BOOK REVIEW

An Introduction to the Policy Process, 5th Edition (2020)

A Book by

Thomas A. Birkland

Routledge

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An Introduction to the Policy Process by Professor Thomas A. Birkland (Professor of Public Policy at North Carolina State University) has been a public policy classroom staple for two decades. This fifth edition of the book includes 11 chapters and offers the reader the breath of recent policy process scholarship and the depth of new case studies of real-world evidence that will serve as an expeditious and brief guide to understanding the policy process.

Ideas and issues affecting public policy process

Chapters 1, 2, and 3 serve as a foundation for readers regarding theories of policy process. Professor Birkland begins this book with discussing the definitions of public policy which are

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various. However, I can conclude that public policy involves the roles of government and politicians, its activities, civic engagements.

In the American context, public policy has been influenced by several thoughts. For example, the concept of the separation of powers or the constitutional division of powers among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. These three players play an important role in policy processes. The federalism which is the division of roles, especially in terms of policy formulation, between a federal government and states and local governments. Political ideology is another factor that could influence the U.S. public policy as well. For example, the democratic value or popular sovereignty has been shaping the U.S. policy process in such a way that policy makers need to hear "voices" of their voters before and after making a policy decision and during a policy implementation process.

Players of public policy

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 highlight the role that stakeholders plays in policy process. There are many official and unofficial players who involve in public policy process. In the case of official players, this involves the roles of legislatures and their oversight roles, executive branch and the roles of policy setting, administrative agencies and bureaucrats who are going to implement public policies, and the courts that might intervene certain public policies.

Besides those official players, there are other groups that influence on public policy process. Those groups include interest groups, political parties, think tanks, the mass media, and citizens. It's noteworthy to mention that these players influence public policy in every stages. The mass media may influence policy makers during the stage of policy agenda setting and also play an importance role in overseeing policy in the implementation stage.

Public policy types

In Chapters 7 and 8, there are many types of public policy such as distributive; protective; competitive; or redistributive. Each type of public policy involves different players and yield

different outcomes. For example, protective regulatory policy involves some activities for the protection of the public such as air pollution (Birkland, 2020). There are other types of public policy such as procedural policy or policies that affects government agencies or substantive policy or policy that actually provides public goods and services.

Elements of policy design

Chapters 8 and 9 integrate the concepts of public policy making and decision. Overall there are 5 elements involving this process. To begin with, policy makers will set a goal of the policy that involves defining a problem or a need. Next, they will review a cause relationship of the policy and its problems or even its expected outcomes. Considering about types of tools of the policy, such as incentives, persuasion, or information, is another issue that policy makers should take into account. Then, the targets of the policy should be defined. Lastly, policy makers should seek ways to implement the policy. For example, they have to consider that the policy will be a top-down or bottom-up design (Birkland, 2020).

Factors affecting the success or failure of policy implementation

In Chapter 10, the policy implementation involves answering the question how to implement the policy: a bottom-up or a top-down approaches? Each approach has its pros and cons. For example, a top-down approach is appropriate when the government wants to encourage or compel compliance. However, this approach ignores the participation of certain groups such as interest groups or citizens.

In terms of a bottom-up approach, problems and goals of the policy come from the lowest level of implementers or in the book called "street level bureaucrats." This type of the policy implementation is appropriate with certain policies, but might not work with some policies that need compliance, such as criminal procedure or energy policy (Birkland, 2020).

Lastly, there are some issues that policy makers should take into account in order to avoid the failure of policy implementation, such as the differences of political ideology; the influences of filibuster; or the effects of fragmentation.

Is public policy a science or an art?

Chapter 11 discusses the status of public policy whether it is classified as science or applied science. However, some scholars such as Greenberg et al. (1977) argued that public policy studies should be based on empirical research in order to advance the filed.

In a nutshell, this book will make a useful reading resource in a course on Public Policy and Policy Process for undergraduate and graduate students. Examples and case studies in the book present practical application of policy process, and are likely to be useful to policy practitioners.

References

Birkland, T. A. (2020). *An introduction to the policy process: Theories, concepts, and models of public policy making* (5th edition). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Greenberg, G. D., Miller, J. A., Mohr, L. B., & Vladeck, B. C. (1977). Developing public policy theory: Perspectives from empirical research. *American Political Science Review, 71*(4), 1532–1543. https://doi.org/10.2307/1961494