



COURSE MANUAL

SC1: Public Policy

Module 5

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Contents

Module 5	1
Policy-making networks and influence	1
Introduction.....	1
Informal power distribution in policy	3
Activity 5.1	7
Case studies.....	7
Influence groups in policy	8
Case studies.....	9
Activity 5.2	9
Activity 5.3	10
Case studies.....	11
Case studies.....	14
Activity 5.4	14
Case studies.....	15
Activity 5.5	15
Activity 5.6	16
Case studies.....	16
Activity 5.7	19
Case studies.....	19
Case studies.....	21
Activity 5.8	21
Case studies.....	22
Activity 5.9	23
Some other theoretical perspectives.....	23
Case studies.....	26
Module summary	27
References	28
Further reading	29

Module 5

Policy-making networks and influence

Introduction

The last two modules have covered the formal political systems and institutions involved in policy-making. We now focus on the informal distribution of power – the arrangements and uses of power that influence policy-making even though they are not covered by constitutions and formal structures. This refers to wider society, to many institutions outside the direct sphere of government, including the many individuals, groups and organisations that deliberately or even inadvertently have an impact on policy-making. Included among these agents or policy actors are political parties, interest groups, protest movements, social influence groups, the mass media, the World Wide Web, international agencies and other levels of government which may not be part of the formal system at that level of government. The boundaries can sometimes blur for two reasons. First, government institutions can formally call upon members of these groups to be part of investigatory or decision-making committees. Secondly, the relative power of some agents, such as international agencies, can allow them to sway the government. A unifying factor is that their actions are informal by comparison to the formal activity covered in the previous two blocks.

To provide a context for our discussion we will consider some theories of state and policy networks and policy communities. These perspectives can add richness to our appreciation of the complex systems in which public policy is shaped.

Public policy is complex. Many dimensions are involved in its investigation, some of which can only be touched upon in this course. Many forces are at play, many people and groups are involved, and there are many undefined procedures and processes. These aspects of policy-making are complicated further by the human dimensions involved: the values, ethics, and power of the participants, which are often concealed or disregarded in the purportedly objective and rational process of determining policy that is in the “public interest”.

Think about the following questions:

- If an individual or a group has a need for government action, what can they do about it?
- Do citizens accept all or any policy that is determined by the policy-makers in government?
- Who are the policy-makers?
- If everyone wants different policy outcomes, how can policy be made?



Outcomes

Upon completion of this module, you will be able to:

- *explain* the relative impact of various groups on policy
- *investigate* theories that might explain the levels of impact from society's most influential groups.
- *analyse* the way interest groups might impact policy-making
- *explain* the impact of political parties on policy
- *analyse* and *explain* the role of the mass media in influencing policy
- *explain* the influence that protest movements might have on the making of policy
- *outline* some international agencies that might impact upon national policies and explain why that influence exists
- *explain* policy communities and policy systems as a basis for understanding policy.

Informal power distribution in policy

A number of theorists have sought to explain who has the power to determine the way society is structured and operated, particularly with regard to government and policy. Therefore, they set out to define the major actors in the policy-making process. Their theories also explain policy outcomes in society. While it is not necessary for you to understand these theories in detail, they are referred to frequently in academic literature, so it is important to acquire a basic understanding of them.

Often, in discussing the notion of a democracy, there is an expectation that everybody can be given equal access to contribute to decision-making in a problem area – for instance, through equal access to comment or an equal vote. The problem might not be that simple, however, since we also need to accept that people experience different issues at different levels of intensity (Mulgan, 1989). People are “affected to different extents by the same issue” (p. 27). Problems can also be described as “wicked,” meaning they are very complex, persistent and multi-faceted, so that it is hard to explain or describe them using a simple structure (Bridgman & Davis, 2000, p. 38). The vote of a person is not simple, and not necessarily equal. The vote of a country-dweller in relation to building toll-paying roads in the city will be different from the vote of the city-dweller using the road every day. Different again, might be the vote of the city-dweller whose home will be affected by the noise and pollution of the road, both when it is being built and once it is operating. Truck drivers transporting goods into the city will be concerned with the toll and how it adds to the price of transporting goods, and ultimately some of the city-dwellers might be concerned by the increase in prices. The decision about such a road might involve issues of the cost of building roads and maintaining them, the effects of roads on surrounding communities, and the cost of transported goods.

Theories of the state deal with describing the role of the state in society (Ham & Hill, 1984). There are several theories and variations, typically extending beyond the formal to embrace the informal. It is important to appreciate that these theories emerge from a variety of perspectives, values and even purposes. Theorists may seek to develop effective tools for explaining the state (descriptive) or suggestions about how the state should be (normative). In some cases they endeavour to explain political institutions and how they operate in relation to civil society. In other cases the state is described as an agency of social power (Davis, Wanna, Warhurst & Weller, 1988).

Simple explanations of the main theories of the state are given below.

1. **Liberalism** – the state represents the interests of individual citizens in providing protection of their rights and liberties. Early interpretations of this theory were presented in the context of limited suffrage, that is, only some had these rights, such as landowners, so the theory has been criticised for promoting inequality. (McLennan et al., 1984).
2. **Liberal-democracy** – this theory argues for the state to represent the community as a whole, to positively intervene to create



equality and social justice, to prevent accumulation of wealth in one group (McLennan, Held & Hall, 1984, p. 27). It is based on universal suffrage, though originally on universal male suffrage. It is often seen to be too simplistic to explain the modern state.

3. **Marxism** – the concept of classes is fundamental. There are two main classes: the bourgeoisie, whose members have their own means of production, distribution and rules of exchange; and the proletariat, who provide labour and are controlled by the rules of the bourgeoisie. The basic tenet is that the members of the bourgeoisie will monopolise state power in order to advance their own interests. The state is therefore an instrument of this dominant class even though it may appear neutral. The state reinforces the social order imposed by this system; the social order underlies the state rather than the state underlying and shaping the social order. (Held, in McLennan et al., 1984, p. 72). Marxism emphasises the role of economic interests in influencing political action and policy, with the state helping to maintain the dominance of particular capital-owning social groups (Ham & Hill 1984).
4. **Pluralism** – occurs where “policy is the product of government mediation and adjudication between the demands of competing groups” (Singleton, Aitken, Jinks & Warhurst, 2000, p. 299). Another way of viewing it is to see that “constraints are imposed on the state by a wide range of groups” and that “public policy is largely a reflection of the preferences of these groups” (Ham & Hill, 1984, p. 25). The central feature of this theory is that society consists of competing interest groups with overlapping and conflicting interests. An infinite range of issues and groups compete in a political marketplace while the state takes a neutral role (Dearlove & Saunders, 1991). Robert Dahl, a leading exponent of pluralism, argues a case for polyarchy, the system in which power in Western industrialised societies is widely distributed among different groups (Ham & Hill, 1984) and every individual or interest group has equal access to, or knowledge of, the political process (Dearlove & Saunders, 1991) but ignores the fact that government bodies may also have vested interests (Ham & Hill, 1984, p. 28). Political issues can be interrelated in complex ways (for instance, lower income taxes might mean lower social welfare provision) and different groups might form different alliances in different contexts. They might fail to align on some issues, but in other cases there might be broad agreement on an interest common to all members of society (Mulgan, 1989).

Pluralism could also be defined in softer ways. For instance, Mulgan (1989) describes New Zealand as a “moderately pluralist” society. This entails the idea that society is not a uniform, homogeneous whole where power can be equally distributed to all, but rather that “popular power can or should be exercised by separate interests and groups” (p. 41).

5. **Elitism** – is “the concentration of political power in the hands of a privileged group” (Singleton et al., 2000, p. 300). At its core it suggests that certain elite groups (for example, the corporate

sector or the military) may have control or dominance over policy-making. Such groups may have control for a variety of reasons such as technical expertise, money, power or position (Ham & Hill, 1984). Some theories focus on the bureaucracy (public administrators) as the elite in society because of their expertise or knowledge. Ham & Hill (1984) suggest that elitism is the equivalent of neo-pluralism, in which power is exercised by “a small number of well-organised societal interests” (p. 25).

6. **Corporatism** – is “the practice of giving peak representative organisations with a strategic role in the economy, such as business and trade unions, a say in the making of economic policy, in return for the compliance of their members in its implementation” (Singleton et al., 2000, p. 300). Interest groups are considered essential to help the state in its policy-making and other activities, but only particular interests are represented. Instead of interest groups interacting in the political marketplace as in pluralism, interest groups are incorporated into the state system. Thus, an important industry group might have a powerful, incorporated, role in industrial policy, but worker groups may have little or no role. For example, peak agricultural bodies may be incorporated to the possible detriment of other agricultural interest groups. Incorporation of such groups helps governments to cope in an extremely complex world and provides assistance in policy formulation and some legitimisation of resultant policy as a result of this participation (Ham & Hill, 1984; Dearlove & Saunders, 1991). The corporatist model was originally associated with fascist and socialist regimes, but has increasingly been used in Western democracies. While corporatism could emphasise any key group, typically its economic/industrial interests have had a major impact (Ham & Hill, 1984).
7. **The New Right** – typifies the sorts of policy directions many Western nations are currently pursuing. This approach identifies pluralism as causing massive demands on state funds, creating destabilisation and overload on government and reducing governmental authority and competence. Significantly, pluralism is also seen to undermine market effectiveness. The New Right’s main strategy is to reduce the size of government and lessen its role (Dunleavy & O’Leary, 1987). This contrasts with liberal-democracy, which essentially sought to increase the role of the state.

Alternative approaches to describing the state’s role are described below. Note that there is overlap between some of these approaches and some theories described above.

- **An administrative approach** – defines the state as the institutions and practice of public power (much as we have done in Modules 3 and 4), sometimes with an implication of total technical and value-free rationality.
- **An instrumental view** – identifies the state as the agent of a capitalist economy or particularly powerful interest groups, with



the state being tied to structural forces in society and enjoying only limited independence of action.

- **An “agency of system maintenance” view** – suggests that the state can act with a measure of autonomy from economic and other powerful interests, to perform a comprehensive political role that guarantees social order and longer-term goals.
- **A political dimensions view** – indicates sensitivity to realignments of power, coalitions and alliances, populism, culture building, political cleavages, and other political processes and dynamics wherein politics “become the state qua state, with the state ‘acting for itself’.” (Davis et al., 1988, p. 27).

These theories and approaches act as tools to explain the way different groups and individuals may operate and have power in society, and to examine what the predominant values in society may be. However, it can be argued that none provide a perfect prescriptive or descriptive explanation.

Another way of considering how this wider social activity occurs in relation to policy-making is provided by Keating, Wanna and Weller (2000, pp. 187–191). They provide five perspectives that cover some of the main theoretical ways available to look at interest groups and social movements in recent decades. Note that some, such as public choice theory, are widely used perspectives which extend far beyond the purposes of understanding interest groups.

- **Theories about parties** – currently and historically, parties have internalised interest representation, aggregation and strategic agenda-setting.
- **Public choice theories** – individuals are rational and instrumental in pursuing their ends and will only devote energy to this when the likely benefits exceed the likely costs. Interest groups can be seen as self-seeking and self-preserving.
- **Institutional theory** – individual attitudes and preferences are largely dependent on the institutional environment in which the individual is situated.
- **Pluralist and learning theories** – pluralist ideas have been described above. Groups learn and adapt ideas through experience in policy forums. The discussion of entities such as learning organisations and learning communities is relevant here, given that groups with political interests are also learning entities.
- **Social movements** – social movements create a “medium where social meanings can be constituted and contested”.

Activity 5.1



Activity

1. What theory of the state do you think applies to your country now? (Think about who has the most influence on policy in general or on a particular policy).
2. Do you think your opinion might be widely shared?
3. Does your viewpoint depend on the issue being considered?
4. Is your opinion only one among many?

Who participates and consults relates to the broader grouping of people or actors – or may be associated with the pluralist or corporatist theories of state. If one considers elitist theory, it may be bureaucrats or public servants (the permanent executive discussed in Module 4) who predominate as the elites.

Case studies



Case study

Case study comments

Case 7: This case emphasises polyvocal policy. A sense of pluralism underlies this case, whether or not there was actual equality among the participants.

Case 8: The distribution of power is an important issue in this case. The author makes some scathing comments about whose voices are being heard and whose are being disregarded. See, for example, p. 141 where she asserts that the people likely to be displaced are seen as expendable and that the interests of the newly wealthy have the most influence. While many people might be trying to have a say in decision-making, the distribution of power is not equal and a purely pluralist interpretation does not apply.

Case 12: In this case it appears that the state at times was acting as an agent of the rich and powerful industrialists when they controlled the capitalist economy (p. 163) or the laws being made (p. 164). This could be interpreted in terms of elitism or corporatism. Despite their influence, housing policy has been developed in response to other demands. For example, some social activists have endeavoured to influence housing policy as a means of establishing social order in the light of the pressures of issues such as poverty, or urbanisation.



Influence groups in policy

The role of political groups in influencing policy is extensive. The categories proposed in this block are arbitrary, although the terms are widely understood. In practice, the field is not so easily categorised. The terminology presented may constrict some groups into tighter classifications than is true in practice and inadvertently omits others. Many diverse individuals, groups and institutions constantly compete to have an effect on public policy. By examining some and how they have been studied we can begin to get a sense of the way they operate and how they may or may not succeed in influencing emerging public policy.

Singleton et al. (2000) classifies groups according to whether or not their basis is economic. By “basis” they are referring to the group’s aims, resources and context, but even this is not so easily demarcated. For example, when we look at farmer groups, whose interests are often economic, we find they are also concerned with a whole range of other issues such as the environment, or medical and telecommunications services in rural areas.

Economic groups might include employer groups, unions, farmer groups, professional groups, and so on. These tend to be insider groups in the sense that they already have formal and informal access to government (Singleton et al., 2000). They might have formal representation on a government advisory board, or a key member of the group, or an individual’s reputation and actions might have some influence on an advisory board or by having ministerial connections.

Non-economically based groups usually lack the supporting funds and power of the economically based groups. We might classify these as typically outsider groups. They have “limited resources... and difficulty gaining access to government” (Singleton et al., 2000, pp. 302–303). Their focus is often on community issues such as animal protection, “right to life” (anti-abortion), and even such broad ideals as peace.

Sometimes groups move from outsider to insider status, often by employing strategies for lobbying and direct action that enable them to influence the government about their causes. Women’s movements and “Green” groups have been successful in this way over the last few decades (Singleton et al., 2000, p. 303).

Case studies



Case study

Case study comments

Case 8: The Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBC) and others are clearly acting from an outsider position – making most of their actions very explicitly through acts of protest.

Case 11: These are outsider influence groups in this case, but it does seem that repeated success will enhance the chances of the alliance of SPARC, NSDF, Mahila Milan, and the community to be asked to advise in other cases.

Case 12: The insider/outsider status of influence groups in the case can only be guessed at. Perhaps the housing groups are largely outsiders while at times capitalists/industrialists have some insider status. Developers could be classed as economic groups using Singleton's approach, but there is less clear evidence that they have tried to exert influence.

Activity 5.2



Activity

Think about the organisations you belong to. Do any function in a political way – by advocating for the benefit of any groups, lobbying for change, helping or working with political parties, responding to government requests for submissions, or providing membership for government-established committees? Draw up your own list, showing the groups and the ways they function.

Political parties

The main function of a democratic system of government is to “enable the electors to choose a government by voting for various parliamentary candidates offered by competing political parties” (Mulgan, 1989, p. 56) though constitutions do not typically see parties as having an essential role in the system. Party membership is often the stronger reason for electoral selection by voters rather than representation of the particular constituency or electorate (pp. 56–57). Indeed, “party support and loyalty are such important factors in determining leadership in the Westminster system that they are most often characteristic of ministers, rather than qualities like the ability to analyse policy” (Singleton et al., 2000, p. 140).

Relationships in the Westminster system, according to Singleton et al. (2000), are as such:

- The Prime Minister depends directly upon the support of his or her party colleagues in order to gain and retain office, which can leave him or her with political debts.



- The government must retain majority support in the lower house in order to hold office (that is, it is not necessarily elected for a fixed term). This makes the maintenance of party loyalty and discipline extremely important.
- Ministers tend to gain their appointments after a lengthy political career in their party and in parliament. As a result, many politicians fail to attain high office, and those who do last the distance tend to build their own base of support within the party and in parliament. The prime minister must take these factors into account when exercising power.
- The presence of a large number of influential people within the parliament gives them added strength over their party colleagues and contributes to the executive's dominance of parliament.

(Singleton et al., 2000, pp. 140–141)

The entire process of developing party policies, working with parties to gain pre-selection and then election into parliament, and then working with party colleagues in parliament introduces a huge dependence on the party machinery. At times parliament seems to be simply a vehicle for party action and/or adversarial party politics. In Westminster systems the dominance of parliament by parties seems to be increased by the role of the political executive or cabinet (Ward, 1995). The strength of this political institution and its party membership draws attention to the power of parties, including member ministers, members of parliament and the extra-parliamentary structure of the parties. The latter refers to a structure of regional and/or state branches of the party, their rules, regulations, and personnel. Whether this is deemed to be good or bad, it might seem important to question how else the diverse opinions of so many elected representatives could possibly be organised and reconciled.

Activity 5.3



Activity

1. What political parties operate in your country?
2. Which ones are successful and which are not?
3. Is a single political party in power or a coalition of parties?
4. How much do you feel the ruling party controls or influences the policy that is formed?
5. How does this happen?

Case studies



Case study

Case study comments

Case 2: In this case the political party is important because Dawkins had to convince his political party – the Australian Labor Party – to change its political platform to accommodate his proposals. The party certainly held power, although in the end it was readily convinced of the proposal (pp. 44–46). A party’s policy statement or preferences actually has quite a potent effect on what its caucus can do in government.

Case 12: There are certainly political parties exerting influence in this case but little is explicitly stated to show how opposition parties influence government decision-making.

Interest groups

According to Singleton et al. (2000), an interest group is “formed to promote and protect a specific interest” (p. 296). Unlike political parties, that might have similar aims, they do not seek to hold political office (p. 296) though sometimes it seems that they do put candidates up for political office or at least affiliate with smaller political parties that put up candidates. For instance, anti-logging groups or conservationists may be allied with “Green” political parties, or resident action groups may align with “Social Democrat” or “Labour” parties.

When defining the groups that seek to influence policy-making, a few terms are used as titles and also to describe modes of operation. Much of the information in the following section on interest groups applies equally well to protest movements and social influence groups.

“**Pressure group**”, for instance, might be misleading as a term since it emphasises a mode of trying to influence which is aggressive, confrontational and – depending on one’s point of view – inappropriate (Mulgan, 1989). Ward (1995) defines pressure groups as those that seek to influence policy decisions. This is quite a simple definition that does not deviate from our understanding of interest groups, although there is a clearer emphasis on influencing government. Pressure groups could include professional medical associations, producer groups, women’s groups and automobile associations (Ward, 1995).

Since governments often openly consult and cooperate with groups, the term “interest group” is preferred – it helps to connote the group as one that is politically legitimate (Mulgan, 1989) though it might also appear to exclude those outside the interest area. On an international level, the G8, the controversial group of the world’s eight richest nations, is abhorred in part because of its exclusion of the other nations of the world. It could be viewed as an interest group seeking to influence world politics, although sometimes the governments it influences are those of its own members’.



“**Semi-public or private groups**” variously described as “interest groups” or “pressure groups” aim to articulate the interests which their members share on particular areas of government policy, and to attempt to influence government in their direction (Mulgan, 1989). Some groups are big, with permanent staff and offices that have functioned for many years; some are much more informal and transient with voluntary labour. They may have a self-interested focus (for example, the interests of a profession) or may be altruistic (concerned with the disadvantaged or the global environment, for example).

...The authority of interest groups is in many cases publicly guaranteed by statutes which establish their powers and membership or which determine their right to be represented or consulted. Other groups are independent of formal structure of government. All interest groups, however, share the common aim of trying to secure government action favourable to their interests.

(Mulgan, 1989, p. 39)

Interest groups are often in competition with each other to sway the policy decisions of governments. However, interest groups can combine to influence government decisions and policies (Mulgan, 1989). Their influence can be exerted at many different points of the policy process. For instance, pressure can be directed at a government department, an independent public body such as a corporation or statutory board or an advisory committee.

According to Mulgan, the ideal interest group would have the following features:

- Membership open to all who share the interest in question.
- A federal structure consisting of constituent branches and a national organisation.
- Provision for regular contact with government officials and politicians.

(1989, pp. 103-104)

Corporatism implies that interest groups play a key role in legitimately helping governments make decisions (Mulgan, 1989). However, the pluralist approach can equally accommodate interest groups in its way of framing the political world. Private organised groups can compete for political influence in the political arena.

How do interest groups influence policy? Various groups employ quite a range of activities to different degrees. They include:

- Meetings, advertisements, letters to the editor, interviews on television and radio, publicity, and so on. All these are designed to acquire political status and to put the area of interest on the government’s agenda.
- Campaigning in support of a political party’s policies in elections, or against another’s policies. The aim is usually to ensure the success of one candidate (and/or party) over another.

- Negotiation with other groups and building alliances – this is an on-going function and one that enables the building up of political strength and influence as well as more fertile communication about policy areas. For example, in Australia the National Farmers’ Federation has worked closely with Aboriginal groups in negotiations over land rights.
- Attracting new members and funding.
- Lobbying the bureaucracy or public service – especially since so many policies begin their lives through the work of middle-level public servants’ research and proposals.
- Research and analysis – presenting well-researched and substantiated proposals or submissions that suggest solutions to particular problems. Many groups employ research officers.
- Lobbying ministers – often a strategy of last resort since ministers are busy and do not like to make decisions without the support and advice of their departmental advisers.
- Lobbying ministerial staff – these staff members are gatekeepers between departments and the minister and between groups and the minister and thus hold considerable power to influence what is “heard or not heard”.
- Hiring professional lobbyists – to make submissions to government as the need arises. Although this is a costly exercise, access to funds might, inequitably, make the difference to an interest group’s success.
- Court action – taking cases to court to contest issues or applications of policy.

(Singleton et al., 2000, pp. 303–305)

Another particular kind of interest group worth mentioning in relationship to policy-making is that of think tanks. These are typically privately funded entities that focus most strongly on economic policy and seek to influence governments with reports and research findings, as well as policy proposals and position statements. Their most distinctive feature is “engagement in strategic issue advocacy” (Keating, Wanna & Weller, 2000, p. 184)

Case studies



Case study

Case study comments

Case 2: The HECS policy progressed without too much opposition, but there was concern about interest groups with care taken that the “specific proposals would stand up to scrutiny by the interest groups most likely to be critical of change” (p. 37). In the end, opposition came when the policy was finally released and the decisions about financing the policy were revealed. Strongly in opposition were the National Union of Students (NUS) and its vocal Vice-President Kiri Evans. She spoke extensively against the funding arrangements (p. 43 and p. 47).

Case 8: Any of the actions of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBC) and other people objecting to the Sardar Sarovar Dam can be seen as those of pressure or interest groups. However, their actions and tactics are clearly protesting against the dam.

Case 11: There is pressure and interest group activity in this case with an alliance of such concerned groups working with the community to lobby municipal authorities about sanitation. It appears that they are relatively successful in doing this.

Case 12: At the end of this case there is a discussion of recent developments in the area of Colombian housing policy. There is a strong shift toward coalitions of housing organisations forming to apply pressure on government to influence its policies. The housing organisations have been very separate from each other and the “lack of a single co-ordinating body made the possibility of developing a strong movement, able to voice its own demands, more difficult” (p. 170). The amalgamation of some of the coalitions helped to set up a body that could voice more strongly the needs of popular housing (p. 170).

Activity 5.4



Activity

Identify some interest groups in your country. Use the list of Singleton et al., (2000, pp. 303–305) above to think about the ways in which they influence policy and compile your own brief list.

Protest movements

Protest movements are inherently interest groups. What sets them apart is that they protest against action, rather than advocating for new action or playing a part in the development of new policy. Most are concerned with objecting to, bringing about a change to, or ending existing policy or practices. They are not focused on getting items on the policy-making agenda, or not directly so. However, interest groups that have a protest component may combine these functions.

Case studies



Case study

Case study comments

Case 8: The level of protest activity in this case was extensive and very visible. The Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBC) petitioned against the dam, and protested in the Supreme Court of India. Protesters took action to draw attention to what was happening or about to happen with the government policy in relation to the dam. The leader of the NBC, Medha Patkar, and probably others, were involved in struggles against the dam and worked towards recruiting more supporters. She was willing to telephone and lobby anyone who might have had influence, including the Chief Minister (p. 141). Protesters lobbied the World Bank and gained its support by getting it to cancel its commitment to the project (p. 141). The pressure and protest activity grew to a worldwide effort.

Case 10: A protest movement of sorts occurs in this case, though sometimes it might be better described as an interest group (a residents' society serving the slum-dwelling community). When Gurubai Koli, her husband and actress Shabana Azmi begin a hunger strike they take on the characteristics of protesters (p. 156). The Cuffe Parade/Colaba Residents Association, representing the rich apartment-dwellers, is also an interest group.

Activity 5.5



Activity

Can you think of any strong protest movements in your own country? Use the list you drew up in your previous activity to aid you in identifying protest movements or activities in recent years. Scan the newspapers for examples.

Influential social groups

A range of social groups have influence. Singleton et al. (2000) define “new social movements” as those “groups of citizens who work to change the value and culture of society” (p. 312). Keating et al. (2000) explain social movements as movements that represent a distinct political formation, with interests other than material interests. They demarcate nine major issue movements that have emerged since the 1960s as: women’s, peace, environment, consumer, gay rights, animal liberation, ethnic, black rights and the “New Right”. Many of these organisations are effectively organised. Some, such as the environment movement, have a huge following and experienced campaigners.

In addition to social movements we could also put into this category key social groups that might have influence – religious organisations, cultural institutions, large businesses and so on. Religious groups or church leaders are typically outspoken when issues of moral concern emerge on the party agenda, such as abortion in the United States and in vitro fertilisation in other countries. Agricultural organisations are also often pivotal in commenting on trade policies or in calling for assistance in times of rural adversity. In some areas, universities or their academic staff members are heard because of the expectation of knowledge or expertise.

Activity 5.6



Activity

1. Can you think of any social movements in your own country?
2. What key institutions exist in society that might speak out about policy?
3. Use the list you drew up from your previous activity to aid you in identifying any key social institutions or movements in recent years. Use the newspapers for examples.

Case studies



Case study

Case study comments

Case 1: The medical profession is clearly a stalwart of opposition to many health policy changes. Note the comment, “the extent to which any state is able to confront, cooperate with or defeat organised special interest groups is a key index of the state’s autonomy” (p. 16). The medical profession is seen as one of the most powerful, best-organised and well-connected interest groups (p. 16). British doctors played a significant role in making final decisions about resource allocations largely due to their professional (clinical) expertise (p. 16).

Case 2: Note the clever use of “reform-minded” university vice-chancellors (the purple circle) to get people on-side of the policy (p. 43).

Case 3: In this case, vested interests such as the oil companies blocked the desired common energy solution. These companies wanted to avoid European Community regulation and were given a voice by the Dutch and the British (p. 67).

Case 4: The influence businesses can have on policy-making is demonstrated when the effect that major players can have on a government’s regulations is discussed – businesses protected from competition can use the political process to prevent entry for new competitors, while at the same time demanding freedom to enter other markets (pp. 74–75).

Case 6: Traditionally doctors and other medical professionals have had a lot of influence in health policy (p. 103).

Case 11: Mahila Milan, as a network of women’s collectives that has at its heart the aim of training women to participate centrally in decision-making (boxed section, p. 161), is concerned with the advancement of women’s issues and welfare across a wide area. As such, it would probably be targetting not just single issues such as sanitation, but also the way women are valued and treated in various parts of society.

Mass media

By “mass media” we mean newspapers, radio and television. The World Wide Web may also be included in this category, however, because there are so many sites and opinions expressed, it is arguable whether all of the following points may apply. The mass media are “significant agents in opinion formation” (Keating et al., 2000, p. 185).

The media serve as an important outlet to tell the public:

- what is going on about us
- what leading politicians say, and what they look and sound like
- what are the important issues and problems, and what is happening in our own country and abroad.

(Singleton et al., 2000, p. 305)

Thus the media have a crucial role in influencing how citizens look at political action (and policy decisions) and how they might have their values, attitudes, and opinions reinforced, or changed (Singleton et al., 2000). The main elements that affect this are the selection of items to use and the way they are presented. The main issues are:

- Not all news is new, and the media can replay old themes to extend and increase its relevance.



- The media may concentrate too much on the prime minister and the leader of the opposition to the exclusion of other important government policy action.
- The media must get issues to air or in print in very short time frames – they cut corners and do 30-second grabs to the exclusion of presenting a richer picture of what is going on. Issues tend to be presented in opposing, black and white ways, lacking the more realistic shades of grey.
- The news focuses on mistakes and failures more than successes or day-to-day competence.
- The focus on newsworthiness means those interest groups playing the political game best have the most chance of being heard through the media – either outsider groups creating newsworthy stories, such as protests and scandals, or insider groups getting their message across through professional presentations.
- While professional journalists express pride themselves in objectivity and balance, often it is the emotional colour of stories that is of most importance. Much of this is predetermined. For example, workers' strikes will tend to be portrayed as negative or wrong, no matter how justified. The values of the media (there will be many) are clearly involved here.

(Singleton et al., 2000, pp. 306–307)

A vital point in relation to the media is the issue of fairness. Information about politics and government should be presented fairly, but because it is done in a cultural context this is difficult. Some of the reasons why are:

- Most of the media are privately owned, its owners' or editors' values may impact upon its content. Journalists who share their values are more likely to be employed. The ownership of media and its undue risk of too much concentration is a big issue in some countries (such as countries with a relatively small population like Australia where monopolies or oligopolies easily occur). There is also a tendency for people to have preferred sources – these often reflect real or perceived political biases in the media entity so a person selects his or her own view of the news in this manner.
- Fairness is impossible to guarantee and any negative impression is not easily undone. Retractions or apologies seldom carry the same weight; a good news story the day after a bad news story does not linger in people's minds as effectively.

(Singleton et al., 2000, pp. 307–308)

Keating et al. (2000) include the Internet or World Wide Web under their heading of “mass media” and apply the same sorts of comments that have been covered above. Singleton et al. (2000, pp. 310–311) emphasise the importance of the Internet competing with the mass media in influence on political reportage:

- Not only are major media outlets able to present their material, key issues can get special coverage. For instance, former United

States President Bill Clinton's four-hour videotaped evidence before the Grand Jury in what is known as the Monica Lewinsky case was available in full for people who could access it on the Web.

- Groups can set up their own websites much more cheaply than they can gain access to major media outlets, providing the opportunity to get their stories out to a wide (and transnational audience).
- Ministers and departments have their own websites to provide their own version of what they are doing – typically in full detail – providing policy summaries (or full versions) for public perusal. Thus it is easier for the public (individuals and groups) to gain access, reducing the advantage that rich insider groups may once have had.

Activity 5.7



Activity

1. From your reading of newspapers, listening to radio, watching television, or even using the World Wide Web, think about the times when the media might have influenced the government in its policy-making.
2. Think also about how you, individually, might have been swayed in your opinion by what you saw or read. Ask yourself whether the media have any influence over policy and also how much, working through some specific examples if you can.
3. Finally, comment critically upon the usefulness and rightness of the media's role in policy-making. Are the large media organisations merely equals among the other players or do they have too much influence?

Case studies



Case study

Case study comments

Case 2: There is a brief section in this case devoted to the press, which seems to demonstrate fairly even-handed coverage of negative and positive comments (pp. 46–47).

Case 8: The media played a key role in this case. The magazine article is one example of implicit media involvement. By contrast, the appearance on television of the leader of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBC), Medha Patkar, is an example of explicit media involvement. There were journalists interested in the protest movement, as evidenced by their lunch with the author of the article (p. 141). Patkar probably used the media, mostly



television, to gain popular support for her group's cause. The media cooperated by televising an interview with her. Her tears presented a very emotional picture, which was probably influential (p. 141 and p. 142). Whatever her intention, she succeeded in raising awareness of the issue, and specifically of the protest against raising the height of the dam. Key international figures like Booker Prize-winning author Arundhati Roy, through the media, gave the issue more international exposure. Finally, the media's role became part of the picture when comments made by Medha Patkar and others like Arundhati Roy led to them being charged with contempt of court (p. 143).

Case 9: Although this case does not actually mention it, wasteful use of funds has been reported in the Western media and may have led to reduced confidence and a reduction in aid as a percentage of rich countries' GDP (pp. 146–147).

Case 10: The media was directly and indirectly involved in this case. First, an individual journalist who was supportive of the slum-dwellers visited the site with other influential members of Nivara Hakk. Second, the presence of the celebrities at the re-occupation of the site meant they were watched and gained full media coverage the next day (pp. 154–155).

Case 11: The article's very presence in a popular magazine (albeit one focused on international welfare issues) is an example of media support.

Other levels of government

The number of “other” levels of government that might impact upon policy-making will depend upon the structure of government in the country. In federated countries there may be a federal government, as well as state, regional and/or local governments. The United States, for example, has federal, state and local governments. There might also be some other representative bodies, such as catchment boards, harbour boards, electric power boards, (Mulgan, 1989) and regional development boards.

“Members of local communities share certain needs which are best provided for by local agencies, with the coercive authority of government to raise revenue and enforce compliance with local regulations” (Mulgan, 1989, pp. 39–40). Local agencies can express needs to higher levels of government (for instance, the need for flood mitigation works or new road funding) and also implement central/federal government programmes (such as building the roads).

It is important to remember that policy in the other direction occurs also, perhaps more powerfully and automatically. If the higher level of government is the source of most revenue and makes grants to the lower level government, these grants can tie the hands of the lower government to undertake the required action with the funding.

Case studies



Case study

Case study comments

Case 4: Other levels of government operate alongside the federal government. Thus, while there are problems with the way the current telecommunications policy works in relation to supply and innovative development of equipment, other states use incentive regulation that helps to alleviate the problem (p. 76). Thus, state governments can undertake policy that counteracts or complements federal policy. States also approve competition at the level of local service providers (p. 77).

Case 10: This case involves two levels of government – state and local. Most of the action occurs at the local government level, with the municipality taking a range of actions. The state government intervened after the fire destroyed the slum in 1985, promising cash aid of about 100 rupees per person. It also promised that the slum would not be demolished, but later insisted that the people could not stay (p. 155).

Case 11: Clearly about local government, this case reveals that policy occurs at all levels of government and is not just the domain of national governments.

Activity 5.8



Activity

1. How do the lower levels of government seek to influence policy in your country?
2. How are their policies shaped by the funding, grants and rules of higher levels of government?

International agencies

International organisations such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) have grown in influence (Keating et al., 2000). International law also has an impact on policy in the following ways:

- International treaties that may bind participating signatory countries.
- International agreements or reports from organisations such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO) – these tend to promulgate principles and standards which ought to be adhered to in all parts of the world.

- Court decisions wherein a decision is made that incorporates a rule from the above into domestic law – this is most likely to happen in cases of uncertainty, obscurity or ambiguity in a domestic statute.
- Cases where a nation will look to other countries' laws for ideas and precedents to guide it in its new policy development.

(Keating et al., 2000, pp. 216–221)

Other international effects on policy are financial and “best practice”. The granting of financial aid comes often with specific conditions, thereby tying a nation to undertake certain programmes. Other organisations, such as the OECD, provide much information on the performance and strategies of its member organisations. It also plays a role in encouraging the adoption of the best of these practices by the remaining members.

Case studies



Case study

Case study comments

Case 5: In an odd twist, the short-term contribution by Union Carbide as “systematic emergency relief” was the impetus for immediate government action to be taken to help deal with the crisis. While maybe not careful and rational policy, it was the underlying reason for action to be taken on the basis of international funds.

Case 7: There are some strong criticisms of international agencies for not understanding the social and cultural conditions of the country in which their policies or actions are being carried out (p. 122). International agencies involved include the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), Save the Children Fund (SCF) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (pp. 124–125). There is also a useful comment about the incompatibility (sometimes) of the funding cycles of agencies and the long-term needs of communities (p. 127).

Case 8: Indirectly, the World Bank has had an impact on this policy – first, by supporting the building of the dam and later, by withdrawing its support.

Case 9: International agencies are at the heart of this case study, which demonstrates the very marked effect they can have on society in a recipient country. While there is an acknowledgement of improvement due to the aid (see the list of improvements on p. 146), there are also unfortunate impacts in the way of increasing the gap between rich and poor (p. 145), as well as corrupt distribution of money (p. 147 and p. 148).

Case 12: The loss of American funding in the 1980s did have an impact upon policy and meant an increasing need to rely on self-

help housing (p. 171).

Activity 5.9



Activity

1. What impact are international agencies having on policy in your country?
2. How inhibiting and constraining is that?
3. Do any benefits arise, in a policy sense, from this influence?
4. Would the country be better off without this influence?

Some other theoretical perspectives

The above discussion gives a brief outline of some of the contributors to public policy in complex societies beyond the scope of the machinery of government. It demonstrates that policy is not simply made within the confines of government, indifferent to public opinion and action. Nor should it be, in a democratic country, where we expect governmental decisions to reflect and be accountable to public opinion.

Other authors offer the ideas of policy systems, policy communities and policy networks to examine and explain how the interactions of the actors in the complex policy-making arena influence policy. The notion that policy is shaped by a range of people in a political situation contrasts with the concepts of the single, rational decision-maker and of streamlined parliamentary decision-making. Davis, Wanna, Warhurst & Weller (1993) define policy communities as collectively, officials and leaders of groups who have a common interest in a particular policy field. For instance, a policy community may form around a national medical system, or the management of a waterway. The policy community may include pressure group activists, interest groups, government officials, ministers, parliamentarians, independent consultants, and journalists. “The policy community shares a commitment to policies, programmes, and ways of doing things” (Davis et al., 1993, p. 144). Policy communities can be very conspicuous and cohesive, with their players knowing each other and working together, or at least openly reacting to one another’s positions. They tend to desire the survival of the existing institutional arrangements that give them a voice in the policy area. However:

...Within the framework of a policy community they will fight for favourable policies, oppose rivals, do deals and contest the rules. A policy community does not mark the end of politics in a particular field; rather it provides agreement between competing interests on common values and a framework for negotiation.

(Davis et al., 1993, pp. 144–145)



You might be able to see the potential here for a corporatist understanding of the state and the relative dangers of such an approach that was outlined in the first section of this module. Indeed, a policy community can be “a conspiracy against the public” (Davis et al., 1993, p. 145) if it dampens the voice of opposition and gains a power of its own to the exclusion of other voices. Policy communities segment policy-making into categories and then often work to defend their own existence. But such categories can preclude us from seeing the connections between policy areas. For example, attainment of education is probably tied to socioeconomic circumstances, not just to the provision of a public programme offering equal access. Failure to see such simple links, or far more subtle ones, does fragment and separate policy into unrealistic boxes. There are arguments that claim that the prevalence of interest groups speaking up about policies actually prevents governments from making coherent policy:

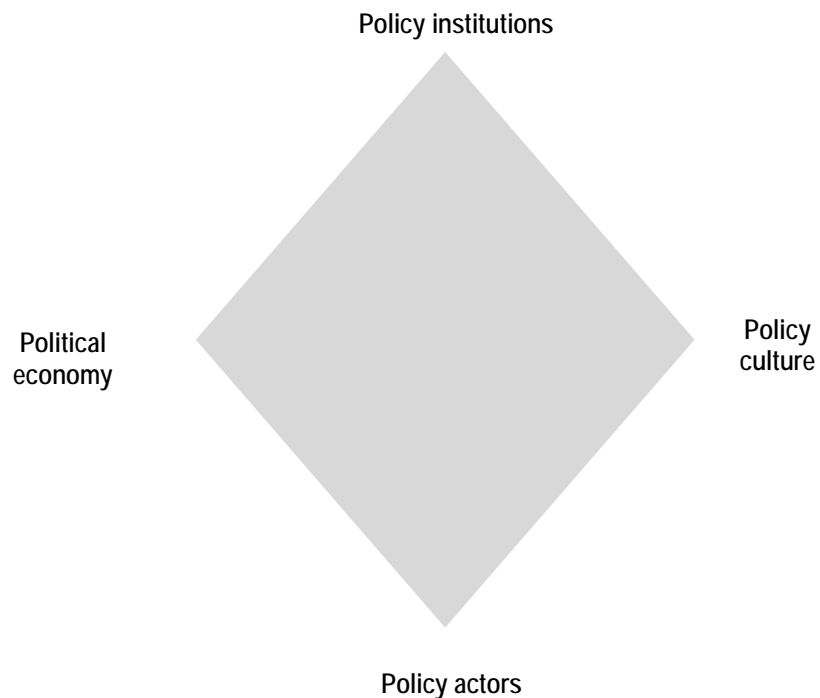
...Government requires that a national, coherent view and scale of priorities be achieved. The multiple subdivision of groups and the proliferation of functional and technical specialities has complicated, perhaps overwhelmed, the capacity of the public choice system to perform this task. However cooperative particular groups, or groups of groups may be, their disposal along vertical hierarchies and their horizontal proliferation complicates, perhaps transforms, the task of achieving concerted action toward common national problems.

(Marsh, 1998, p. 439)

Considine (1994) indicates that policies occur in systems comprised of institutions, groups, networks, and other continuing relationships. Within these systems are “shared understandings, values, common sources of disagreement, and patterned interactions” (p. 8).

In Figure 5.1, Considine (p. 8) demonstrates the main dimensions of the policy system – the material realm which is the political economy (primarily concerned with resources), and the intellectual realm named policy culture (primarily concerned with ideas and values). The two can intersect and overlap.

Figure 5.1: The structure of policy systems



Source: Considine, 1994, p. 8

Clearly, institutions and policy actors are involved in the system to various degrees. They reflect to a large extent the formal and informal participants we are discussing – the formal institutional power and roles in policy-making in Module 4 and the informal more dispersed power distribution and action in society in this module.

In any policy context, the first normal questions and investigations relate to material questions – what services already occur, who provides what, what do people gain or lose from the services, where do the resources come from, how do the service providers connect with service users, and what regulations exist to control behaviours? (Considine, 1994, p. 9).

In this material or political economy situation four main dimensions help us to understand the transactions that “bind or divide” the policy system and “the pattern of roles and resource flows” (p. 13):

- **Provision** – the relations between producers and consumers
- **Association** – the links within each provider and user group
- **Intervention** – the roles of public agencies, and
- **Organisation** – the prevailing techniques or technologies.

(Considine, 1994, p. 10)

An analysis of policy cultures goes deeper to reveal what values and priorities are being advanced and contested (Considine, 1994). This is the intellectual and emotional field, and it is a shifting one – priorities and values shift with changing contingencies. There are five levels at which



we can examine such cultures, though all are essentially based on values and a valuing or evaluation process:

- **Values** – These can be overt, as in manifestos, or openly stated agendas, or more implicit.
- **Assumptions** – Often these are covertly hidden to avoid controversy, or they are so taken-for-granted that those who have them do not recognise them.
- **Categories** – These are regularly used “shorthand” or classifications used to help us conquer uncertainty, such as “the poor”, or “ethnic communities”.
- **Stories** – These convey priorities and lessons learned without having to explicitly present an argument. They can also be categorised as myths and legends.
- **Languages** – Jargon and fashionable terminology establish a policy language or policy discourse that becomes habits of expression that may conceal matters from investigation but also provide reassurance. The terminology “helps reduce a mass of detail to standard words and expected responses” (Considine, 1994, pp. 14–15).

Case studies



Case study

Case study comments

Case 6: The case suggests that new-style policy development in New Zealand has gone beyond consultation and pluralist understandings of how policy networks and communities work. It is as if the mode of operation has shifted to limiting debate and applying a “policy blitzkrieg”, bringing democratic principles into question (p. 103).

Case 7: The cooperative and mutual activities of several agencies including UNHCR, USAID, NRC and others in the refugee situation suggest that policies emerge from dynamic communities of policy activity.

Case 11: The success that the alliance of SPARC, NSDF and Mahila Milan has had may mean that it could ultimately be incorporated into a policy community about sanitation problems in the country. In this way it would be called upon to be at, or make itself present, at policy-making forums. Whether there is official incorporation into decision-making or simply demands placed by constant lobbying, the existence of the group as a force in policy-making is relevant in terms of policy communities.

Module summary



Summary

Many organisations outside of the formal government institutions are involved in the policy-making process. Interest and other social groups are made up of individuals who have greater power and thus capacity to be influential together rather than singly. Their differing individual values are brought together and coalesced into collective values. In any analysis of policy, it is advisable to extend beyond the constituted organisations of government and closely analyse the roles of these players.



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- Ward, I. (1995). Federal government. In J. Henningham, *Institutions in Australian society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Further reading



Further reading

The following readings discuss theories of the state and the influence of various informal groups within society. This is only an indication of possible readings, not a comprehensive list. You may find many other relevant sources for further reading.

Charlton, R. (1986). *Comparative government*. Political Realities series. Harlow: Longman.

Chapters 5 and 6 cover political parties and pressure groups respectively.

Davis, G., Wanna, J., Warhurst, J., & Weller, P. (1993). *Public policy in Australia* (2nd ed.). Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

Chapter 6 deals with political organisations, including political parties, pressure groups and policy communities.

Dunleavy, P. & O'Leary, B. 1987. *Theories of the state: The politics of liberal democracy*. Basingstoke: Macmillan Education.

Ham, C., & Hill, M. (1984). *The policy process in the modern capitalist state*. Brighton: Wheatsheaf.

Chapter 2 is useful for its introduction to various theories of the state.

Howlett, M. & Ramesh, M. (1995). *Studying public policy: policy cycles and policy subsystems*. Toronto: Oxford University Press.

Chapter 2 examines some theories of the state. Chapter 3 focuses on actors and institutions involved in policy-making, including interest groups and the media. Chapter 6 examines policy networks and policy communities.

McGrew, A. G. & Wilson, M. J., (Eds.). (1982). *Decision-making: Approaches and analysis*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

The readings in Section 4 include an article on pressure groups and focus on exploring notions such as pluralism. Reading 5.3 by Cawson explores pluralism, corporatism and the role of the state.

McLennan, G., Held, D. & Hall, S. (Eds.). (1984). *The idea of the modern state*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Chapter 3 examines Marxist and pluralist theory as it may apply to the modern state.

Marsh, D. (Ed.). (1998). *Comparing policy networks*. Buckingham: Open University Press.