

Public policy: Definition & characteristics

Compiled by:
Dr. P.S Prasad

HoD, Department of Political Science
Rabindranath Tagore University.

Meaning & Definition:

Public policies are as old as governments. Whatever be the form, oligarchy, monarchy, aristocracy, tyranny, democracy etc., - whenever and wherever governments have existed, public policies have been formulated and implemented. To cope with the varied problems and demands of the people the government has to make many policies, these policies are called public policies.

Public policy is a course of action created and/or enacted, typically by a government, in response to public, real-world problems. Beyond this broad definition, public policy has been conceptualized in a variety of ways.

Robert EyeStone terms public policy as *"the relationship of government unit to its environment."* Thomas R. Dye says that *"public policy is whatever government chooses to do or not to do"* Richard Rose says that *"public policy is not a decision, it is a course or pattern of activity."* In Carl J. Friedrich's opinion public policy is a proposed course of action of a person, group or government within a given environment providing opportunities and obstacles which the policy was proposed to utilize and overcome in an effort to reach a goal or realize an objective or purpose.

From the above definitions, it is clear that public: policies are governmental decisions, and are actually the result of activities which the government undertakes in pursuance of certain goals and objectives. It can also be said that public policy formulation and implementation involves a well planned pattern or course of activity. It requires a thoroughly close knit relation and interaction between the important governmental agencies viz., the political executive, legislature, bureaucracy and judiciary.

A popular way of understanding and engaging in public policy is through a series of stages known as "the policy cycle". The characterization of particular stages can vary, but a basic sequence is: agenda setting – formulation – legitimating – implementation – evaluation. Hence, Public policy is best described as the broad area of government laws, regulations, court decisions, and local ordinances. Everyone has a stake in the public policies enacted by federal, state, and local governments.

Characteristics:

Public Policy Making is a Very Complex Process:

Policy making involves many components which are interconnected by communication and feedback loops and which interact in different ways. Some parts of the process are explicit and directly observable, but many others proceed through hidden channels that the officials themselves are often only partly aware of. These hidden procedures are very difficult and

often impossible to observe. Thus, guidelines are often formed by a series of single decisions that result in a 'policy' without any one of the decision makers being aware of that process.

It is a Dynamic Process:

Policy making is a process that is a continuing activity taking place within a structure; for sustenance, it requires a continuing input of resources and motivation. It is a dynamic process, which changes with time, the sequences of its sub-processes and phases vary internally and with respect to each other.

Policy making comprises Various Components:

The complexity of public policy making as we know, is an important characteristic of policy making. Public policy formulation often involves a great variety of substructures. The identity of these substructures and the degree of their involvement in policy making, vary because of different issues, circumstances and societal values.

Policy Structure makes Different Contributions:

This characteristic suggests that every substructure makes a different and sometimes unique contribution to public policy. What sort of contribution substructures make, depends in part on their formal and informal characteristics which vary from society to society. Decision-Making: Policy making is a species of decision-making because it lets us use decision-making models for dealing with policy making.

Lays down Major Guidelines:

Public policy, in most cases, lays down general directives, rather than detailed instructions, on the main lines of action to be followed. After main lines of action have been decided on, detailed sub-policies that translate the general theory into more concrete terms are usually needed to execute it.

Results in Action:

Decision-making can result in action in changes in the decision-making itself, or both or neither. The policies of most socially significant decision-making, such as most public policy making are intended to result in action. Also policies directed at the policy making apparatus itself such as efficiency drives in government are action oriented.

Directed at the Future:

Policy making is directed at the future. This is one of its most important characteristics since it introduces the ever-present elements of uncertainty and doubtful prediction that establish the basic tone of nearly all policy making.

Actual policy making tends to formulate policies in vague and elastic terms; because the future is so uncertain. It permits policy makers to adjust their policy according to emerging facts and enables them to guard against unforeseen circumstances.

Mainly Formulated by Governmental Organs:

Public policy is also directed in part, at private persons and non-governmental structures, as 'when it calls for a law prohibiting a certain type of behaviour or appeals to citizens to engage

in private saving. But public policy, in most cases, is primarily directed at governmental organs, and only intermediately and secondarily at other factors.

Aims at Achieving what is in the Public Interest:

However difficult it might be to find out what the "public interest" may refer to, the term never the less conveys the idea of a "general" orientation and seems therefore to be important and significant. Furthermore, there is good evidence that the image of "public interest" influences the public policy making process and is therefore at least, as conceived by the various public policy making units, a "real" phenomenon, and an important operational tool for the study of policy making.

Use of Best Possible Means:

In abstract terminology, public policy making aims at achieving the maximum net benefit. Benefits and costs take in part the form of realized values and impaired values, respectively, and cannot in most cases be expressed in commensurable units. Often, quantitative techniques can therefore not be used in this area of public policy making but neither the qualitative significance of maximum net benefits as an aim nor the necessity to think broadly about alternative public policies in terms of benefits and costs is therefore reduced.

Involvement of Various Bodies Agencies:

Industrial workers, voters, intellectuals; legislators, bureaucrats, political parties, political executives. Judiciary etc. are the various organs that participate in public policy making and can influence the policy process to a great extent.