



BOOK REVIEW

The Public Policy Theory Primer, 3rd Edition (2017)

A Book by

Kevin B. Smith and Christopher W. Larimer

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The Public Policy Theory Primer is one of the essential must-read books for public policy and public administration students. An interesting feature of the book is that it introduces the reader to the essential concepts of public policy and sets out an important agenda for the future of policy studies.

In this book, Professors Kevin B. Smith (University of Nebraska-Lincoln) and Christopher Larimer (University of Northern Iowa) divide the area of public policy studies into 7 dimensions: (1) relationships between policy and politics; policy process, or how governments create policies? (3) policy analysis, or analyzing problems and offering options; (4) policy evaluation, or assessing programs; (5) policy design, or how do policies distribute power and why? (6) relationships between policymakers and policymaking institutions; and (7) policy implementation, or how was a policy decision translated into action?

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1. Relationship Between Policy and Politics

Scholars developed several models to explain the link between politics and policy. For example, Theodore Lowi (1972) developed the policy typologies framework which demonstrates the relationship between governments and policies.

According to Lowi's policy typologies, the relationship between politics and policy is assumed to be linear and causal relationship. His assumption is that the government uses policy as a tool to control or influence individual behavior. Consequently, there are 4 types of policy outputs:

(1) *Distributive policy*. Policymakers will use this policy to distribute benefits and costs on an individual basis. In other words, this policy treats citizens as the same regardless of race, economic status, and so on.

(2) *Redistributive policy*. This policy is used to promote social equity, such as welfare, Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, or income tax.

(3) *Regulatory policy*. This policy is used for control citizens, such as the use of sanctions or incentives.

(4) *Constituent policy*. The examples of this policy are reappointment, setting a new agency and so forth.

2. Policymaking Decisions

The most common decision model used in policymaking is bounded rationality and incrementalism. The bounded rationality has the assumptions in which (1) policymakers has cognitive limit; (2) they have to make a decision with time and resource constraints. Consequently, they have to make the best decision given the situation.

Incrementalism was developed from the bounded rationality theory by Charles Lindblom (1959). To clarify, according to this theory, new policies are resulted from what had been done in the past, but have small changes.

However, Policy punctuations are a new theory that contrast with the incrementalism. According to Jones, Baumgartner, and True (1998), public policies sometime have a large scale in changes, especially U.S. policies.

3. Where Does Policy Come From?

Public policy comes from several sources. For example, public policy is a result from policy subsystems; namely government agencies, interest groups, and Congress/congressional subcommittee, and sometimes we call them as iron triangles. Another source of policy includes advocacy coalitions, punctuated equilibrium, and garbage cans.

4. Policy Analysis

There are several approaches in analyzing policy. For example, the rationalist approach focuses on objective indicators and uses quantitative data in analyzing and making a decision, such as cost-benefit analysis (CBA).

However, the post-positivist approach critiques the rationalist approach, especially ignoring value-laden issue. This approach also relies on the policy narrative analysis and includes social constructions of target population in the analysis. An example of this approach is participatory policy analysis (PPA).

5. Impact Analysis and Program Evaluation

In terms of program evaluation, there are four types of evaluation: (1) formative evaluation, or evaluating at the beginning of the program, (2) summative evaluation, or evaluating when program is done, (3) process evaluation, or assessing program activities, and (4) outcome evaluation, or assessing program' goals. In case of impact analysis, the main objective is to evaluate an outcome of interest after programs are done.

6. Policy Design

Policy design involved analyzing content of public policy, such as social constructions of target populations (e.g., underlying value, core beliefs, or norm) or democratic values (e.g., equity and liberty), in order for policymakers to deliver values of public policy to those groups.

7. New Directions in Policy Research

Future research about policy studies may consider applying the concepts of neuroscience, cognitive psychology, behavioral economics, and evolutionary psychology to a decision-making model.

Overall, I found this book to be an engaging read and an excellent introduction for anyone interested in policy studies. It is designed to serve as a basic text for introductory courses in public policy and public administration. The last section, “Do the Policy Sciences Exist?”, involves a long-standing debate in the world of public policy. The reader will be asked whether they would see policy studies as an artistic or a scientific endeavor. Any thoughts on this?

References

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