

# **PUBLIC POLICY, POWER AND DECISION**

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# PUBLIC POLICY, POWER AND DECISION

- How does politics actually work?
- How and why do actors in the political system decide to deal in one way or another on issues?
- Who has political power and influence and how are they exercised?
  
- This chapter expands the discussion by focusing on several fundamental approaches for analyzing public policy and the exercise of political power.

# PUBLIC POLICY

- A public policy is any decision or action by a governmental authority that results in the allocation of something that is valued.
- Each political system establishes how extensively and in what forms its public policies will define res publica and impact its environment.

## **Example of a public policy**

- A national government can decide to declare war on a rival country or to commend a victorious sports team.
- The government representatives of many countries can hammer out a joint treaty to limit greenhouse gases.
- A security unit can arrest a suspected terrorist.
- A government can pass a law making sex among certain consenting adults illegal.

# TYPES OF PUBLIC POLICIES

Several criteria are used to classify different types of public policies.

- A straightforward classification of policies is based on the functional area that is served such as education, health, transportation, trade, public safety, the environment or defense.
- Policies can be also distinguished by the broad objective of the policy:
  - 1) distributive policies provide particular goods and services
  - 2) redistributive policies transfer values from one group to another group
  - 3) regulatory policies limit actions
  - 4) extractive policies take resources from some actors
  - 5) symbolic policies confer honor or disrepute on certain actors

# ANALYSIS OF THE STAGES OF THE POLICY PROCESS

A different approach to policy analysis examines the stages of the policy process – the sequence of actions from the inception of an idea for policy to the point where the policy ceases to exist.

There are six stages:

- 1) Issue identification:** Some actor decides that a condition in the environment requires a public policy response.
- 2) Problem definition:** There is an attempt to explain why the problem exists to determine what seem to be the causes of the problem and to define desired outcomes.
- 3) Specification of alternatives:** Policy analysts develop policy proposals that seem to respond to the problem, given the causes, the preferred outcome and the likely obstacles.

# CONT'D...

- 4) **Policy selection:** Decision makers assess the alternatives, trying to assess the possible costs and benefits from the options.
- 5) **Implementation:** The policy is interpreted and applied in specific contexts.
- 6) **Evaluation:** After some period of time, new information is gathered to ascertain whether the policy has had any of the anticipated impacts, whether conditions have changed, and whether any unintended effects of the policy must be considered.

# POLICY PRESCRIPTION

- ❑ There are always actors trying to influence and shape public policy decisions at every stage and to influence policymakers to make some decisions and not others. As actors define and then pursue a policy goal, they are also engaged in *policy prescription*.
- ❑ Their policy goal might be based on careful policy analysis and policy impact studies, or derived from ideological principles or influenced by an agent of political socialization or an authority source such as a political party or political leader.
- ❑ Whatever the basis of their policy prescriptions, policy advocates propose what public policies should be adopted and how policy should be implemented.

For example;

- ✓ The US government should implement policy B to respond to job losses.
- ✓ The government of India should adopt policy C to improve the health of its millions of rural poor

# EXPLAINING PUBLIC POLICY DECISION MAKING

There are three political explanations of the public policy process:

- The elite approach
- The class approach
- The pluralist approach
  
- Each approach provides a different explanation of how politics works, how influence is exercised, and what forces seem to shape the decisions that result in public policy.
- No actual country or political system is likely to operate exactly like any of these three approaches.
- Rather, each approach is a rich illustration of a pattern of power and decision making that is prevalent in some systems.

## CONT'D...

The three approaches share two important analytic features:

- All three are constitutive approaches in the sense that each attempts to define the fundamental unit of analysis that explains politics.
- All three explain politics in terms of the interactions among aggregations of individuals who use the political system to pursue their own particular interests.

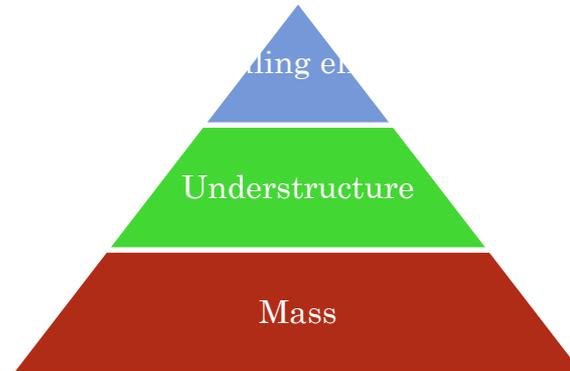
# THE ELITE APPROACH

- First, politics is defined as the struggle for power to control policy.
- Second, the political world is characterized by political stratification; that is the population is segmented into separate groups that are in layers (or strata) with higher or lower amounts of power.

In the elite approach, there are only two major strata:

- The stratum that does more of what there is to do (in the public policy process) and that gets more of what there is to get (in valued impacts from policy decisions) is called the political elite.
- The stratum that does less and gets less is called the mass.

## CONT'D...



Such a depiction emphasizes that the elite is composed of a relatively small number of individuals who are in a dominant position on top of the large mass. Notice that there is a third stratum between the elite and the mass. This is the political understructure, composed of political officials and administrators who carry out the elite's policy directives.

- The elite approach is particularly grounded in the writings of European political theorists of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially the Italians Roberto Michels, Wilfredo Pareto, and Gaetano Mosca.

# THE PUBLIC POLICY PROCESS FOR ELITE APPROACH

- In the elite explanation of the policy process, the active elites are subject to very little direct influence from the mass or even from the understructure of governmental officials. The mass is politically apathetic and impotent and this large proportion of the population passively accepts whatever policies are imposed upon them. The members of the understructure follow the elite's directives because they believe that their survival in positions of authority depends on the power and support of the elite.

# HOW MANY COUNTRIES HAVE ELITIST POLITICAL SYSTEMS?

- At least two-fifths of contemporary countries are nondemocratic systems. It seems reasonable to infer that most of these systems are dominated by an elite in the manner described by the elite approach.
- It is also possible to ask whether a country classified as a democracy is actually run by an elite. That is, even if a political system meets the basic criteria of democracy such as a limited mandate and freedom to criticize and oppose the leadership, does this necessarily mean that the system is not elitist?
- For example, C. Wright Mills provides arguments and evidence that there is elite rule even in most democracies. In this view, a small proportion of the population dominates most significant political decisions and enjoys a hugely disproportionate share of the benefits from the truly important policy decisions made by the government.

# THE CLASS APPROACH

- ❑ The class approach shares certain fundamental concepts with the elite approach, but it offers a very different explanation of the continuing dynamic processes of politics.
- ❑ The most important shared concept is stratification, the basic fact of structured inequality in the distribution of values in society.
- ❑ The second key concept is that the strata identified in the class approach are called classes. Class denotes a large group of individuals who are similar in their possession of or control over some fundamental value.

## CONT'D...

- Karl Marx, the best known class theorist, differentiates classes primarily on the basis of a group's relationship to the major factors of production in the economic system.
- At the simplest level, Marx divides society into two classes: *the capitalist class* (which includes those who own significant amounts of the major factors of production) and *the proletariat class* (which includes those who own little more than their own labor).

## CONT'D...

Some contemporary analysts suggest various modifications to Marx's ideas about class.

- ❑ First, most class theorists identify more than two major class strata, with each class characterized by its particular levels of social, political, and economic power.
- ❑ Second, some argue that it is control rather than ownership of the means of production that is most important.
- ❑ Third, others observe that in certain social systems, the key elements that distinguish different class strata are status, kinship, ethnicity, religion, or tradition based authority.
- ❑ Fourth, still others posit that possession of information resources and knowledge has become the crucial resource distinguishing classes in postindustrial, high-tech societies.

## CONT'D...

The third crucial concept of the class approach is *class conflict*.

- Given the fundamental inequalities in the distribution of values, struggle between classes is inevitable.
- The higher classes employ various strategies and ultimately coercion to prevent a significant loss of values to the classes below them.
- Lower classes find that only violence enables their class to increase its relative share of values.

## THE PUBLIC POLICY PROCESS FOR CLASS APPROACH

- ❑ Most class analysts do not explain in detail how policy decisions are actually made. They assume that the common interests shared by members of a class will result in general consensus within that class regarding what public policy decisions should be enacted.
- ❑ Like elite theorists, class analysts view the political system as set of structures that are subordinate to the dominant class. Thus, members of this dominant class either hold key positions of governing authority or directly control those who do. The interests of this class are well understood by those who can enact public policy.
- ❑ Consequently, the policies and actions of the state serve the interests of the dominant class, which attempts to maintain its domination and preserve the existing distribution of values.

## CONT'D...

- ❑ Rather than focusing on the policy process, the class approach centers its analytic attention on the tactics of class domination and the dynamics of the class struggle.
- ❑ In the view of Marx and many other class theorists, major class conflict will end only when the elimination of dominant classes reduces the system to a single class, and hence society becomes classless.
- ❑ The state's policies then serve everyone equally and in the absence of class inequalities, there is no cause for further conflict among groups.

# THE PLURALIST APPROACH

- ❑ *Pluralism* offers a very different account of the political process, in which *multiple groups compete actively in the pursuit of their political interests*.
- ❑ The pluralist approach is grounded in the concept of the group, which is defined as *any aggregate of individuals who interact to pursue a common interest*.
- ❑ A political group, as an analytic concept, exists whenever individuals have a shared interest regarding some allocation of values by the political system.
- ❑ The pluralist explanation of politics is identified with American social scientists Arthur Bentley, David Truman and Robert Dahl.

## CONT'D...

Pluralism begins with the assumption that an individual's *group memberships are multiple and non-overlapping*.

- That is, any particular individual can belong to many different groups.
- Individuals are not stratified into large, permanent groups as described by the elite and class approaches because the aggregation of people who share a common identity on one political interest is not the same as the people who are part of groups formed for other political interests.

## CONT'D...

The second important assumption is that *many different political resources might influence those who make public policy decisions.*

- The kinds of resources that might be used to influence political decisions include money, numbers of supporters/voters, monopoly of expertise, political skill, access to information, legal rights and status.

## CONT'D...

In pluralism, **politics** can be understood as *the interaction among groups that are pursuing their political interests.*

- The role of government is to manage the interactions within this giant system of interacting groups.

Thus **public policy** is defined as *the balance point of the competition among groups on an issue at the time when government makes a policy decision.*

# IN THE PLURALIST MODEL, THE PARTICULAR FUNCTIONS OF THE GOVERNMENT ARE;

- 1) To establish rules of the game for the group struggle
- 2) To determine the interests of competing groups and the levels of political resources mobilized by those groups
- 3) To find a public policy that approximately balances the positions of all active groups in terms of their interests and resources
- 4) To enact these balance points as public policy decisions
- 5) To implement the resulting policy

## CONT'D...

- ❑ In a more realistic interpretation however government is not merely an automatic weighing machine that totals the value of each group's influence resources.
- ❑ The government might have an ideological position and thus place greater emphasis on some objectives rather than others. For example, the government might enforce rules that help or hinder some groups in using their political resources, it might value some political resources more substantially than others, it might allow certain groups greater access to important information or it might be more or less willing to find the financial resources necessary to implement a certain policy.

# CONT'D...

- ❑ Pluralism explicitly rejects the notion that a small elite or a single class dominates the public policy process.
- ❑ Rather, many different groups become active in politics but only on the narrow range of issues relevant to their interests.
- ❑ While a group might not always win, its participation can affect the policy decisions made in the area.

# THE THREE APPROACHES COMPARED

The three approaches offer compelling answers to the basic political questions of who gets what, why, when and how.

Which of these three approaches is correct?

## SHORTLY;

- The elite approach looks for: evidence of actual collaboration among the elite in the formulation of public policy, the frequency with which the elite seems to lose on policy decisions of significance to its members, whether there really is a mass of citizens who are uninformed, politically inactive, and impotent regarding policy choices.
- The class approach analyze: whether the state almost always operates to serve the interests of one dominant class group; whether most people's interests and behaviors can be defined in class terms; whether most significant social changes are attributable to violence grounded in class conflict.

# CONT'D...

- Pluralism assesses: whether there are persistent winners and persistent losers on policy decisions; whether the state applies rules and policies fairly and equally to all groups; whether competition among groups can be fair if there are huge inequalities in the levels of political resources available to different individuals and groups.

## ESSENTIAL SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

The elite and class approaches share certain crucial premises.

- For both approaches, the fundamental feature of society is *stratification* - the unequal distribution of values across distinct groups.
- Also in both approaches, the government is one of the key mechanisms controlled by the dominant group, and the government's policy decisions are intended to maintain that group's domination.

## CONT'D...

The elite and class approaches differ in their conceptions of the nature of the groups and of group interactions.

- For the elite approach, there are two broad groups: the elite and the mass. Elite theorists mainly focus on the elite - its membership, the basis of elite domination and the strategies employed by the elite to maintain its control. The mass is assumed to be inactive politically and is rarely analyzed in detail.
- In contrast, most class theorists identify more than two distinct class groups and emphasize the dynamic interactions among the classes.

## CONT'D...

Pluralism differs fundamentally from both the elite and class approaches, beginning with its rejection of the notion of social stratification.

- It conceptualizes a sociopolitical world composed of many groups, with each individual belonging to a variety of groups.
- Different groups emerge on each particular political issue and each group has an array of resources that it can organize to influence decisions on that issue.

“Everyone wins some and loses some, but the losers can always win on the next issue”.

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