STAGES OF THE POLICY PROCESS
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Numerous treatments of the policy process lay out stages of that process, with various nominal labels attached, in order to help organize discussion and analysis. Such stage-oriented discussions do not form the direct basis for hypothesizing causal relationships, although such hypotheses may emerge. Rather, they are rough chronological and logical guides for observers who want to see important activities in some ordered pattern or sequence. Such organizational helpers are useful and, in fact, essential for anyone trying to plow through the complexities of policy making and policy analysis. At best, such maps—even with their rough spots and simplifications—lend some clarity to the observer/reader/student as he or she grapples with a complicated and sometimes murky set of interactions and processes.

I see no point to repeating a lot of different authors’ versions of policy stages. There are many versions. Most of them have some similarities. Many analysts agree pretty well on the central activities requiring attention. Instead, I will offer my guide to the stages of the policy process.

Major Stages

Figure 3–4 lays out the basic flow of policy stages, major functional activities that occur in those stages, and the products that can be expected at each stage if a product is forthcoming. Naturally, a policy process may be aborted at any stage. Beginning a process does not guarantee that products

will emerge or that a stage will be "completed" and so lead to the next stage. Figure 3-4 presents the general flow of stages, activities, and products that can be expected in a policy that is generated and transformed into a viable and ongoing program. "Stages" are the names attached to major clusters of activities that result in identifiable products if they reach conclu-

**Figure 3-4 The Flow of Policy Stages, Functional Activities, and Products**

"Functional activities" are the major subroutines of actions and interactions engaged in by policy actors. "Products" are the output, or end result, of any general stage.

**Agenda setting** Somehow the organs of government must decide what they will pay attention to. The stage at which this decision is made in any given policy area is here called agenda setting. Thousands of issues are constantly vying for inclusion on the governmental agenda. Only some of them make it at any given time. The form in which they come on the agenda can vary over time and influence subsequent concrete decisions. The functional activities in the agenda-setting stage include the necessity for some individuals and/or groups to perceive a problem to exist, to decide the government should be involved in the problem, to define the problem, and to mobilize support for including the problem on the governmental agenda.

Competition enters these activities in several ways. First, different people compete to attract the attention of governmental actors for inclusion of any specific problem on the agenda. There is not a fixed number of agenda item "slots" available at any one time. On the other hand, the capacity for the government to include items on its action agenda at any point in time is not unlimited. Second, even within the groups and among individuals concerned with a general issue area there will be competition over the specific definition of the problem and, consequently, competition over which groups and views to mobilize and how to do it.

**Formulation and Legitimation of Goals and Programs** Not all agenda items receive specific treatment in the form of decisions about policies and programs. Not all of them even get translated into a form that allows specific formulation and legitimation activities to take place. But if an item on the agenda is treated in any concrete way, the next step is for it to become the subject of formulation and legitimation.

Formulation and legitimation are complex activities that involve four major sets of functional activities, each complex in its own right. Part of formulating alternatives and then choosing one alternative for possible ratification is collecting, analyzing, and disseminating information for purposes of assessing alternatives and projecting likely outcomes and for purposes of persuasion.

Alternative development is one of the successor subroutines to the one dealing with information. Another is advocacy, in which different persons and groups advocate different points of views and alternatives and seek to build supporting coalitions in support of their views and their preferred alternative. Finally, usually as a result of compromise and negotiation, a decision is reached. If the compromise and negotiation process breaks down, no decision is reached.
The generic products of the formulation and legitimation stage are policy statements (declarations of intent, including some form of goal statement) and the details of programs for making the intent concrete and pursuing achievement of the goals. Both the goals and the program designs may be vague and sketchy. Grandiose goal statements that lack clarity are usually the result of the compromise process. Too much specificity and clarity might prevent compromise of forces that don’t really agree on fundamental concrete goals and aspirations. If the goals are raised to a more general and murky level, they can attract the support of persons and groups that might otherwise disagree.

Reasons for lack of specificity and clarity in program design are more numerous. Partly it is a matter of not proliferating details. That might also proliferate disagreements, and partly it is a matter of time on the part of Congress, since program designs usually appear first in a statute. Congress must address hundreds, even thousands, of agenda items in any given two-year period. The members cannot fool with any one too long. Throughout the course of history, Congress has gotten into the habit of delegating administrative power to the president and/or to the agencies and secretaries concerned to fresh out rudimentary program designs. From the early 1930s to 1983, Congress could hedge its bets by inserting some form of legislative veto in a statute, which in effect made the president or agency check with Congress before proceeding with some specific actions. The Supreme Court ruled this invention unconstitutional in mid-1983. This ruling may force Congress to fill in a few more details some of the time, but it is doubtful if it will have more effect than that. The pressures producing extensive delegation by Congress will not change.

Program Implementation The next stage (assuming that a policy has been stated and a program created) is program implementation. In order to implement a program, resources need to be acquired. The law needs to be interpreted, usually in written regulations and then in elaborations of those regulations. A variety of planning activities typically take place. Various organizing routines are part of implementation. Finally, the payoff—routines of providing benefits, services, and/or coercion (whatever the tangible manifestation of the program) are developed. All of these activities, although they sound more dull than advocacy and negotiation, are political. Conflict and disagreement can erupt. Various techniques of conflict resolution are necessarily brought into play. Policy actions are the products of the various routines and activities that comprise the program implementation stage.

Evaluation of Implementation, Performance, and Impacts After policy actions lead to various kinds of results (what I call performance and impact), evaluation of both the actions (implementation) and the results (performance and impacts) takes place. The word evaluation often conjures up an image of “objective” social scientists applying rigorous analytic techniques and letting the chips fall where they may. Some of that may transpire. But, as used in this book, evaluation is a much broader concept and refers to the assessment of what has happened or, in many cases, what is thought to have happened. The “what” can refer to implementation, to short-run results (performance), or to long-run results (impacts). That assessment takes place constantly and is done by all kinds of people—officials of all descriptions, interest groups, legislators, researchers inside the government, and researchers outside the government. Some evaluation is completely based on political instincts and judgments. A good deal is based on a mix of a little information (often anecdotal) and political judgments. Some (a small portion) is based on systematic analysis of fairly extensive information (data).

Policy analysts coming from political science or any other discipline have a role to play in evaluation of implementation, performance, and impacts. But they should realize that their form of evaluation is only one form and that probably it is less politically relevant than almost any other form of evaluation that takes place. Not too much should be expected in terms of attention to or subsequent actions based on evaluation. On the other hand, evaluation should not be written off entirely. It has a place.

Decisions about the Future of the Policy and Program The evaluative processes and conclusions, in all of their diversity, lead to one or more of many decisions about the future (or nonfuture) of the policy and program being evaluated. The necessity for such decisions means that the cycle can be entered again at any of its major stages. Conceivably, a problem will be taken off the agenda either because it has been “solved” or because it is viewed as no longer relevant. Or the nature of its most salient features as an agenda item may be changed. Thus, decisions about the future might reset the cycle to the agenda setting stage.

Those decisions may lead back to policy formulation and legitimation. The necessity or legitimacy of keeping an item on the agenda may not be questioned, but legislative (statutory) revisions may be viewed as necessary or desirable, at least by some actors. Thus, the cycle is reentered somewhere in the activity cluster comprising formulation and legitimation. In some cases, decisions about the future may not require new legislation or amendments to existing legislation, but they may require some adjustments in program implementation.

Principal Limits on and Utility of a Stage Conception of the Policy Process

Remember when looking at the policy process as a succession of stages that any such conception is artificial. It may also not be true to what happens. It has a logical appeal, and it is presented chronologically, but chronological
reality as it emerges in any case may vary significantly from what the stage-based model says “should” happen in a specific order. The process can be stopped at any point, and, in most cases, the policy process is truncated at some fairly early stage. Only some fairly modest subsets of all possible policies go through the entire process. And the process can be reentered or reactivated at any point and at any time.

In short, reality is messy. Models, particularly a nice listing of stages with an implied tidy chronology, are not messy. In a collision between tidiness and untidiness the analyst must not be so struck by the values of order as to force reality into a model in which it might not fit.

These are only caveats, however. The utility of organizing data and thoughts about complicated reality in this way is great. It allows the analyst to look for patterns and, more important, to explain the causes of different patterns.