INTRODUCTION TO THE CONCEPT AND PROCESS OF PUBLIC POLICY

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INTRODUCTION

'Public Policy' as an academic pursuit emerged in the beginning of the 1950s,[1] its analysis dates back to the beginning of civilization. As a social science, it draws on the humanities, and political science in particular, for its development. Theoretically speaking, public policy is formu-lated in the present, based on the past, with the object of improving the society's future. The purpose of studying public policy is to understand the problems of the people and to provide insights into a range of policy options to deal with matters of public concern. Public policy is an area which had to do with those spheres which are labelled as public.

Historically, political science, to some extent, was preoccupied with the activities of the various political institutions and groups in relation to their success in pursuit of political power. It hardly recognized the role which such organizations played towards the for-mation of policy as one of its main concerns. Yet the policy is an important element of the political process. Thomas Dye, a leading scholar of policy analysis, says, 'Traditional (political science) studies described the institutions in which public policy was formu-lated. But unfortunately the linkages between important institutional arrangements and the content of public policy were largely unexplored'.[2] He further observed that today the focus of political science is shifting to public policy—'to the description and explanation of the causes and consequences of government activity'. While the concern of political science about the processes by which public policy was determined has increased, most students of public administration would acknowledge that the public servants themselves are intimately involved in the shaping of the policies. The study of public administration has hitherto tended to concentrate on the machinery for the implementation of given poli-cies. It has addressed issues regarding organization of public authorities, the behaviour of public servants and, increasingly, the methods of resource allocation, administration and review. With such an approach, it is difficult to determine much about the way policy is formulated, although it is generally contended that the experience of policy implementa-tion feeds back into the furtherance of policymaking process.

Thus, the past studies on public policy have been mainly dominated by the scholars of political science who largely concentrated on the structural aspects of the government. But presently, the scholars of policy analysis and public administration have tended to concentrate more on the content of policy and the process of its formulation, implemen-tation and evaluation. The study of public policy has evolved into what is virtually a new branch of the social sciences—the so-called 'policy sciences'. This concept of policy sci-ences was first formulated by Harold Lasswell in 1951. Today, the policy sciences have gone far beyond new and naïve aspirations for societally relevant knowledge. The cred-ibility of policy sciences in the recent past, and beginning of the 21st century in particular, remains elusive. However, considerable debate remains over whether there is one coher-ent set of principles that govern the study and understanding of the public policy process.

What Makes Public Policy Public?

Since the 1950s much of scholarship has resulted in a significant accumulation of knowl-edge regarding public policy and policy analysis. Given the complexity of issues involved in the policy process, it is important for the readers to know the definition of basic con-cepts of public policy.

The term 'public policy' comprises two words. In the first instance, it is important to understand the concept of 'public'. We often use such terms as 'public interest', 'public sector', 'public opinion', 'public health' and so on. The starting point is that 'public policy' has to do with those spheres which are labelled as 'public' as opposed to spheres involv-ing the idea of 'private'. The concept of public policy presupposes that there is an area or domain of life which is not private or purely individual, but held in common. 'Public' dimension is generally referred to 'public ownership' or control for 'public purpose'. The public comprises that domain of human activity which is regarded as requiring govern-mental interventions or social action. The question is: Does the sphere of public require a different analysis to that of private? In a representative democracy, it is assumed that power flows from the consent of the governed, that is, the people themselves. The people are therefore sovereign. Thus, when policy advocates seek to induce the government to make policy or when government actively engages in actions these advocates support, we can say that the government does so in the public interest. However, there has always been a conflict between what constitutes public and what private is.

For Baber, there are 10 key differences between public sector and private sector:

  (i) It faces more complex and ambiguous tasks.
 (ii) It has more problems in implementing its decisions.
(iii) It employs more people with a wider range of motivations.

   (iv) It is more concerned with securing opportunities or capacities.

   (v) It is more concerned with compensating for market failure.

   (vi) It engages in activities with greater symbolic significance.

  (vii) It is held to stricter standards of commitment and legality.

 (viii) It has a greater opportunity to respond to issues of fairness.

   (ix) It must operate or appear to operate in the public interest.

   (x) It must maintain minimal levels of public support than required in private industry.

Beginning of the first quarter of the 20th century saw the emergence of the state as a means of reconciling public and private interests. Public administration emerged as an instrument of the state for securing public interest rather than private interest, whereas for the political economists, only markets could balance private and public interests. The new liberalism was based upon a belief that public administration was a more rational means of promoting the public interest. For Max Weber, the growth of bureaucracy was due to the process of rationalization in industrial society. The civil servant was the rational functionary whose main task was to carry out the will of those elected by the people. Public bureaucracy was, there-fore, different to that which existed in the private sector because it was motivated to serve the public interest. The rational public interest argument started eroding after the Second World War. Invariably the bureaucrats did not function in the public interest and displayed the capacity to have distinct goals of their own. In this connection, a comparative study of bureaucracy by Aberbach observed, 'The last quarter of this century is witnessing the vir-tual disappearance of the Weberian distinction between the roles of the politician and the bureaucrat, producing what may be labelled as a pure hybrid'.[7] The public and private sec-tors reveal themselves as overlapping and interacting rather than as well-defined categories.

What Public Policy Is?

The concept of 'policy' cannot be objectively defined. Among other definitions, policy can be denoted as

   (i) a declaration of goals for common action,

  (ii) a set of rules for guidance and

 (iii) a statement by government of what it intends to do.

Although a public policy is made by a government in response to public's problem and demand, it may be implemented by public or private actors or both. Public policy is ulti-mately made by the government even if the ideas or opinions come from the private actors or through the interaction between government and non-governmental forces. Judicial decisions also do matter in the formation or implementation of a public policy. For example, the Supreme Court (India) on 19 April 2016 pulled up the state governments for their failure to prevent unauthorized construction of shrines on public land. The bench said, 'None of the states are doing anything to comply with the SC's directions. God never

intended to obstruct footpaths and pavements or encroach upon public land. Persons building religious structures on public land and footpaths are insulting god'. The court had on 13 September 2011 said it had undertaken the exercise primarily to ensure that 'henceforth no public land, public park or public street is encroached for constructing religious structures'. There is thrust to designate policy as the 'outputs' of the political system. David Easton defines public policy as 'the authoritative allocation of values for the whole society'.

The magnitude of the problem can be visualized from other definitions which are offered: Dye, a leading scholar of public policy, observes, 'Public policy is whatever governments choose to do or not to do'. Similarly, Robert Lineberry says that 'it is what governments do and fail to do—to and for their citizens'.[11]

To Schneider and Ingram, 'Policies are revealed through texts, practices, symbols, and discourses that define and deliver values including goods and services as well as regula-tions, income, status, and other positively or negatively valued attributes'.[12] This definition means that policies are not just contained in laws and regulations, but they continue to be made as the implementers make decisions about who will benefit from policies.

Parsons regards policy as 'an attempt to define and structure a rational basis for action or inaction'.

Anderson describes public policy as 'a relatively stable, purposive course of action fol-lowed by an actor or set of actors in dealing with a problem or matter of concern'.

Taken as a whole, a policy may be defined as a purposive course of action taken or adopted by those in power in pursuit of certain goals. Perceptibly, the term public policy includes government activity. 'Public policy consists of political decisions for implement-ing programs to achieve societal goals'.

At a minimum, Peters observes, 'Stated most simply, public policy is the sum of govern-ment activities, whether acting directly or through agents, as it has an influence on the life of citizens'.

Thomas Dye argues that this search for a definition of public policy can degenerate into a word game that, eventually, adds little more understanding. Because of scholars' lack

of a consensus definition of public policy, Birkland discerns following key attributes of public policy:

  (i)   Policy is made in response to some sort of problem that requires attention.
 (ii)   Policy is made on the 'public's' behalf.
(iii)   Policy is oriented toward a goal or desired state, such as the solution of a problem.
(iv)   Policy is ultimately made by governments, even if the ideas come from outside government or through the interaction of government and non-governmental actors.
 (v)   Policy is interpreted and implemented by public and private actors who have different interpretations of problems, solutions and their own motivations.
(vi)   Policy is what the government choose to do or not to do.[17]

Birkland defines a policy 'as a statement by government—at whatever level—of what it intends to do about a public problem'. Such statements can be found in the constitution, statutes, regulation or court decisions. A statement by the government on a public concern is also a policy.

All the variants of the definition suggest that public policy is concerning the public as it affects a greater variety of people and interests than do private decisions. As the public is the source of political authority, in a democratic country, it is obvious that government is at the centre of efforts to make public policy. It should be added here that public policy focuses on what Dewey once described as 'the public and its problems'. Public policy is about people and their needs, values and preferences. Public policies are the policies adopted and implemented by government bodies and officials. Public policies are purposeful decisions made by authoritative actors in a political system who have the formal responsibility for making binding choices among societal goals.

In a democracy, most public policymakers are elected officials (such as members of Parliament). Legislative bodies and executives (ministers) play a key role in the policy-making process. Judges at the state and national levels who are appointed also interpret what constitutes a public policy. Non-elected bureaucrats or civil servants may also have limited policymaking authority. Whether elected or appointed, however, public policymakers are managers of the public trust and their actions are subject to public scrutiny, which in the cases of elected officials, sometimes, lead to their defeat in the election.

POLICY PROCESS

A fascinating aspect of public policy is to understand how policy is shaped by social, political, economic and other institutional factors. The policy focus is on the analysis of the policy process. It is concerned not only with knowledge in and for the policy process, but also with knowledge about the formation and implementation of public policy. It involves study of constitutions, legislators, interest groups and public administrators. The process does seem to be showy but worthless to many people. According to Webster's New Collegiate dictionary, a 'process' is 'a natural phenomenon marked by gradual changes that lead toward a particular result' or 'a series of actions or operations conducting to an end'. The idea of breaking down the making of public policy into stages or phases, which begin with defining problems and setting agendas and with implement-ing and evaluating policy, may well be to impose stages on a reality that is interactive. What is important, however, is that we understand and explain this complexity of the policy process which exists within a context of a multiplicity of frameworks.

Public policy is largely the outcome of arguments between government and non- governmental actors. It involves questions whether something is a solvable problem, what the possible solutions are, what the costs of those solutions are, whether the solutions will be meeting the people's demands and so on.

Indeed, there are a lot of people who work to promote the potential solutions to a problem. All these aspects relate to the policy process. The process, in main, refers to a series of stages or courses of actions. Policy process is cyclical, and it assumes that there is a relationship between one stage and the other. It suggests that there is some sort of system that translates policy ideas into policy effects—formulation, implementation and evaluation. The participants in the policy process—be they the members of the policy community, interest groups or association leaders—are not all or even primarily neutral participants. As Cochran argues that there are few 'neutral policy analysts' and by description no neutral advocates of particular policy alternatives.[18] The results of scientific policy analysis are often given up when other conventional tools seem to work better. For illustrations, the act of identifying a problem is as much a normative judgement as it is an objective statement of fact. Thus, if the problem is defined normatively, then one cannot say that any subsequent analysis is 'neutral'.

About the Author

Radhakrishan Sapru studied at Panjab University, Chandigarh, which awarded him master's degrees in Political Science (1970), Public Administration (1972) and English (1976) and subsequently a doctorate in Public Administration in 1983 and an LLB degree in 1992.

Initially appointed as teaching-cum-research assistant at the Department of Public Administration, Panjab University, Chandigarh, in February 1976, Dr Sapru rose to the position of Professor. He headed the Department of Public Administration at Panjab University from 1 April 1990 to 31 March 1993 and again from 1 April 2002 to 31 March 2005. Dr Sapru retired as Professor in August 2005, after serving nearly three decades at the Panjab University. During his academic career and after superannuation, Dr Sapru published more than 50 articles in national and international journals besides 10 books in the field of public administration.