

Political scientists refer to the term 'policy cycle' as a 'strategist approach', i.e. a tool which helps to analyze the development of a policy item. Under normal conditions a policy cycle has the following stages: agenda setting, policy formulation, decision-making, policy implementation and policy evaluation.

A number of scientists have suggested using this scheme for bringing in order the seemingly chaotic and unordered process of policy development. The process is divided into specific stages and each has its own aim, which enables policy makers to analyze the problem carefully, weigh alternative solutions and find the technical solution that would maximize public welfare. This suggestion has spurred an avalanche of critical responses to this model, labeling it a 'general description of public policy' and 'an impractical normative model for decision making'.

It is comforting to think of the policy cycle as a result of a careful craft work, done by government officials, who have analyzed the problem carefully and managed to come to an agreement. However, the reality turns out to be much more complex and challenging than theory. The reasons behind this can be numerous, the most serious being that many people are involved in policy making process – not all of them official and therefore they might not be attempting to solve the same issue, they all have different opinions on what would make a good solution and this hinders the decision making process. This is accompanied by a host of other problems, which are encountered by policy makers at each stage of the policy cycle: decision makers usually operate within limited time frame, resources and information. They are tackled by special interest groups, that are driven by bureaucratic imperatives and whose interests are limited by the next election cycle. Secondly, the media have great influence upon publicity, which enables manipulations in the agenda setting process. In fact, the media are perceived as the key element in this process – namely by "feeding" the issues to the relatively ignorant society. Thirdly, perceived relevance of decision aiding tools is changing over time. Since the 1960s, for example, the emphasis has been shifted from systems analysis, operations research and cost benefit analysis to geographical information systems, small group elicitation and survey research.

Furthermore, even despite the fact that public perceives policy formulation stage as the most difficult one, policy implementation itself is no less difficult. In fact, it can be so difficult to implement that we should actually be surprised to gain any positive accomplishments from the policy itself. Finally, evaluation stage is very often neglected in the policy cycle. Illogical as it may seem, a thorough and systematic evaluation of the policy is rather an exception than a rule.

Therefore policy development can be metaphorically referred to as firefighting, with participants trying to address the areas that are already on fire, or it can resemble the process of frantic weaving, in which they all search for solutions that would meet the interests of all the stakeholders.

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