolet radiation. The threat of an 'ozone hole' was quickly recognised as the source of doomsday scenarios. Media hypothesized about 'a substantial increase in skin cancer, a sharp decline in the global agricultural yield and the mass death of fish larvae, one of the first links in the marine food chain' (Rich, 2019, p. 102).

Scientists identified chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) as the main cause of the ozone depletion. The Montreal Protocol was signed two years later by every member state of the United Nations. It put in place a binding framework for phasing out the production of ozone-depleting substances. It gave rise to the slow recovery of the ozone in subsequent decades (Solomon et al., 2016). The Montreal Protocol stands out as one of the most, if not the most, successful international environmental agreements to date.

Governments have delivered many more stunning policy successes (Light, 2000; Heyse et al., 2006; Compton & 't Hart, 2019). Consider this list of history-shaping accomplishments:

- *The rebuilding of Europe, Japan and Singapore after World War II*. The United States offered long-term financial support through the so-called Marshall Plan, which helped war-torn societies become economically vibrant.
- *The emancipation of women and minorities* has steadily progressed over the decades, at least partially because of policies aimed at supporting these groups and punishing discrimination against them.
- *Strengthening of public health*. Global policies helped eradicate smallpox and push back devastating diseases such as polio and measles. In recent years, smoking bans in public spaces have protected non-smokers against second-hand smoke effects.
- *The expansion of social security.* In many Western countries, social policies have been enacted to protect the poor and the sick against destitution.
- *Great projects*. Governments have engineered impressive waterworks, sent people into space, and built research institutions that unravel the mysteries of life and the secrets of the universe.

- *Expanding education*. Many states have made primary and higher education institutions accessible to increasing numbers of citizens.
- *States build and maintain critical infrastructures* (roads, railways, ports, airports, pipes) that serve people and industries.
- *Protecting the public*. Many countries have installed agencies that enhance food safety and transport safety.
- *Creating livable cities*. In recent decades, many decaying cities have been transformed into modern cities where people flock to live (think of Tokyo, Melbourne, Barcelona and Pittsburgh).

What is Success?

Examples of policy success are sure to prompt a discussion. Why is this policy considered a success, why not that policy? It would be helpful to have criteria for success. Mallory Compton and Paul 't Hart (2019) provide just what we need here. After studying a wide range of policy successes, they came up with four criteria that must be met before they speak of a policy success.

First, the policy must be *effective*. It must accomplish its stated goal. To be effective, policymakers must deliver what Compton and 't Hart (2019) call 'craft work' – 'devising, adopting and implementing programs and reforms that have a meaningful impact on the public issues giving rise to their existence' (p. 2).

Second, the way the policy has been created – the policymaking process – must be *socially appropriate, ethically sound and legal*. Policymaking must meet legal requirements (think of privacy requirements) and comply with widely shared values such as fairness, equity and inclusion.

Third, the policy must *work long enough* to keep the problem at bay or entrench the ambition. To 'perpetuate' a policy (van der Steen et al., 2016), the policy must be made resistant to opponents who want to dismantle it when they have a chance.

Fourth, the policy must be *considered* a success by political elites and society at large. It's not enough for a policy to be socially appropriate and effective in the long run. A society must also *agree* that it is a success. This is not always easy as most people may not even be aware of the policy and the outcomes it generates. That's why 'success must be experienced and actively communicated, or it will go unnoticed and underappreciated' (Compton & 't Hart, 2019, p. 3).

A great example of a policy that ticks all these boxes is found in Norway's sovereign wealth fund, which is formally known as the Government Pension Fund Global (GPFG) (Øvald et al., 2019). When oil was discovered under Norwegian waters, the small fishing state created a company (Statoil) and funnelled its financial surpluses into the GPFG. The Fund makes sure that the financial bonanza is invested in Norway's infrastructure and its welfare state. The fund's ethical guidelines keep it from investing in companies that manufacture weapons or engage in human rights violations, corruption or environmental harm. This policy has worked out very nicely for Norway. It has become one of the richest countries in the world, with a most generous welfare system and a high quality of life.

Thinking about Policymaking: Mind Traps

Policies matter. That's why we want to understand how policies come into being, how they work and how they can succeed. That's what this book is about. But before we can start on our journey, we should discuss a set of common misunderstandings about policymaking and policymakers.

The Myth of Policymaking as an Orderly Process

Many policy books describe the policymaking process in terms of a policy cycle (see Figure 1.1). It depicts the policy process as a neat sequence of activities. The cycle starts with the realization that a discovered problem requires action (agenda setting), which leads to the formulation of initial ideas (policy design) and the decision to adopt a policy. The figure takes us to the execution of the policy (implementation) all the way to its evaluation, which, in case of a negative verdict, pushes the problem back on the agenda (after which the cycle begins anew).

It makes sense to think of a policy as a set of actions designed to solve a certain problem or achieve a particular ambition. That is, after all, how we defined policy.

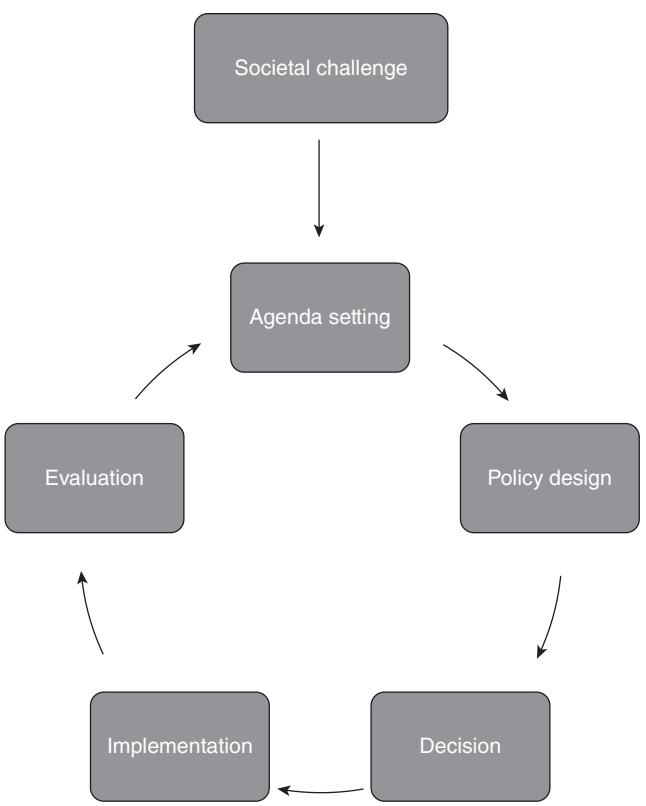

Figure 1.1 The life cycle of a policy

Our definition implies a process that leads from the discovery of a problem to the formulation and execution of a policy. We will learn in this book that the policy process is a lot messier than the cycle suggests (Bridgman & Davis, 2003).

For instance, it is not always easy to establish where a policy process begins. Most policies are not really 'new'. Policymaking is often about adapting existing policies or repurposing old policies to address new problems. Moreover, the problem that a policy supposedly addresses is not always given. We will learn that an issue must be actively defined as a problem before it can be addressed with policy.

Designing a policy is not an orderly process, either. Policymakers often have no idea how to solve a problem (climate change, anybody?). Some problems governments cannot solve. Some problems governments should not try to solve. Many problems may not be solvable at all. Effective solutions may be too expensive or politically unacceptable. Policymakers will try things, and then reject them or double down on them, but why that happens is not always clear.

The evaluation of a policy is not always neatly scheduled at the end of a policy cycle. It is, in fact, rarely clear when a policy ends. Evaluations may be started before a policy begins or at a moment that its effects could not possibly be known. Evaluations may be driven by a desire to attack an incumbent politician; evaluations may also be meaningless, as there is no real political desire to understand a policy's effects. Even very effective policies can be construed as failures.

We don't think the policy cycle is useless. The depiction of a neatly sequenced policy process provides an excellent starting point for understanding (and visualizing) the idea that policy development unfolds over time. Policymaking is a process and needs to be studied as such. The policy cycle provides a roadmap for understanding that process. It helps us explore which actors play which parts in the various phases of a policy's life cycle. It shines a light on the professionals who try to make a policy work so we can learn about their strategies, their disappointments, and their success stories. The policy cycle is an *analytical tool* (most policymakers probably have no idea what this policy cycle entails).

But this analytical tool is a bit misleading in its simplification of the process. As this book will show, the policy process is much more complicated, much less straightforward. Policymaking is a messy process. The world of policy resembles a busy metro station on a Monday morning rather than the factory-type beltway that delivers policy from the inner bowels of bureaucracy to the street.

The Myth of the Top-Down Process

We started this chapter with elected officials who seek to solve problems and achieve political ambitions. We presented policy as a tool for these officials to make these things happen. This vantage point suggests a 'top-down' direction in the policy process, starting with a politician's promise and ending with the enactment of a policy.

It is easy to imagine a top-down process. The politician in charge instructs a senior civil servant, who, in turn, oversees a team of advisors and makers of policy. This team

creates a first draft of the policy. We can see a policymaker typing away to produce the policy proposal. We can envision political advisors poring over the draft, returning it with red markings like a graded paper. When the draft policy is finally ready, it is sent to the politician who signs off on it (or sends it back for further revisions). Once approved, the policy is ready to be implemented.

This top-down perspective may appear as the logical way to create a policy. But this depiction of the policy process has very little to do with how the policy process really works. Many policy scholars therefore dismiss this top-down perspective as unrealistic. Moreover, they argue that the top-down perspective does not consider the wishes and desires of citizens.

That's why policy scholars have formulated an alternative perspective: the 'bottom-up' approach. This perspective is usually presented as a more democratic alternative to (and correction of) the top-down process. It does not start with an elected politician or a political programme. It starts with the citizen's needs and the best way in which policymakers may address those needs. In this perspective, policymakers must try to discover what citizens want from their government and what policymakers can do to satisfy citizens' wishes. Policymakers then develop a policy together with citizens. The policy is then sent to incumbent politicians for authorization.

An intriguing example of the bottom-up approach in practice can be found in the State of Oaxaca, Mexico (Ramírez Arellanes, 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, which hit Mexico particularly hard, the small towns of Villa Talea de Castro and Santa Catarina Cuixtla managed to keep the virus outside. They did so by establishing a policy of complete self-isolation. The policy was not imposed from above. It was the outcome of the consultative decision-making process that characterizes the Oaxacan indigenous administrative system:

> The general community assembly is recognized as the main consultation body for public affairs […] When there are problems at the community level, the city council summons the population to meet in assemblies, where issues that concern all the inhabitants are discussed together, in such a way that important decisions are made collectively.
>
> (Ramírez Arellanes, 2022, p. 9)

It is easy to find other examples of bottom-up policymaking. It is harder to find many truly effective real-life examples of bottom-up processes that have led to policies on major, sector-wide, or national issues. This strongly suggests that the bottom-up approach may be particularly suited for small-scale problems that can be addressed with local policies.

The Myth of the Politics–Administration Divide

In a democratic system, elected politicians are assumed to set the course for a community by formulating aims, making important decisions, and overseeing the activities that

should accomplish those aims. Civil servants are, at least in theory, the officials who make sure that political decisions are translated into well-designed policies and are then properly executed. In this view, politicians set the course and civil servants steer the ship of state in that direction.

This envisioned separation of tasks is known in the literature as the 'politics–administration dichotomy'. It was first formulated by Woodrow Wilson, before he became president of the United States (he was president from 1913 to 1921). As a young political science scholar, Wilson (1887) saw a clear task for politicians: make the difficult or controversial decisions about 'who gets what, when and how' – as Lasswell (1936) famously defined the political *métier*. Civil servants were to translate these decisions into policy and busy themselves with the 'systematic execution of the law' (Allison, 2006, p. 61).

Does such a division of labour really exist? Political scientists and public administration scholars have long debated this question. There is a *normative* answer to this question, which explains who *should* be in power. There is also an *empirical* answer: who *actually* holds the reins in the policy world.

From a normative point of view, there is nothing wrong in advocating a hard split between the political and the policymaking arena. Politicians are elected, civil servants are not. It is the job of politicians to make critical decisions that shape the nature of the societal enterprise; it is the job of unelected civil servants to serve their political masters. Political scientists call this 'the primacy of politics'. Put this way, few academics would argue differently.

Empirically, it is a different story. Many public administration and policy scholars have demonstrated in painstaking empirical research what many people might suspect: politicians don't always rule the world of policy nor is that possible. Study after study has found that civil servants must and do make decisions that have a direct impact not only on the shape of policy but also on its effects. The idea that civil servants are merely executing policy is thus far from the truth.

Politicians rely on professional bureaucrats to make their policies come true. They could never realize their political aims without the ingenuity and hard work of civil servants. It works best if politicians provide civil servants with a degree of freedom to do their thing (political scientists call this 'bureaucratic autonomy'). This is particularly helpful because politicians tend to be vague about the way their ambitions and solutions should be accomplished, conveniently papering over dilemmas and tensions that will have to be resolved before anything can happen.

The exact interpretation of political aims is often left to civil servants. In their interpretation of what politicians want to accomplish, civil servants make decisions that we might think are, or should be, made by politicians. The result of these interpretations is that civil servants influence 'who gets what, when and how'. In other words, they make political decisions. That's why Dennis Grube (2019) concluded that 'civil servants are political actors. Period' (p. 28).

This observation has, understandably, spurred heated debate. Some scholars think this a good thing. The practitioner-turned-scholar Laurence Lynn (1996, p. 91) argues that

the work of civil servants is so important it should be recognized as 'statecraft'. Others argue that it is not up to unelected civil servants to engage in such 'statecraft'. The concern of political scientists has only gotten bigger with the growing size of government bureaucracies and the ever-expanding set of tasks that politicians bestow on government. Large professional bureaucracies, political scientists argue, can sap power from politicians (Page, 1985). There are plenty of historical examples, from Julius Caesar to Napoleon Bonaparte, that demonstrate what can happen if servants of the state amass power and start pursuing their own goals rather than the goals set forth by the political institutions of the state.

Such worries may be a bit exaggerated. The really big decisions – to go to war, to close a nuclear power plant, to impose a lockdown – are usually made by politicians. It is also true that in many if not most cases, the design and execution of policy is left to civil servants. There is no problem here, as long as civil servants recognize the 'primacy of politics': adhering to political intentions and demands.

In reality, politicians and civil servants often work together to solve a problem or accomplish a political or societal ideal (Heclo, 1977). This does not negate the question about who should make which decision – politician or civil servant? – but it does away with the normative dictate that prevents us from seeing how policy is really made and how that affects citizens.

The Myth of Rational Policymaking

For a long time, policy scholars talked about policymakers as if they would (and should) always act in a rational way. The policy domain was described as 'a sphere of rational analysis, objectivity, allegiance to truth, and pursuit of the well-being of society as a whole' (Stone, 1997, p. 373). This myth of rational behaviour was attractive to scholars, Deborah Stone argues, because it suggested that 'clean and rational' policy can be rescued from 'dirty' politics.

At first sight, the rational model does not look unreasonable or undesirable. Here are the steps that a rational policymaker should follow (note how it begins and ends with information):

- Collect all information about the possible causes of, and solutions for, the problem.
- Create policy options.
- Define criteria for choosing between the various options.
- Compare policy options.
- Select the best policy option on the basis of the formulated criteria.
- Implement the selected policy option.
- Monitor progress by collecting information.

This rational model of policymaking can be illustrated with a traffic problem. A city has a notorious trouble spot that always creates long delays to drivers, causing not just frustration but also accidents (and victims). Something needs to happen. Policymakers collect

loads of information (pictures, maps, film, reports) and study the source of the problem. They think of different solutions: creating a roundabout, doubling the road, closing the road to heavy traffic or all motorized traffic – there are plenty of options. They decide to pick the option that is cheapest, will be effectuated the quickest, and is likely to be most effective in the reduction of traffic accidents. After analysing the information with these criteria in hand, they conclude that the roundabout is the best option. The roundabout is built, and policymakers begin monitoring the effects of the new policy.

Simple and logical as it sounds, the rational approach rarely works in practice. One reason is that the approach only works when the ends are given. It does not work when people adhere to different values and therefore cannot agree on what the goals of the policy should be (Stone, 1997; Cairney, 2021). As long as the aims of the policy – fewer delays, fewer accidents or both? – remain unresolved, 'there is as of yet no "problem" to solve' (Schön, 1983, p. 41). As we will see in this book, consensus about the nature of a problem and its possible solutions rarely exists.

Even if everybody would agree on the problem and the aim of the policy, the rational approach is still likely to fail. It is rarely possible to collect all relevant information that is necessary to understand the problem causes, the exact working of the policy instruments and their possible outcomes. It gets even harder when policymakers have little time to build a complete understanding: policymakers 'are often confronted with unique situations to which they must respond under conditions of stress and limited time which leave no room for extended calculation or analysis' (Schön, 1983, p. 239).

Another problem is that most policymakers are not as rational as they might think they are. The world of policy is characterized by a state of 'bounded rationality' (Lindblom, 1959). To compensate for their incomplete understanding, policymakers tend to adopt working theories about causes and effects (policy scholars speak of *policy theories*). Unfortunately, these policy theories are often incomplete or incorrect ('unemployed people are lazy' may be the basis for some social policies, but it is not an evidence-based policy theory).

Academics have written up a storm about the myth of rationality and the limits of evidence-based policymaking. They find it not just a hopelessly optimistic approach, but also a dangerous approach. In their most dystopian view, they imagine policymakers making life-or-death decisions based on heaps of information neatly organized in Excel files, forgetting that behind the data there are real people.

The poster boy for the rational approach was Robert McNamara who served US President Johnson as secretary of War during the Vietnam war. McNamara, 'the godfather of strategic planning in the federal government' (Borins, 2010, p. 220), was a strong believer in the rational paradigm. As explained in the excellent documentary *The Fog of War*, he always tried to 'get the data' in his effort to 'maximize efficiency'. McNamara's team would use available data to calculate where bombings in Vietnam would have the most effect (in terms of war gains). The number of victims was not part of the calculation. Looking back on his career, McNamara warned against the rationality paradigm ('rationality alone will not save us'). A purely rational approach, he explained, may put vast numbers of human lives at risk in the name of ideology (Borins, 2010).

In recent writings about policymaking, the rational approach has taken a beating. Policy scholars routinely declare that the days of rational policymaking are over (Rittel & Webber 1973; Head & Alford, 2013). That may well be an exaggeration. Many policymakers adhere – unwittingly or not – to a key pillar of the rational approach: the search for information. Most policymakers think that more information is better. Policymakers are therefore always looking for more information in order to identify the best solutions to a problem.

As we will see, some policy issues – think of the traffic issue – may be well served by a rational approach. But the policy world tends to deal with more complex problems, for which the rational formula holds little promise and is indeed rarely used.

The Myth of Measurable Policy Performance

Earlier we discussed four criteria that allow us to assess the success and failure of a policy. But having a set of criteria does not make it easy to assess policy performance. Policy scholars point to avoidable pitfalls and caution against easy verdicts (Bovens & 't Hart, 1996).

For starters, we may not all agree on the exact nature of the criteria. For instance, when is a policy really effective? What sounds smart now may look really dumb tomorrow. What works today may work against us in the near future. A policy might be effective, but we may not like the outcome. A policy may be effective, but only because policymakers negated societal norms that would have made policy success impossible. A policy may be effective in contributing to a highly ambitious policy aim, such as landing robots on Mars (Mazzucato, 2018). But people who hold a different conception of what the state should do may dislike the pursuit of such policies, however effective they might be. What I find appropriate, you might well find objectionable.

Moreover, it is not easy to demonstrate with scientific precision that a policy actually meets these or any other criteria one might select (Bovens & 't Hart, 1996). It is one thing to measure policy output against the stated aims of the policy. But how can we really know that the policymaking process was 'appropriate' and legal? How does one measure the opinion of 'elites' (who are these people, anyway?) and 'society at large'? How long does a policy have to persist to be called successful, and is it possible that a policy outlives it usefulness?

At the same time, we know that declaring a success does not automatically make everybody believe the policy is a success. Opponents of the policy will point towards the costs of the policy and the negative effects it generates. Success is not a matter of arithmetic. Policy successes as well as policy failures 'are constructed, declared and argued over', write Mark Bovens and Paul 't Hart (2016, p. 654). They are the outcome of 'framing contests' between proponents of a policy and its critics.

Finally, and importantly, there is an ethical dimension to this discussion. Who, for instance, gets to determine if a policy is successful – and for whom (McConnell et al., 2020)? Who determines which criteria we should use to evaluate a policy? Are the four criteria we used above the only criteria that matter?

In recent years, scholars have cast doubt on the 'success stories' that punctuate the history books. They have pointed out that governments not only produce 'public goods' but also 'public bads' – conditions or capacities that have a negative impact on a sizeable group of citizens (Aldrich, 2008). A historical example is found in the private companies such as the East India Company – companies with armies, underwritten by the state – that exploited the riches of Asian, African and American territories (Dalrymple, 2019). In his classic book *Seeing Like a State*, James Scott (1998) explains how utopian government schemes in colonized states caused death and destruction. More recent examples include an intelligence agency that kills innocent people, a police unit that terrorizes its own citizens, or a tax agency that uses racial profiling.

The Myth of the Lazy Civil Servant

In popular discourse, civil servants are all too often described in negative tones. We hear and read about lazy civil servants who are always looking to minimize their efforts while maximizing their performance.

Extensive research over the years has demolished these stereotypes (Goodsell, 1983; Du Gay, 2000; Golden, 2000). Empirical research suggests that most civil servants – even in authoritarian regimes – like their work and want to contribute to a better society (Vandenabeele, 2008; Ripoli & Rode, 2023).

To be sure, not all civil servants are equally motivated. Research shows that the motivation of civil servants depends on a combination of individual and psychological factors (which are hard to change), but also on socialization and organizational features (such as values or performance) (Perry & Wise, 1990; Vandenabeele et al., 2014; Ritz et al., 2016; Meyer-Sahling et al., 2020). As we will see in Chapter 6, the culture of the organization in which a civil servant works can have a tremendous effect on their willingness to enact a policy.

An Optimistic Perspective on Policymaking

In popular discourse and in scholarly work, policy successes are usually presented as the exception rather than the rule. We read about policy failure every day: botched efforts to fix something, problems that endlessly prevail, solutions that ransack available budgets, policies that hurt rather than help people. Policy scholars have documented every type of failure.

One of the early classics in the policy field, written by Jeffrey Pressman and Aaron Wildavsky (1984), captured this pessimistic perspective in the book title: *Implementation: How Great Expectations in Washington are Dashed in Oakland; Or, why it's amazing that federal programs work at all, this being a saga of the Economic Development Administration as told by two sympathetic observers who seek to build morals on a foundation of ruined hopes*.

Compton and 't Hart (2019, p. 2) decry this focus on failure and the 'declinist discourse' that has dominated the policy field. Their exasperation is nicely captured in the title of their book, which should be read as an answer to Pressman and

Wildavsky's lament: *Great Policy Successes: Or, a tale about why it is amazing that governments get so little credit for their many everyday and extraordinary achievements as told by sympathetic observers who seek to create space for a less relentlessly negative view of our pivotal public institutions*.

Many policies are indeed 'unremarkably successful'. Think about the clean water pouring out of your tap/faucet, the garbage that is picked up according to schedule, smooth roads and green parks, the emergency services arriving at your door within minutes – you probably don't think about these normal features of modern life all that often, but they are the product of successful policies.

In recent years, we have seen an entire range of contingencies that brought out the best in policymakers around the world: policymakers worked incredibly hard to counter terrorism, subdue the financial crisis, stop the rise of extremist thinking and bring a pandemic to a halt. During the COVID-19 crisis, policymakers worked hard to guarantee access to healthcare, keep the trains running, and design financial support schemes for businesses and citizens. Policymakers did their best to get their societies through this megacrisis.

The COVID-19 crisis also showed how hard the job of a policymaker can be. Critics found a lot to disagree with in their crisis policies – and policymakers were vilified for the perceived failures of their policies. To be sure, these policies were not without flaws. In the heat of crisis, policymakers initiated some policies that in hindsight may look less suitable, perhaps even questionable. But all in all, policymakers enabled an effective response to the pandemic.

Policymakers make a difference every day, but especially when a society needs government most. Given the existential threats that face us, we need our governments to create effective solutions. These solutions are dreamed up, elaborated, and delivered by policymakers. The world of policy may have a bad reputation (boring, conservative, ineffective), but it is where change is hatched, designed, shaped and executed (for better or worse).

For people who want to dedicate their professional lives to making things better, the policy world is the place to be. It is the place where even young and inexperienced people can make a real impact. The policy world also offers many opportunities to engage in exhilarating work (Lewis, 2018). Policymakers may not receive much media attention, but they can engage in challenging, demanding, sometimes risky activities. When a policy operation works, it provides deep satisfaction and quiet pride. Most of these opportunities are rarely afforded in economic firms or private operations.

It will never be easy. It is hard to design a working policy and get it funded. Policies typically encounter many obstacles in their implementation. But when policy works, a difference is made. Derek Lewis (1997), who was recruited from a well-paid job in the private sector, expresses this feeling well: 'The 1,014 days for which I was Director General of the Prison Service in England and Wales were the longest, toughest, most traumatic and yet most satisfying of my life' (p. ix).

Conclusion: A Roadmap to the Policy World

This book takes the reader on an expedition into what we call the World of Policy. This world of policymaking is like Alice's Wonderland: it is hard to understand, as nothing is what it seems to be at first sight. It runs on a dynamic mix of creativity and legalese, embedded in tradition and constraints (Wilson, 1989). It is a world with its own logic, but upon closer inspection we can recognize trends and regularities.

This book explains how this world works: who the key people are, what they do and why, and why some solutions work whereas others remain largely ineffective. We explain how policymakers answer to politicians but also create room for their own insights (and what politicians then do to curtail that space). We describe the intricate process of policy design and identify failure factors that often hamper the delivery of potentially effective solutions.

We have an optimistic story to tell, even if it is tinged with pessimistic insights. Scholars of public administration and public policy excel in explaining why policies fail and why governments cannot solve important problems. But policies work all the time and make the world a better place. This is important to know. We take it one step further by explaining what policymakers can do to overcome various constraints and make things happen.

Our aim is straightforward: we want to prepare future entrants into this world to make a difference. To deliver policies that work and are considered acceptable by the community they serve.

Recap

- Politicians get elected on their promises to achieve certain aims. Their most important instrument in this endeavour: policies that work.
- The people who design and implement these policies – we call them policymakers – have lots of leeway in shaping these policies. Most of them are not elected politicians, but their decisions have political consequences.
- When politicians and policymakers work together, they can achieve remarkable things.
- The success of a policy is subjective and can be construed according to different criteria.
- Many policies fail in one way or another. But it is possible to get things done. This book shines a light on both barriers and successful strategies.
- In studying the world of policy, we must take notion of several 'myths' that can create misunderstandings.

Assignment

Can you think of a public good that can be delivered by using a rational approach? If a rational approach won't work for policymakers, which other approaches should they try?

Questions

- How would you define 'policy'? What are the essential characteristics of a policy?
- Why is policymaking important? Can you give an example?
- Explain why policymaking often does not follow a rational procedure.
- For which type of problems is a rational model best used?
- What makes a policy successful? Can you give an example of a successful policy and argue why it is successful? Can you do the same for a policy failure?
- Who do you think should make the important decisions in the policymaking process? Argue your position.

Annotated bibliography

Nathaniel Rich (2019). *Losing earth: The decade we could have stopped climate change*. Picador.

This gem of a book should be the first stop for students who want to understand the importance of public policies. In this highly engaging read, Rich explains why policymakers failed to stop climate change, even though the signs were clear and many really wanted to initiate action.

Mallory Compton (2019). The 'social warfare state': Americans' making of a civic generation. In M. Comfort, & P. 't Hart (Eds), *Great policy successes* (pp. 104–121). Oxford University Press.

This chapter describes the history of a great American policy success: The GI Bill. It shows that success may come at a price, however. Many soldiers were discriminated against and did not receive what so many others did. In a book filled with success cases, Compton makes us wonder what really counts as a policy success and why.

Deborah Stone (1997). *Policy paradox: The art of political decision-making*. W. W. Norton & Company.

Many scholars have made the point that policymakers don't act rationally, but none have made the argument in a more engaging way. Stone argues that policymaking is an inherently political process. We fully agree. A great read.

Charles Lindblom (1959). The science of 'muddling through'. *Public Administration Review*, *19*(2), 79–88.

Paradigm-shifting ideas sometimes come in a few pages. Lindblom's observation that policy is usually made in small steps – and that many small steps can add up to big consequences – is now a pillar in the conventional wisdom of policy scholars. A seminal article, definitely worth the read.

(Continued)

James Scott (1998). *Seeing like a state: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*. Yale University Press.

Scott shows us what happens when hubristic governments impose fundamental reforms on unsuspecting societies in the name of modernization. The warning is clear: good intentions may give rise to terrible outcomes.