Instructor’s Manual

# Chapter 1: Public Policy and Politics

## Overview

Chapter 1 provides a foundation and orientation to vocabulary and concepts for the rest of the text; it clarifies basic concepts and discusses why we should be aware of public policy decisions. Because public policy is not made in a vacuum, this chapter explores the social, economic, political, governing, and cultural contexts that affect the development and implementation of policy decisions. There are political, moral/ethical, and economic rationales for government intervention. The chapter details how market failures can occur in a variety of ways. Finally, the chapter introduces the concept of policy analysis, presenting some criteria for analyzing public policy: effectiveness, efficiency, equity, and feasibility.

## Learning Objectives

* Define and explain the nature of public policy.
* Identify key concepts associated with the study of public policy.
* Explain the different contexts in which public policy is made.
* Examine the reasons for governmental involvement in public policy.
* Explore why citizens should understand public policy.
* Describe the reasons for evaluating public policies today.

## Discussion Questions

Questions for small groups or larger class discussion.

1. How does public policy affect our everyday lives? What kinds of controls are in place to ensure the safety of our water, food, communities, etc.?
2. Name some government policies at federal, state, and local levels. How did these policies come to be? Who decides if they are needed? Who enforces them?
3. Can citizens (like you) affect policy decisions? What are some ways that citizens can participate in the formation and implementation of public policy?
4. Recent years have seen a decline in the public’s trust in government and policymaking. In addition, polarization among the parties has sharpened. How do these trends affect the ability of our government to make good policy?
5. Explain the moral/ethical reasons for the government to get involved in making policy.

## Video/Audio Resources

1. [Polarization Around Social Identity Is Shaping the Future of Politics](http://youtu.be/31wEk1nHTo4)

Brookings Institution video with speaker Laura Olson explaining demographic and cultural changes and how they affect politics.

1. [Coal 101: What’s Wrong with Coal?](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Wv2GKaukZU)

A video by the nonprofit Sierra Club, taking a position on the use of coal in the United States.

1. [A Politics of the Public Good](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9OmpUJIMHS0)

Sujata Gadkar–Wilcox discusses the idea of politics as a public good from her research, the classes she teaches in constitutional law, and in her recent campaign for state representative.

## Class Activities

**1. Introduction to USA.gov**

The [USA.gov](https://www.usa.gov/) website is a comprehensive portal that enables users to access countless government sites from one location. This exercise provides several simple searches to help you navigate the site and to demonstrate the role that citizens may play in influencing policy decisions. [USA.gov](https://www.usa.gov/) is one resource you can use to learn about members of Congress, the executive branch, and your own state government:

* Visit the home page, [USA.gov](https://www.usa.gov/). How does the website reflect the government’s effort to engage citizens and provide useful information? Explore the ways in which you can obtain information from the government and download an app if you so desire.
* Go to the website <http://www.usa.gov/Agencies.shtml>. Select “Branches of the U.S. Government,” and then “House of Representatives” and you will be taken to the U.S. House of Representatives website. Who is your representative? Does he or she have a webpage? On which committee(s) does your representative serve? Why do you think your representative selected this committee? If you don't know who your representative is, enter your zip code at the top and click “Look Up.” Identify your representative and explain a bit about his or her work in the House, including committee service.
* Part of being an engaged citizen is knowing how to communicate with elected officials at all levels of government. Return to <http://www.usa.gov/Agencies.shtml> and choose “State, Local, and Tribal Governments. ”Click” How to Contact Your Elected Officials? Locate the web link to your state’s legislative branch and identify your own representative. Locate the site where you can obtain information about current events taking place in your state’s legislative body (news, bills, schedule, etc.).
* A more challenging illustration of how to navigate through [USA.gov](https://www.usa.gov/) involves finding information about a particular public policy issue or general information on a specific topic. Look under the Topics link and select one that interests you. Follow the listed links to learn about an issue and the agency responsible for it as well as factual information.

**2. Introduction to Govtrack.us**

Another website that enables you to track legislative activities is <https://www.govtrack.us/start>. It is a government transparency website operated by Civic Impulse, LLC.

*Members of Congress.* Identify one of your U.S. Senators and list the committees of which he or she is a member. Choose one committee and explain what it does. Identify your U.S. Representative in the House. How many bills has this representative sponsored since being elected? What was the most recent bill he or she sponsored and did it pass? *Click on Voting Records* to review how your elected official has voted.

*Bills and Resolutions.* Search for a subject area of interest to you. Select a bill *that has not yet passed* and answer the following questions.

Give the official Senate or House bill number and official title.

Give the lead sponsor (in the House and/or Senate) and the current status of this bill.

*Committees.* In which committees of the House and Senate would you find work being done on U.S. transportation issues? What is the political party affiliation of the chairs of the committees? What bills are under consideration related to transportation?

**3. Interest Groups**

Why do you think people join interest groups? Visit the websites of several interest groups and evaluate the interest group’s area of focus, positions taken, and efforts to engage people. Then answer the questions below.

* + Visit the Sierra Club’s website [www.sierraclub.org](http://www.sierraclub.org)
  + Visit the American Petroleum Institute website [www.api.org](http://www.api.org)
  + Visit the AARP’s website [www.aarp.org](http://www.aarp.org)
  + Visit the NRA’s website <http://programs.nra.org/>
  + Visit Rep. Gabby Gifford’s interest group <http://americansforresponsiblesolutions.org/>
* Answer the following questions:
  + Do you agree with the “logic of collective action”?
  + What do you think people get from participating in interest groups like the above?
  + In what ways do these groups have an impact on public policy?
  + How confident are you that the information you found on the websites is credible? Explain.

**4. Interest Groups on the Web**

Visit the website for the Smoke-Free Alternatives Trade Association (SFATA) ([www.sfata.org](http://www.sfata.org)), the major trade association for the e-cigarette industry, and access reports and data regarding its positions on the health effects of e-cigarettes by selecting the link for Resources, and Research from there, you can read studies and clinical research on this issue Note especially the language SFATA uses in its “statement of principles,” such as “the science behind this new industry is not yet settled.”

For a contrasting view, visit the website for the American Lung Association (ALA) ([www.lung.org](http://www.lung.org)) and search for “e-cigarettes” in its search field. From here, you will see several links discussing the ALA’s position on e-cigarettes and its concerns regarding potential health consequences.

* How credible is the information you found on the two websites? Which group do you think provides less biased information, and why do you think so?
* Does either supply references to authoritative sources for the information presented, such as government reports or studies published in scientific or scholarly journals?
* How else can you judge the facts and issue positions on these pages? By comparing the different positions and the language used to defend them, can you determine which group offers the most defensible stance on the health effects of e-cigarettes?

As indicated throughout the text, the enormous amount of information available through websites makes citizen activism more feasible than ever before. After all, the potential for activism is facilitated by information as well as by individual motivation to get involved. Reliance on web sources, however, also presents a challenge: how to manage the huge amount of information?

**5. Interpreting Policy Studies**

Policy analysis is pervasive and critically important for the policymaking process at all levels of government. To determine which studies are credible and which are not, and which might be used as a basis for making policy decisions, students of public policy need to hone their analytical skills.

Visit the following websites containing various types of policy analysis and answer the questions that follow:

* + <http://www.wispirg.org/news/wip/new-survey-wisconsin-brain-drain-partly-because-youth-seek-alternatives-driving> (state-level interest group report on transportation policy)
  + <http://www.cleanwateraction.org/files/publications/closing-floodgates.pdf> (Sierra Club analysis of Ohio’s coal energy)
  + <http://www.energyxxi.org/sites/default/files/file-tool/Executive_Summary_EPA_Regs.pdf> (Institute for 21st Century Energy report on the economic impact of EPA’s 2014 carbon regulations)
* What is the purpose of each study, and who conducted it?
* Does it seek and present objective information on the nature of the problem and possible solutions?
* Does the information seem to be valid, and what standard should you use to determine that?
* Is the report’s argument logical and convincing?
* Does the report omit an important subject matter?
* Does the study lay out the policy implications clearly and persuasively?