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**PROMOTING POLICY THEORY:
REVISING THE ARENAS OF POWER**
*Robert J. Spitzer**

Lowi's arenas of power has been one of the most durable and widely used schemes applied to the study of public policy. This article seeks to clarify some persistent ambiguities concerning the scheme, and to propose some specific revisions for one of the four categories. These revisions conform to general suggestions for making the four policy categories more sensitive to the degree to which actual policies possess the traits of more than one policy type. When the concepts giving rise to the four categories are thought of as continua rather than discrete entities, the scheme resolves for itself what many have perceived as its key weakness.

The process of theory-building, whether in the realm of policy studies or elsewhere, often incorporates an ad hoc admixture of deductive and inductive explorations. Indeed, approaching a problem from both broad theoretic outlines and specific cases and facts can provide an incisive avenue to learning.

The focus of this article is a policy scheme that was conceived on a broad scale—Lowi's arenas of power (1964, 1967, 1970, 1971, 1972, 1972a). This scheme has been subject to both wide use, and extensive critical attention (Beer, 1973; Grant, 1972; Greenberg et al., 1977; Hartmann, 1973; Hayes, 1978; Hill and Plumlee, 1984; Hudson III, 1972; Kjellberg, 1977; Kornblith, 1968; Mann, 1975; Meier, 1979; Penbera, Jr., 1973; Peters, Doughtie and McCulloch, 1977; Price, 1972; Rakoff and Schaefer, 1970; Ripley and Franklin, 1976; Roos, 1969; Salisbury and Heinz, 1970; Schneider, 1979; Shiry, 1977; Shull, 1983, 1984; Smith, 1969, 1975; Spitzer, 1979, 1983, 1983a; Steinberger, 1980; Tatalovich and Daynes, 1984; Vogler, 1974; Wilson, 1973; Wootton, 1985; Zimmerman, 1973). Though the scheme has attracted much attention, misunderstanding persists regarding its conception and nature; in particular, attention is often focused on only three of its four policy categories (distributive, regulatory and redistributive) excluding the fourth category, con-

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stituent; moreover, inadequate attention is focused on the underlying logic behind the categories. Therefore, some attention to these elements is warranted.

The Arenas of Power

Lowi's approach to the study of policy began as a critique and synthesis of the prevailing approaches to the study of power and policy making, focusing in particular on the role of groups and elites.¹ From this critique emerged an important and unusual argument—that different types of policies engender their own unique politics or sets of political relationships. Since policy itself is viewed as state-inspired coercion, it is then divided into two realms: how coercion is applied (applicability of coercion) and the consequences of that coercion (likelihood of coercion). Each of these two components is dichotomized to produce a four-cell matrix.

When the applicability of coercion applies to the individual, the policy and its political consequences are likely to be decentralized and disaggregated; when the applicability of coercion applies to the environment, the policy and political consequences will be more systemic and centralized. When the likelihood of coercion is remote, we are likely to find consensual political patterns, whereas coercion of an immediate nature engenders a more conflictual process.

The pairing of these characteristics produces the familiar four categories. Each category has its own unique policy characteristics, which in turn engenders its own consequent political characteristics.² Distributive policies are those which can be dispensed and disaggregated on a unit-by-unit basis, in a non-zero-sum way. Classic examples include pork barrel, patronage and subsidy policies, like public works projects. Distributive politics, in turn, are characterized by accommodation, logrolling, and the prevalence of subgovernments following a pattern of mutual noninterference.

Regulatory policies, though individualized and specific in impact, cannot be disaggregated into a series of unrelated items. Classic regulatory policies involve laws that explicitly manipulate conduct through the use of sanctions, penalties and prohibitions. Consequent political characteristics are pluralistic, with interest groups heavily involved. Examples include

¹Though the scheme's conception was broadly deductive in this sense, it also grew from his very detailed study of New York City politics (Lowi, 1964a, 1971).

²Care must be taken to avoid the fallacy of inverting the independent and dependent variables; this is, some are tempted to use political characteristics to categorize policies, rather than relying on policy characteristics themselves (the independent variable) as the basis for categorization. This and subsequent discussion of the categories is drawn from Spitzer, 1983, Ch. 2.

laws restricting substandard goods, unfair competition, and antitrust legislation.

Redistributive policies incorporate those that are broad in scope, affecting classes of people—black versus white, poor versus rich, etc. Redistributive policies are long-range, insofar as they deal with the long-term allocation or reallocation of resources among these broad classes. The attendant political configuration most nearly resembles the elitist view of politics, characterized by the struggle between haves and have-nots. Opposing political forces tend to polarize into two sides, though the political struggles here are less fractious and intense than for regulatory policies. Examples include social security, monetary policy and the income tax.

Constituent policies have received less attention than the other three areas, partly because this category was added later, and because it is less well understood than the others (probably for the former reason). These policies are, in essence, the "rules of the game." They focus on the overhead function of government, and therefore the nature of governmental authority. Constituent policies usually attract relatively little public attention, as only the top political stratum tends to be concerned with these political issues. This often leads to accommodative, if not collusive political arrangements. Examples include election laws, reapportionment, and administrative/departmental reorganization.

As mentioned, the arenas of power scheme has been the subject of both wide use and criticism. Though the criticisms raise important questions, these have been dealt with elsewhere.³

Revising the Arenas

Many who have worked with or studied the arenas scheme have observed that the degree of categorical "fit" for various policies is more precise for some than for others. For example, crime control legislation, which usually includes specific prohibitions backed by firm sanctions, is classic regulatory policy. But what about efforts to regulate that are less explicit in language, and/or that rely on sanctions such as fines alone, or license withdrawal, or that even offer positive incentives to encourage or discourage behavior? Similarly, some policies are classically redistributive, such as the income tax. But what about policies that are similarly broad in scope, but that seem to be closer to distributive policies, such as aid to education? Such questions arise about all four categories, and are often raised as evidence of the inadequacy of the scheme. I argue, however, that these questions do not undercut the scheme, but rather illustrate the viability of the categories when they are treated in a slightly different way.

³Criticisms of the schemes are discussed in Spitzer, 1983:26-29.

Based on the notion that some policy cases represent a more "pure" categorical fit, whereas other cases are more "mixed," I proposed several years ago the revision depicted in Figure 4-2 (Spitzer, 1983:29-31).

Each box in the figure is cut in half, with the resulting inner diamond indicating the location of policies with mixed characteristics. The outer triangles represent the location of policies with more nearly pure cases. In the case of distributive policies, for example, the pure cases on the outside include examples such as parks, land-grant and most public works policies. The mixed cases are policies that are mixed either by virtue of the nature of the policy itself, such as urban mass transit, or by virtue of amendments and/or additions included in the policy. In the case of regulation, pure cases articulate relatively unambiguous rules of conduct backed by sanctions, whereas mixed cases prescribe conduct through less directly coercive means, such as the use of incentives. A pure redistributive policy is one that

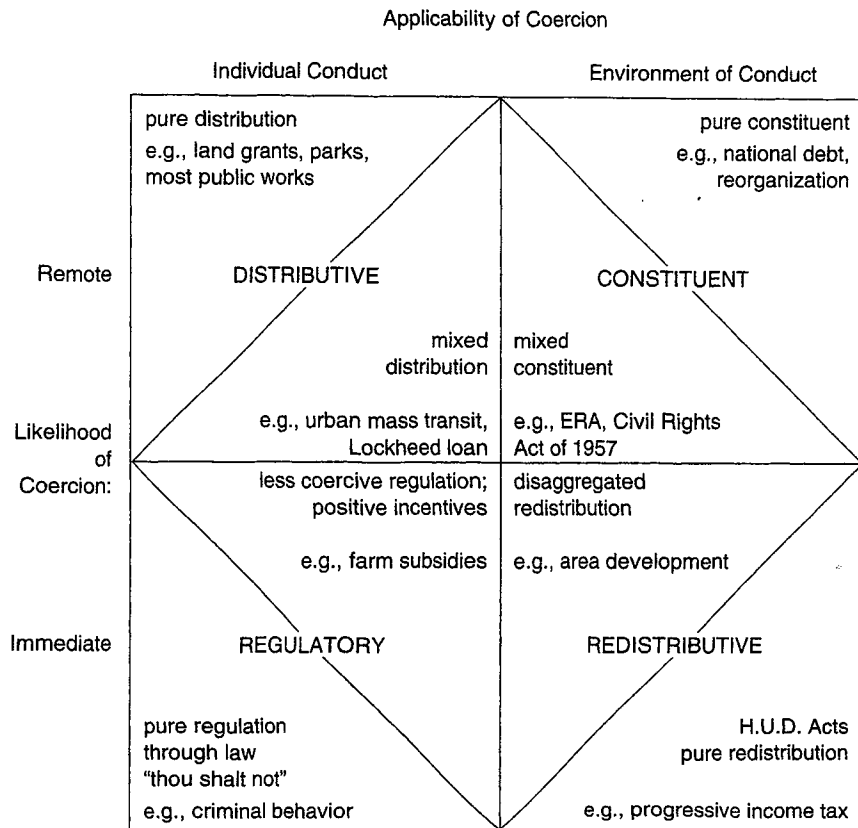


Figure 4-2 Revised Arenas of Power Scheme

involves a direct transfer between classes (a relatively uncommon phenomenon in American politics), whereas mixed cases reveal some degree of policy disaggregation (in a distributive sense), as with area redevelopment policy, or the Housing and Urban Development acts of 1965 and 1968. A pure constituent case would include one that deals with purely administrative/overhead matters, such as election law or agency reorganization. A mixed case also involves governmental-administrative matters, but in the context of a policy that also deals at least partly with substantive governmental concerns, like civil rights. The actual determination of how policies are categorized is predicated on a series of classification rules that appear elsewhere (Spitzer, 1983:32-33, 1983a:556-574).

This distinction between pure and mixed cases was tested empirically elsewhere, relying on both cases studies and aggregate analysis, and was found to be valid (Spitzer, 1983, Chs. 3, 4, and 6). In general, the political patterns of policies followed those predicted by the category characteristic, according to the degree to which a case was pure or mixed. For example, Lowi posits that regulatory policies will have highly pluralistic, and therefore conflictual political patterns. When a case involved pure regulation, conflict was indeed high. When it was a mixed case, however, conflict was less. An important political characteristic of redistributive policy was that the president had great influence over its attendant political process and therefore over the ultimate political outcome. Yet when a redistributive policy possessed mixed attributes, the president's influence was also less. And so on. These past findings are mentioned here briefly to point out that empirical verification of this revision does exist. We turn now to another refinement, dealing only with a single category.

Regulatory Policy

In a recent policy studies article, Tatalovich and Daynes (1984) focus on a single of Lowi's policy areas, regulatory policy. Their interest in this area arises from their prior work on abortion policy (Tatalovich and Daynes, 1981), which they conclude falls under the regulatory rubric. Yet they observe that abortion policy differs from most of the regulatory policies identified by Lowi and others, which are primarily economic in nature. To resolve this apparent divergence, they researched other literature on regulatory policy. They then made the distinction, drawing on past work, between economic regulation (so-called "old" regulation) and social ("new") regulation (Tatalovich and Daynes, 1984:208; Lilley and Miller, 1977; Weaver, 1978; Wilson, 1980). Thus, they divide regulation into two forms, economic and social, with abortion falling into the latter category. Tatalovich and Daynes (1984:208) define social regulation as "involving the use of authority to modify or replace social values, institutional practices, and

norms of interpersonal behavior with new modes of conduct based upon legal proscriptions." They find that the politics of social regulatory policy differ from those of economic regulation by virtue of a greater involvement of the courts, ideology, and single-issue groups (Tatalovich and Daynes, 1984:209). Their study of abortion confirms this, as does a similar study of another social regulatory policy, gun control (Spitzer, 1987).

The key point to make about the two types of regulatory policy is that, though different, they are equally regulatory. In the context of Figure 4-2, each can have pure or mixed cases. As Figure 4-3 proposes, economic regulation is located closer to distributive policy, by virtue of its concern with the regulation of prices and conditions of market entry (Kelman, 1978; Wilson, 1980; Salamon, 1981). This focus on concrete economic terms and consequences in the policy (so-called "old" regulation) should logically yield a political configuration that resembles the policy-politics relationship of the

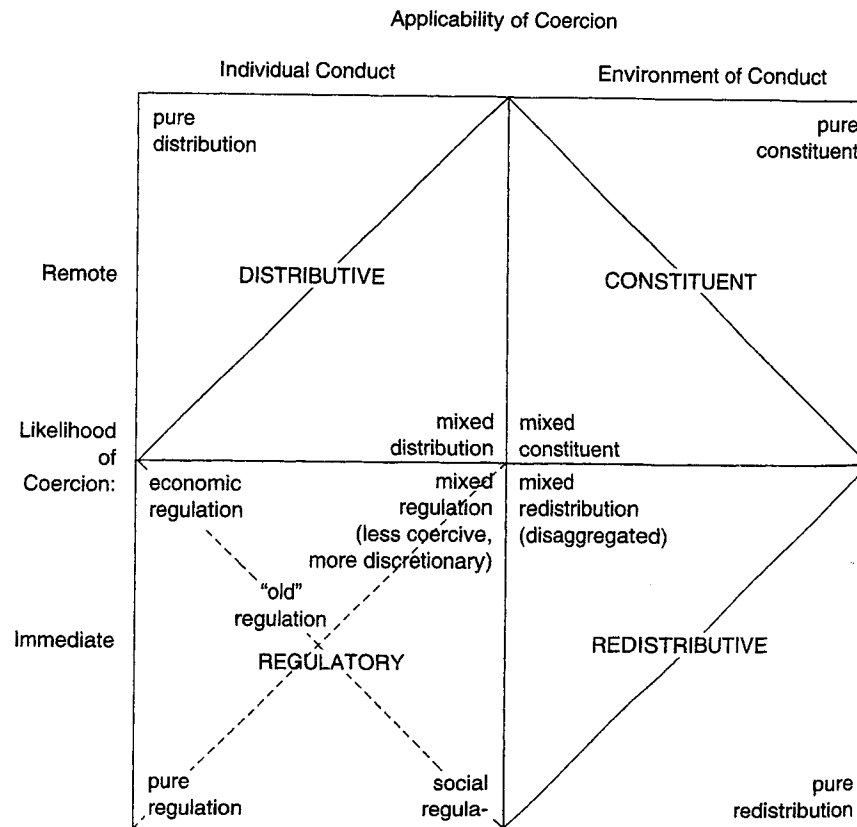


Figure 4-3 Revised Arenas Scheme With Attention to Regulatory Policy

distributive area (as distributive policy deals mostly in the realm of the concrete). A brief example will help to illustrate such a policy.

In their analysis of regulatory policy, Ripley and Franklin (1976:116-117) discuss a relatively minor, but instructive regulatory case involving cranberry growers. Shortly before Thanksgiving in 1959, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) reported to the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) that some of the cranberries then available had been contaminated with a harmful weed killer. The Secretary went public with the news, advising consumers not to purchase tainted cranberries—though there was no way for consumers to distinguish tainted from untainted berries. The announcement sent panic throughout the industry, as 70 percent of its sales occurred during this period. Hurried negotiations between HEW and the FDA, on the one hand, and the cranberry growers and their congressional supporters, on the other, produced a labeling program to identify safe berries for consumers. Unfortunately, the cranberry growers had already suffered significant losses, so they sought compensation from the government for \$15-\$20 million in losses (they ultimately received \$10 million). According to Ripley and Franklin (1976:117), "[a] distributive subgovernment in effect intervened in the aftermath of a regulatory decision. . . ." Admittedly, the "regulatory decision" was not the issuance of a conventional rule or prohibition. Yet, the statement was the product of the FDA, and it represented the policy of that agency. It was also an effort to curtail certain market activity. Lacking from the statement was the issuance of an explicit penalty. One might argue, however, that the agency was simply relying on a less coercive form of manipulation of conduct (impelled, perhaps, by time constraints and/or political considerations).

Given the argument that regulation can be pure (explicit prohibitions backed by sanctions) or mixed (less coercion, more discretion), as summarized in Figure 4-3, the cranberry case illustrates an example in the administrative realm of "mixed regulation" where the policy characteristics and consequent political patterns resemble those of distributive policies and politics. It also involves "economic regulation." Thus, the location of the cranberry case within the regulatory box in Figure 4-3 would be at the top center, nearest the distributive box.⁴

Moving counter-clockwise in the regulatory box, economic regulation embodies regulation of prices, conditions of market entry and the like ("old" regulation is located closely to this); pure regulation embodies stan-

⁴One might speculate that the likelihood of "agency capture" is enhanced the closer a regulatory policy is located to the distributive box; and similarly, that "capture" is less of a political problem when dealing with pure/social regulation, given the higher visibility and broader scope of the latter, as compared to the narrower scope and possible subgovernment involvement in the case of the former.

dard thou-shalt-not provisions, like criminal penalties; and social regulation, defined above as using authority to alter social values, institutional practices and behavioral norms, brings us closest to policy and political characteristics of classic redistribution. In terms of policy characteristics, we find that social regulation shares the broad scope of impact, winners-versus-losers, symbolically zero-sum traits of redistributive policy. Located near to this is what several have referred to as "new" regulation (Kelman, 1978:16-18; Salamon, 1981:150-151), involving non-market behavior including businesses. Cited examples include environmental issues, consumer protection and workplace safety laws (and agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency, the Occupational Health and Safety Administration, and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission). This "new" regulation is not purely social, but it does represent a departure from purely narrow economic/market concerns.

The political traits of social regulation are also similar to those of redistribution. Social regulation engenders bi-factional opposing coalitions. Such issues often involve the president as a key symbolic actor (e.g. abortion, gun control, obscenity, school prayer; this also tends to be true of "new" regulation—see Salamon, 1981:150-152) to a greater extent than economic regulation. Moreover, the political reverberations of social regulation arouse passions on a wider scale, as compared to economic regulation (consistent with social regulation's closer proximity to redistribution).

Despite these similarities, however, it is important to remember that social regulatory policies are still regulatory, as defined by the characteristics of the policy. According to the underlying argument of the arenas scheme, the particular political characteristics of social regulation resemble those of redistribution because the policy characteristics of social regulation differ from other forms of regulation, leaning in the redistributive direction. This brief sketch of the proposed sub-components of regulatory policy leads us to a final, more general consideration for the arenas scheme.

Splitting Hairs or Meaningful Distinctions?

The reader having gone this far might query whether these added distinctions represent overly narrow, or even trivial refinements. Naturally, this may be the case. I argue not, however, as all of this leads to a larger conclusion about the arenas of power—namely, that the dichotomization of coercion (immediate versus remote, individual versus environment) yielding four categories is, in a sense, both misleading and simplistic. To say this is not to criticize, however, but merely to recognize that complex concepts must often be simplified to make them manageable and useful.

Still, after more than 20 years of study and application, perhaps we are now at a point where we can recognize the obvious about the concepts un-

derlying the scheme—that immediate versus remote, and individual versus environment as applied to coercion are not dichotomous at all, but rather are continua, as indicated by the arrows connecting coercion traits in Figure 4-3. The four key types upon which so much attention has focused imply semantically, as well as substantively, that policies falling under each are discrete and unique, and that it does not make sense to discuss degrees of distributiveness or degrees of regulation. The main point of this essay, however, is that the oft-neglected underlying logic of the scheme indicates that, in fact, it is perfectly logical and consistent to think in terms of degrees, instead of simple discrete categories. The refinements proposed in Figures 4-2 and 4-3 are aimed specifically at this goal, though they focus principally on only one category of policy. If we think of Lowi's scheme not as a matrix, but as a two-dimensional map, where location of a policy is determined by the appropriate intersection of horizontal and vertical axes based on policy characteristics, then the scheme takes on greater richness and intricacy that is still entirely consistent with the concepts first outlined in 1964. In addition, the fundamental logic underlying the scheme—that policies engender politics—is sustained and, if anything, strengthened. The operational problems of implementing the two-dimensional map approach are, of course, considerable. For example, precise measurement of the relative likelihood of coercion across various policies remains, as of now, an important but un-addressed task. Still, a shift in thinking about the arenas scheme along the lines suggested here might prove to be very rewarding. One hopes that others will be sufficiently intrigued to continue this inquiry, perhaps through an inductive exploration of the other policy areas.

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