

1. Public policy and political values

It is well over half a century since Harold Lasswell articulated the need for a ‘policy sciences of democracy’.¹ In that time, numerous scholarly books and articles have been published, and sundry frameworks, typologies and models have been produced, some aspiring to the status of policy ‘theory’, others making less ambitious claims. The notion of a ‘policy science’ has, however, proven illusory; interdisciplinarity perpetually seems just out of reach; and policy studies has wandered down various other paths. Of most concern for us here, though, is the way policy scholars have been seeking to establish their own field, with its own focus of study and its own claims to theory. In the process, a line of segregation has been created, not just between policy studies and political science, but between public policy and politics. In addition, expectations have been created that can never be met and the field has become disconnected from its primary subject matter – policy making in a democratic society.

BRINGING POLITICS BACK IN

In its wanderings, much of policy studies has gone one step further than just side-lining politics; it seems to have moved into a state of denial concerning the role that values play in the policy process. Policy making, indeed all decision making, is a value-laden activity, and choices – whether made at the individual, organizational or political level – involve the juggling of conflicting values. A more realistic account of policy making requires that we bring politics back into our explanations and, in doing so, recognize the ubiquity of values. Politics is about contesting and furthering competing visions of the good society. Its goals are about preserving the things that are valued, and adjusting, amending or reversing features that are considered undesirable. The choice of what these desirable end points are is subject to ongoing debate that reflects the different values held by individuals and groups in society – and finds its expression in ideologies; party platforms and manifestoes; and political rhetoric. The role of elected policy makers is to make judgments in the face of uncertainty and this requires values choices to be made. In this sense politics

¹ Harold D. Lasswell, ‘The Policy Orientation’, in *The Policy Sciences*, ed. Daniel Lerner and Harold D. Lasswell (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1951).

is suffused with values: 'what makes something *political* is the existence of disagreement over values and competition between groups'.²

David Easton's famous definition of politics as 'the authoritative allocation of values' is frequently cited as the starting point for discussions about the role of values in the policy process.³ It is interpreted, by implication, as referring to a process through which politics, and therefore the policy process, ensures that different values in the community receive some recognition or representation in policy outcomes. This interpretation of Easton's characterization understands 'values' as conceptions of the desirable and acknowledges that value differences are a major source of competing interest and conflict between individuals and groups within society.

While closer reading suggests that Easton meant the term in a different sense,⁴ the turn of phrase is appealing, as it expresses both the idea that politics is essentially about values and the idea that authoritative decision makers unavoidably make choices that favour some values over others. Decision makers are confronted with conflicting values positions, and enough of each value needs to be visible in the outcome to generate acceptance of the decision. This is useful as a summary of a political values perspective on policy. The political process is about making authoritative decisions on behalf of the community and these choices inevitably involve values choices, trade-offs and compromises.

The Scourge of Politics

Much of the discussion around policy making seems, however, value-blind. This is evident in the academic literature; in politicians' own statements; and in media commentary. The accusation that a particular policy decision was 'political', or made for 'political reasons', generally carries with it the pejorative

² Justin Parkhurst, *The Politics of Evidence: From Evidence-Based Policy to the Good Governance of Evidence* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 65.

³ David Easton, *The Political System: An Inquiry into the State of Political Science* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), 129. See for example Linda Courtenay Botterill, 'Valuing Agriculture: Balancing Competing Objectives in the Policy Process', *Journal of Public Policy* 24, no. 2 (2004); Jenny Stewart, 'Value Conflict and Policy Change', *Review of Policy Research* 23, no. 1 (2006); Jacqueline Vaughn Switzer, 'Influencing Environmental Policy in Rural Communities: The Environmental Opposition at Work', *Policy Studies Journal* 29, no. 1 (2001).

⁴ Sorzano observed that Easton's 'understanding of political conflict as a dispute over the allocation of scarce values also includes an unstated assumption regarding the actors' agreement on what is to be deemed valuable'. This interpretation of values 'is unable to incorporate political disputes over normative principles'. J. S. Sorzano, 'Values in Political Science: The Concept of Allocation', *Journal of Politics* 39, no. 1 (1977): 29.

implication that such motives are inappropriate and perhaps even distasteful, and the outcome thus of dubious legitimacy. Although these points are often made rhetorically in the cut and thrust of party political competition, they nevertheless have a corrosive effect on the legitimacy of democratic politics and policy making. The ‘political’ is often juxtaposed with evidence, as if this were objective and value-free in a way in which political decisions are not.

While this book is concerned in the largest part with the way public policy is studied, some of the suggestions made here also have implications for policy practitioners. Academics and practitioners alike have at times been caught up in the belief that rationality and objectivity in the policy process is the ideal state of affairs. For practitioners, this aspiration creates unrealistically high expectations of ‘objective’ processes and thus sets the scene for frustration and disappointment. Although academics perhaps should be less susceptible to this distaste for politics, ‘rationality’ in policy making has had a surprisingly strong following among scholars as well, as we discuss in this book. ‘It is probably not exaggerated to argue that major strands of reasoning in contemporary political science and political philosophy are obsessed with the idea to eliminate passion and anything remotely irrationally sounding in politics.’⁵ Models, theories and policy processes based on assumptions of rationality may provide apparent order, but practitioners, academics, political commentators and observers more broadly need to appreciate that the messiness of policy making is not a sign of pathology – it is an inevitable part of the process of dealing with the contestation between, what are at times incommensurable, values.

Original Insights

Some of the pioneering policy scholars being explicit about the relationship between values and the policy process. It is worth noting the influence that psychoanalysis and behavioural psychology – at the time relatively new fields – had on thinkers such as Lasswell and Herbert Simon. Lasswell’s work on policy came after his earlier publications on the role of psychoanalysis in the political and social sciences. It is clear that he was making the link between values, behaviour, personality and the political process very early on – links lost in his later work that laid the foundation for more rationalist and positivist approaches to policy studies. Lasswell evinced a deep interest in psychoanalysis and the pathologies of the political personality that could impede ‘logical’

⁵ Herbert Gottweis, ‘Rhetoric in Policy Making: Between Logos, Ethos, and Pathos’, in *Handbook of Public Policy Analysis: Theory, Politics, and Methods*, ed. Frank Fischer, Gerald J. Miller and Mara S. Sidney (Boca Raton FL: CRC Press, 2007), 239.

decision making.⁶ He recognized some of the limitations of human cognitive capacity that have been explored in detail by later psychologists, but also suggested that the skilled policy analyst is able to overcome these shortcomings through ‘training in the social sciences’ and ‘self-awareness’.⁷ Lasswell was explicit about the role of values: ‘The policy-science approach not only puts the emphasis upon basic problems and complex models, but also calls for a very considerable clarification of the value goals involved in policy.’⁸

Other writers have drawn attention to values, but this element of their contributions is similarly often overlooked. When Rittel and Weber, for example, famously argued that public policy problems are ‘inherently wicked’ they attributed this in no small part to the fact that these are rarely matters on which there is a ‘right answer’. And that is because ‘there are no value-free, true–false answers to any of the wicked problems governments must deal with’. The judgments of those assessing policy choices will ‘differ widely to accord with their group or personal interests, their special value-sets and their ideological predilections. Their assessments of proposed solutions are expressed as “good” or “bad” or, more likely, as “better or worse” or “satisfying” or “good enough.”’⁹

Another early work that linked values, policy and politics was Dahl and Lindblom’s *Politics, Economics, and Welfare*. In a chapter on the ends and means of policy, the first question raised by the authors was ‘Why discuss values?’¹⁰ Their answer was that social action cannot proceed without considering the human values on which it will ‘impinge’. Like the later values researchers, who we discuss in Chapter 3, they linked values to the ‘important prime goals of human beings’ and identified seven instrumental goals of policy: ‘freedom, rationality, democracy, subjective equality, security, progress and appropriate inclusion’.¹¹ A number of these have subsequently been identified by empirical research as fundamental human values. In their book, Dahl and Lindblom also discussed the limits on rational approaches to policy making, presaging Lindblom’s later, and most famous, article ‘The Science of “Muddling Through”’.¹²

⁶ See for example Harold D. Lasswell, ‘The Triple-Appeal Principle: A Contribution of Psychoanalysis to Political and Social Science’, *American Journal of Sociology* XXXVII, no. 4 (1932); Harold D. Lasswell, *Psychopathology and Politics* (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1960 [1930]).

⁷ Lasswell, *Psychopathology and Politics* (1960 [1930]), 28.

⁸ Lasswell, ‘The Policy Orientation’ (1951), 9.

⁹ Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, ‘Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning’, *Policy Sciences* 4, no. 2 (1973): 169, 63.

¹⁰ Robert A. Dahl and Charles E. Lindblom, *Politics, Economics and Welfare* (New York: Harper & Row, 1953), 25.

¹¹ Dahl and Lindblom, *Politics, Economics and Welfare* (1953), 28.

¹² Charles E. Lindblom, ‘The Science of “Muddling Through”’, *Public Administration Review* 19, no. 2 (1959).

The debate that Lindblom's contribution set off focused on incrementalism and its virtues and limitations as a *process* of policy choice. Incrementalism has been criticized for its perceived conservatism and its alleged inability to explain significant policy change, with that latter deficiency being used to justify the elaboration of new models, such as Baumgartner and Jones's punctuated equilibrium notion. Such responses overlook the fact that Lindblom was first and foremost engaged in providing a critique of comprehensive rationality as the objective for policy making; incrementalism was offered as one possible 'strategic' alternative to the rational-comprehensive model's unattainable and, as Lindblom saw it, undesirable, vision.

These criticisms also miss two very significant points in Lindblom's work. First, Lindblom recognized the values dimension of public policy choice and the need to ensure that all relevant values are represented – and that a mechanism exists for addressing those that have been overlooked. And, second, Lindblom identified the cognitive and resource limitations facing the decision maker, the effect of which is that choices will always be made within constraints and without full information. Cognitive limitations include 'dual processing' in choice situations and the reliance on emotion, values and heuristics in a way that inevitably undermines analytical reasoning. There is a vast literature on the dual processing concept, detailed consideration of which is beyond the scope of this book; however, it is worth noting the key message from that literature regarding the extent to which human decision makers employ cognitive shortcuts of various types in making choices. In addition to the realities of human intellectual abilities, policy makers are further constrained in their capacity for comprehensiveness by limits on their time, and on available financial and informational resources. The merits or otherwise of incrementalism as a model of the policy process are secondary to these two key contributions by Lindblom to our understanding of politics and policy: the constraints facing policy makers seeking to be comprehensive and the values basis of policy choice.

Politics and Values

While values were acknowledged by these pioneers of policy studies to be central to policy processes, this did not lead to a commensurate centrality of values in subsequent policy research and scholarship. This needs to be redressed. Since Lasswell published his foundational chapter on the policy orientation, advances in psychology have provided further evidence of the limited human capacity for rational, objective decision making, and of the role of values, emotion and heuristics, or cognitive shortcuts, therein. This research provides important insights into the nature of the policy process and helps

avoid the trap of describing – and prescribing – unrealistic and unattainable models of decision making.

We address the aversion to politics by conceptualizing the relationship between individuals, the political process and public policy in terms of a political values perspective. The dichotomy between policy and politics is a false one, and a greater appreciation of the values basis of policy choice should discourage narrow interpretations of how policy is made and futile attempts to ‘fix’ the policy process. This approach meets Hajer and Wagenaar’s call for a reformulation of the policy sciences that is ‘up to the task of understanding and furthering the interests of ... real-world, conflict-ridden, living communities’.¹³ These conflicts are, at their core, conflicts over values and values priorities. Politics and the policy process, as mechanisms for collective decision making, cannot avoid addressing them. ‘Conflicts among values are inevitable and admit of only imperfect compromises and practical, temporary solutions. Our world is one in which legitimate ends clash irreconcilably.’¹⁴ While individuals often avoid decisions that involve making choices between incommensurable values, political leaders and policy makers do not have that luxury, since all relevant values are likely to be held by important elements of their constituency – and those who elect them expect their values to get a hearing. The way political issues are defined, the priority given to some issues over others, and the policy solutions offered are all driven by values.

Values, Power and Interests

Politics is conventionally understood in terms of power and interests, and the importance of both of those is undeniable. Power is particularly important in understanding who gets what, and interests are particularly important in understanding motives, drivers of action and distributional decisions. However, neither of these is the focus of this book, which instead seeks to redress the neglect of values in policy studies. It is not uncommon for values to be seen as simply a veneer for self-interest, and while there are undoubtedly examples of that being the case, it is untenable as a generalization.¹⁵ In some cases, values

¹³ Maarten A. Hajer and Hendrik Wagenaar, ‘Introduction’, in *Deliberative Policy Analysis: Understanding Governance in the Network Society*, ed. Maarten A. Hajer and Hendrik Wagenaar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 21.

¹⁴ Philip E. Tetlock, Randall S. Peterson and Jennifer S. Lerner, ‘Revising the Value Pluralism Model: Incorporating Social Content and Context Postulates’, in *The Psychology of Values: The Ontario Symposium, Volume 8*, ed. Clive Seligman, James M. Olson and Mark P. Zanna (Mahwah NJ: Erlbaum, 1996), 44.

¹⁵ For recent presentations of the self-interest approach, see Dennis Chong, *Rational Lives: Norms and Values in Politics and Society* (Chicago IL: University of

are clearly quite independent of interests.¹⁶ In some cases they are constitutive of interests. Overall, ‘Self-interest, political values, and especially group identifications create a powerful field of motivational forces, which orients citizens within their information environments’;¹⁷ and, as a consequence, values and interests are widely seen as almost impossible to disentangle given the opacity and indeterminant nature of self-interest in many situations:

The political world is complex and quite ambiguous. Causal relationships between politics and personal well-being are typically unclear even to the most attentive. In some instances ... the connection between politics and well-being may be relatively clear. In most cases, a number of explanations may fit the situation quite well. It is at this point that a person’s beliefs about the nature of politics and private life become critical.¹⁸

Research from political psychology suggests that public opinion on political issues is not strongly correlated with self-interest and indeed ‘One must conclude, looking at the litany of negative findings, that citizens do not seem especially sensitive to their own material interests when making political decisions.’¹⁹ People are driven by principles in making political choices and values in fact ‘may be the key elements in the structure of political knowledge’.²⁰

Values Juggling

Acknowledging the essentially political nature of policy making in liberal democracies as a values-juggling exercise enhances our understanding of policy choice. It can also provide policy makers with a better appreciation of the factors that need to be considered in the development of policy that is broadly acceptable to the community. What follows is a re-evaluation of the way we understand public policy that proceeds by interrogating the various theories, approaches and models currently used in policy studies; revisiting earlier work that identified values as an important element of politics and policy; and drawing on more recent, relevant insights from other disciplines

Chicago Press, 2000); Jason Weeden and Robert Kurzban, *The Hidden Agenda of the Political Mind: How Self-Interest Shapes Our Opinions and Why We Won’t Admit It* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

¹⁶ Weeden and Kurzban, *The Hidden Agenda of the Political Mind* (2014), 168–70.

¹⁷ Charles S. Taber, ‘Information Processing and Public Opinion’, in *Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, ed. David O. Sears, Leonie Huddy and Robert Jervis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 450.

¹⁸ Stanley Feldman, ‘Economic Self-Interest and Political Behavior’, *American Journal of Political Science* 26, no. 3 (1982): 463.

¹⁹ Taber, ‘Information Processing and Public Opinion’ (2003), 448.

²⁰ Taber, ‘Information Processing and Public Opinion’ (2003), 449.

into the nature of human values. Integral to this exercise is recognizing the strong relationship between policy studies and political science and acknowledging that democratic responsiveness ‘begins with the policy preferences held by citizens, and moves link by causal link through such stages as voting, election outcomes, the formation of policy-making coalitions, the process of policy making between elections, and public policies themselves’.²¹ As we discuss throughout the book, each of these links involves values choices and cognitive shortcuts that simplify otherwise complex and time-consuming decision processes.

Although the literature that discusses values in policy making tends to use the concept of ‘values balancing’ to describe the challenges facing decision makers,²² there are good reasons to think that this creates a misleading image and that ‘values *juggling*’ is a better description. ‘Balancing’ carries two implications that are inconsistent with the real world of the policy decision maker. First, it implies that a stable state or equilibrium can be reached at some point; and second, it carries an image of a pair of conflicting values. The juggling metaphor captures the reality of multiple considerations being in play at any one time, often of different weights and characteristics. It also captures the way one or two items can be dropped and others picked up while keeping the system in motion; thus, it provides a more accurate image of the world of the decision maker in liberal democracies who is faced with complex and shifting arrays of societal values and values priorities. The policy process is concerned both directly and indirectly with the juggling of societal values, some conflicting, some broadly compatible, and some relevant to some policy issues but not to others.

DEFINING OUR TERMS

One of the challenges of writing about public policy is definitional. Terms such as policy makers, policy analysis – and, indeed, values – are used loosely in much of the literature. Throughout this book, we are using the term ‘policy makers’ in the plural, since policy making is almost invariably a collective process of some form. By ‘collective’, we do not mean to imply that it is coherent or unified, but simply that it involves multiple players. Policy *makers* are the elected politicians who are democratically authorized to make decisions on behalf of the community. Policy makers need to be distinguished

²¹ G. Bingham Powell, ‘The Chain of Responsiveness’, *Journal of Democracy* 15, no. 4 (2004): 91.

²² See for example David Thacher and Martin Rein, ‘Managing Value Conflict in Public Policy’, *Governance* 17, no. 4 (2004).

from policy *workers* – government employees whose task it is to develop policy options; make recommendations; develop programmes; and implement decisions. Policy workers may well exercise considerable influence over the policy making process, but they do not ‘make’ policy.²³ Then there are policy *actors* – those sitting outside government seeking to influence the policy process in pursuit of their values and interests. These include interest groups, social movements and others with policy goals that they seek to promote. The term *policy analysis* is used to describe the development, consideration and critique of policy proposals by policy workers and other policy actors at the ‘coal face’ of policy. It is a pragmatic activity that deals with the nuts and bolts of the policy process.

A final semantic challenge arises with the term ‘public policy’ itself. ‘Public policy’ is used interchangeably and confusingly to denote both the actions of governments and the study of those actions. This contrasts with the clear terminological distinction, for instance, between politics as an activity, and political science or political studies as the study of that activity, or society as a phenomenon and sociology as its study. Following those models, we will restrict our use of the term ‘public policy’ to the actions of government and use the term ‘policy studies’ to denote the study of those actions.

In Chapter 3 we investigate the issue of defining and measuring values in some detail. For now, we note that the term has been used varyingly in the social sciences literature – including in the literature mentioned above. The best available definition of values is that developed by Schwartz and which forms the basis of his widely used theory of values: values are ‘desirable, trans-situational goals, varying in importance, that serve as guiding principles in people’s lives’.²⁴ On the basis of extensive empirical research, Schwartz has identified ten value types: Power, Achievement, Hedonism, Stimulation, Self-Direction, Universalism, Benevolence, Tradition, Conformity and Security. These values are related to each other on a circular continuum with

²³ In parliamentary democracies, there is a group that sits in a grey area between policy workers and policy makers – the ministerial advisers. Their role has been the subject of considerable debate, particularly in the Australian literature. See for example Maria Maley, ‘Conceptualising Advisers’ Policy Work: The Distinctive Policy Roles of Ministerial Advisers in the Keating Government, 1991–96’, *Australian Journal of Political Science* 35, no. 3 (2000); Maria Maley, ‘The Policy Work of Australian Political Staff’, *International Journal of Public Administration* 38, no. 1 (2015), and others in this special issue of the journal; Ann Tiernan, ‘Problem or Solution? The Role of Ministerial Staff’, in *Motivating Ministers to Morality*, ed. Jenny Fleming and Ian Holland (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001).

²⁴ Eldad Davidov, Peter Schmidt and Shalom H. Schwartz, ‘Bringing Values Back In: The Adequacy of the European Social Survey to Measure Values in 20 Countries’, *Public Opinion Quarterly* 72, no. 3 (2008): 423.

the pursuit of some supporting attainment of others, for example Power and Achievement, while others are in conflict, such as Universalism and Tradition. As we suggest in Chapter 3, this presentation of values provides a neat visual guide to potential areas of policy conflict.

THE WAY FORWARD

To be clear: this book is *not* seeking to add yet another ‘theory of the policy process’ to the literature. For epistemological reasons we visit in Chapter 2, attempts to construct such theories are heroic at best. There have been and continue to be many theories and models of the policy process, yet none has gained dominance in the field, despite numerous attempts at adaptation, application and/or extension. In ways we outline in Chapters 6 and 7, the main contenders in the field each has significant limitations. It is an indictment of the discipline’s propensity to keep generating new, complicated and jargon-ridden ‘theories’ that a special issue of a journal has recently been produced ‘to help policy scholars communicate clearly with each other to improve their knowledge and insights’.²⁵ If policy scholars struggle to make sense of the plethora of models, frameworks, lenses, theories and approaches that abound in their own field, the chances that those theories will add value to our understanding of public policy, let alone have any real world impact, are surely limited.

The purpose of the following discussion is the more modest one of encouraging students of public policy to appreciate the extent to which policy making is part of a larger democratic political process, one that is shot through with values conflicts. A political values perspective on the policy process can enhance our understanding of the links between politics and policy; improve policy debate; and contribute to more constructive discussion of the ways in which democratic societies respond to their collective challenges. It can be applied to existing frameworks. By drawing attention to the values dimension of these models of the policy world, it can potentially strengthen their ability to elucidate the complex world of policy making.

There are two key related themes that run through the chapters that follow. First, public policy is the output of the political process; it is how elected politicians, and more broadly the parties that form government, seek to achieve their goals. In democracies, ‘the desire for popular influence over government requires that policy making remain political’.²⁶ And, second, the

²⁵ Christopher M. Weible and Paul Cairney, ‘Practical Lessons from Policy Theories’, *Policy and Politics* 46, no. 2 (2018).

²⁶ Charles E. Lindblom and Edward J. Woodhouse, *The Policy-Making Process*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993), 6.

political process at all levels involves human actors whose behaviour is heavily influenced by values and whose capacity for analytical decision making is limited. These limitations apply to the citizen deciding how to cast their vote; the interest groups seeking to influence public debate; the political parties translating their ideologies into election platforms; and the policy advisers and decision makers in the process of identifying policy problems and analysing and selecting possible solutions.