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GENERAL EDITOR  
ROBERT E. GOODIN

EDITED BY  
MICHAEL  
MORAN  
MARTIN  
REIN  
ROBERT E.  
GOODIN

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these approaches consider the institutions as interdependent variables, but institutions are not political actors. Instead institutions in combination with particular distributions of votes should be viewed as incentive structures, and hence as intervening variables, and not as actors.

Immergut (1990, 1992*b*) characterizes political systems in terms of their “veto points” which are formed by the combination of constitutional rules and political majorities at any given point in time. A “veto point” is defined as a political arena with the jurisdictional power to veto a government legislative proposal, in which the probability of veto is high. This model assumes that politicians within the executive or legislative branch have decided to propose legislation, and considers the points in the subsequent chain of decision making in which veto is likely. Although it is tempting to overextend this model to call any locus of political disagreement a “veto point,” the original intent was to present a restricted definition. If, for example, a law must be passed in the two chambers of a bicameral parliament, and the second chamber is controlled by a different majority from the first chamber, then disagreement between the two chambers and hence, second chamber veto of first chamber decisions is likely. Under these conditions, the second chamber should be considered a veto point. Other examples of potential veto points are: constitutional courts, presidents, and referenda. In the European legislative process, the European Parliament (EP) has only been a veto point since the co-decision procedure was introduced by the Treaty of Maastricht (1993).

Tsebelis has incorporated the “veto points” model into a more general “veto players” theory (1995, 1999, 2002). Veto players theory also focuses on the policy-making capacities of executive governments, but defines “veto player” positively as any institutional or partisan actor whose agreement is necessary for approval of legislation. The institutional veto players are identical to the veto points. But the veto players theory goes further by also considering the members of the governmental coalition as veto players, as the members of the different parties in the coalition must all agree in order for legislation to be proposed. Tsebelis also considers the policy distances and policy cohesion of the various veto players. The veto players theory says that policy change will be made more difficult as the number of veto players increases, and also their policy distance and cohesion.

Attempts to test these theories about the impact of institutions on policies and policy making have resulted in mixed conclusions. Armingeon (2002) tests variables from Lijphart’s typology and comes to the conclusion that one must distinguish between different dimensions of “consensus” democracy: corporatism (the organization of interests), consociationalism (need for agreement amongst relatively large numbers of parties), and counter-majoritarian institutions (institutions for blocking majority decisions). Huber, Ragin, and Stephens (1993) and Schmidt (2002) find support for the impact of constitutional structures and both veto points and veto players on social policy, but find that one must examine interaction effects between partisanship and political structures. In a study of attempts to renegotiate the policies of coordinated market economies, Immergut and Kume (2006) and collaborators find that “public beliefs” set limits to the ability of policy makers to transform their

institutions of social and political coordination. Thus, in moving from studying past policies to examining newer patterns of politics and policies, political institutional theories have begun to move from a focus on institutional blockages to look more at processes of political competition and public persuasion.

## 4. CONCLUSION

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This chapter has examined the impact of research on public policies on the development of institutional theory and conversely, the implications of institutional theory for the development of public policies. Research on the impact of institutional rules and procedures on public policies has relevance as well for policy solutions that are based on procedural methods. As contemporary policy makers increasingly abandon their faith in policies constructed and implemented by government, they turn ever increasingly to policy solutions based on “starting a process,” “creating a network,” or “indicating a procedure.” It is precisely here that institutional analysis in offering a basis for critique and prescription has most to offer, even though research on the impact of rules and procedures on politics and policies is still in a relatively early phase.

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## CHAPTER 28

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# SOCIAL AND CULTURAL FACTORS: CONSTRAINING AND ENABLING

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DAVIS B. BOBROW

When a pickpocket looks at a king all he sees is pockets.

(Senegalese saying)

understanding how it is that men's notions, however implicit, of the "really real" and the dispositions these notions induce in them, color their sense of the reasonable, the practical, the humane, and the moral.

(Clifford Geertz 1973, 124)

### 1. INTRODUCTION

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Public policy never begins with a blank slate whether we are talking about how and why it is made or whether it plays out in terms of wanted or unwanted consequences. Policy makers, implementers, target populations, and their audiences already hold and use a complex of "notions" to arrive at choices and evaluations (as Geertz suggests). Those "notions" affect what is treated as more or less relevant, important,

\* I am indebted to my two favorite anthropologists, Gail Benjamin and Riall Nolan, for their suggestions.

and desirable—from information to material assets to institutions to skills to normative judgements. They “load the dice” with regard to public policy indicators, focal situations, issue categories, cause and effect judgements, strategic repertoires, and success criteria. They even define what is for people, public policy and politics (Hudson 1997; Thompson, Grendstad, and Selle 1999). Notions in use amount to constraints on and enablers for public policy.<sup>1</sup>

How well we explain the occurrence and consequences of one or another policy or policy problem depends significantly on how well we understand the notions used by actors involved with it. How effectively we shape policy seldom will be greater than our understanding of the notions used by those who matter for policy adoption and implementation (Elmore 1985). For example, law enforcement attempts to curtail gang-related crime in Chicago ghettos would benefit from recognizing that for the residents, both gangs and the police are sources of protection *and* exploitation (Akerlof and Yellen 1994). How accurately we predict the effects of chosen policies depends on understanding of the notions used by those populations the policies seek to influence. Such understandings often amount to awareness of what is “local knowledge” for the various parties to public policy and policy processes, be they White House staffs or impoverished female heads of households.

Meeting those challenges encounters at least two major complications. One is that of variety: “what men believe is as various as what they are—a proposition that holds with equal force when it is inverted” (Geertz 1973, 124).<sup>2</sup> In the Senegalese saying, what is for some a ruler is for others a set of professional opportunities. A statement or act or material object is then subject to alternative interpretations and thus diverse implications for action and evaluation. The second is a less than total overlap between what people alone and in groups say, what they do, and what they believe (assume, know, or think). There often may be a very substantial difference between what they say to “insiders” (persons they classify as ongoing members of their identity or membership group) and to outsiders. What people actually do can vary as they think their actions are or are not observed by insiders or outsiders. The outsider is faced with the task of seeing behind “veils” and “masks” whether those are worn because of conscious deception or just acceptance of cultural notions—and often less well prepared to do so accurately than are insiders.

Later sections will briefly discuss these complications, and note some ways to cope with them. Those ways feature approaches central in social science fields other than political science—ethnography, sociology, social psychology, cognitive linguistics, and organizational behavior. Yet, as the next section reports, the concepts and

<sup>1</sup> The premiss is not that cultural notions matter *instead* of material and institutional factors (as discussed in Snyder 2002). Rather, it is that such notions lead to important, choice mediating interpretations of those other sorts of factors, interpretations which provide conditions conducive to their continuity or change.

<sup>2</sup> What level of aggregation is useful or distorting is a recurrent concern, and has raised doubts about looking for and relying on a common characterization of large sets of people categorized by a particular nationality, religion, or even profession (for critical examples of the last, see Kier 1995; Zhang 1992). Charges of excessive aggregation have been leveled at modal personality, national character, and civic culture studies.

methods involved have a substantial history of use by eminent political scientists concerned with public policy. This chapter does not call for doing what is unprecedented in understanding cultural and social constraints and enablers on public policy.<sup>3</sup> It does call for greater attention to the pursuit and application of such understandings, and making such activities as standard a part of the analysis and design of public policies as applied micro- or macroeconomics or law.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. SOME INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

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The sort of political science concerned with public policy in light of cultural and social factors was a feature of the Chicago school which emerged between the First and Second World Wars (Almond 2002, 23–108), and exemplified in the work of Harold Lasswell (e.g. Lasswell 1971, 1951; Lasswell and Fox 1979; Lasswell and Leites 1949). That prominence reflected strong professional relationships with notable sociologists, social psychologists, anthropologists, and linguists. The appeals of policy alternatives and their consequences were shaped by belief systems encoded in symbols. Symbol manipulation was a major part of politics. Political capital included intangible assets such as social status and rectitude as well as material assets such as instruments of coercion and wealth. Indeed the legitimacy and influence of the material was partly a function of the non-material assets accorded by association with and propagation of symbols.

Political appraisals and policy assessments then needed to be informed by three types of inventories of markers for intangibles, and methods to take those inventories. One was of symbol usage and the associations thus invoked. The relevant symbols might be words, but they also might be physical icons and sites used in public rituals. A second was of social memberships and origins (life histories) of policy elites. The premiss was that shares of representation in policy processes served to constrain and enable in one or both of two ways. A predominant share might make some particular set of “notions” prevalent in policy processes. It also might indicate that a broader population viewed those thought to hold certain “notions” as particularly relevant, capable, and normatively sound players of central roles in public policy. A third inventory focused on symbols and complexes of “notions” in and about primary social membership groups. That required identifying primary membership groups for actors in the aspect of public policy under consideration.

<sup>3</sup> The distinction between social and cultural factors is not useful as the level of modernization distinctions between the sets of people analyzed by sociologists and anthropologists has eroded.

<sup>4</sup> Positively, recent “behavioral economics” innovates by probing relevant populations to get at their “notions” and related actions rather than assuming fit with an assumed model.

For Lasswell and his associates, new sorts of knowledge were needed to cope with stunning failures in domestic public policy, and with grave challenges from foreign “others” to favored conceptions about and even the existence of a just and humane world. The inventories would show variety from place to place and time to time. They would be useful for monitoring and countering politically malign actors, and designing strategies to improve and protect a valued political order.

Unsurprisingly, the landmark *The Policy Sciences* (Lerner and Lasswell 1951) included chapters by anthropologists (Kluckhohn on culture and Mead on national character), a sociologist (Shils on primary groups), and a social psychologist (Stouffer on how to discern what is really going on in large organizations). After the Second World War, work by Lasswell’s students and their students evolved in several directions with a common intent of arriving at more systematic policy and political system implications. Those efforts sought to organize notions used in official speech by policy elites into operational codes (e.g. Leites 1951; George 1969) and notions expressed by mass populations into profiles of national civic cultures (e.g. Almond and Verba 1963). Subsequent work presented alternative models of political cultures about major policy matters such as budgets and risk management (e.g. Wildavsky 1987, 1988; Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky 1990; Douglas and Wildavsky 1982); sweeping characterizations of particular national and regional political systems (e.g. Pye 1988; Pye and Pye 1985); thematic inventories of the notions and related actions of politicians in for them important situations (e.g. Fenno 1990 on US legislators); and reconstructions of the strategic rationales and related actions of ordinary (or even marginal) populations in encounters with public sector policies and institutions (e.g. Scott 1985, 1990 on Malaysian peasants).

It is important to note the scope of this legacy. The actors have ranged from elites to marginal populations, in the USA and abroad. The units have ranged from whole nations to small groups. The methods have ranged from at-a-distance analysis of public documents and interviews with émigrés to large-scale opinion surveys and direct observation (with more or less participation), and sometimes gone further to construct typologies and models. Both quantitative and qualitative tools have been used. To say that policy analysis needs to consider cultural and social factors as constraints and enablers is not to commit to a single methodology or type of data. It is, however, to commit to empirical enquiry, i.e. to beginning if not ending with “thick description” of what people say and do. For those an analyst holds to be of political and public policy interest, “If something is important to them, it becomes important to you. Their view of the world is as important as your view of that world” (Fenno 1990, 113–14).

Work in the Lasswellian tradition does not focus mostly on the texts of a few intellectuals. It does not assume that populations marginal to prevailing systems of power and wealth are especially worthy (or unworthy) of study or of public policy “voice.” Priorities should depend on what are crucial roles in the policy process and in its consequences, matters which differ across policy issues, options, and salient events. Deciding whose notions most call for understanding should not be confounded with moral judgements about who holds meritorious notions. Finally, the

Lasswellian tradition recognizes that the cultural and social information it would have us gather can be used for “emancipatory” or oppressive purposes.

### 3. COMING TO TERMS WITH VARIETY

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General laws of political behavior have obvious appeals. Yet public policy in application is less a general than a specific matter in terms of its when and where, who to whom, the options considered, and the consequences of options chosen. Accordingly, most general laws, be they of rational choice utilitarianism, prospect theory anchoring and loss aversion (Levy 1997), or social affiliation and identity (Sen 1977), provide only containers lacking situationally relevant operational content.<sup>5</sup> Applying the containers of utility, costs, and benefits involves imputing what the relevant actors treat as having more or less utility, cost, or benefit. Similar imputations, filling in, are required to get at what anchors are used and losses focused on, or what social affiliations are given great weight.

Policy-relevant applications of such laws involve accurately recognizing what participants pull from their containers to assess cause and effect relations between alternative courses of action in a situation and likely consequences. Excessively general, ahistorical labeling does little to illuminate why some population behaves as it does or what would lead it to act differently. Consider the variety of significations attached in different countries to visits by their heads of state and ordinary citizens to war casualty memorial sites, and even more distinctions between indigenous and foreign interpretations of such commemorative activities (as with domestic and international controversy about Japan’s Yasukuni Shinto Shrine; Nelson 2003).

A similar need to specify content in use applies to make informative such broad “classical” cultural and social categories as class, race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, age, or generation. Doing that will often reveal that the category may be a useful summary of aggregate outcomes, but not of much which bears on achieving changes in outcomes. Thus, Thompson and Wildavsky (1986) called for a shift “from economic homogeneity to cultural heterogeneity in the classification of poor people.” Suppose the category is being used to anticipate how those placed in it will respond to different policy treatments or interventions. Suppose further that the members of the category have more than one behavioral choice open to them during the time period during which a policy is supposed to accomplish its desired consequences. For

<sup>5</sup> To recognize a dimension of possible difference is of course to recognize one of possible similarity. That still leaves a need for content to substantiate contentions about the predominance of similarity or difference (as argued in Johnston 1995).

example, in the context of US election-related quarantine policies toward Castro's Cuba, it matters if relevant voters in Florida think of themselves as primarily Hispanic Americans or as Cuban Americans, and give more weight to ties with relatives in Cuba or to a vision of regime change there.

Realizing the policy maker's anticipations (Cuban-American votes) depends then on the "notions" of the targets with respect to: (a) their giving membership or identity primacy to the general category over subdivisions of it and over other categories; and (b) their "notions" as they lead them to recognize and evaluate alternatives open to them as category members. The targets are not clay but intentional actors from whom passive compliance and uniform reactions are not givens. Differences in (interpreted) experience with particular public institutions can lead to different general notions of effectiveness in dealing with public institutions and participating in politics more generally (as Soss 1999 found for recipients of two cash-providing US social safety net programs administered in contrasting ways). Specific content will still be needed even if claims are true that we are in an era of new, post-industrial broad categories replacing the "classical" ones (e.g. Clark and Hoffman-Martinet 1998; Inglehart 1990).

Suppose that the use of familiar categories follows less from an intent to shape the ostensible target population and more from judgements about how third parties (e.g. majority populations, taxpayers, allied governments) will react to invocations of a category label—e.g. "welfare cheats" or "the deserving poor," "terrorists" or "liberation fighters." Third-party reactions will depend on their "notions" about the members of the target category in relation to the salient situation. Other policy elites, bureaucrats, or populations which can reward or punish the invoker can use notions far different from those of the ostensible target population. When they do, public policies can produce desired behaviors and interpretations by almost everyone but it. The post 9/11 USA Patriot Act arguably has impacted less on those who would commit terrorist actions than on the general population and a host of government agencies. That bears some resemblance to what Edelman (1977) had in mind when he evaluated American anti-poverty programs as "words that succeed and policies that fail."

Talk about cultures or subcultures in relation to public policy usually follows from an image of a set of people whose relevant notions and actions differ from some historical, existing, or imaginable set of people. Differences get our attention when we think they constrain or enable some relative to other policies and policy processes. What contribution such talk will make to the analysis and conduct of public policy depends on awareness of the multiple dimensions of difference the world offers, and on the breadth and depth of efforts to understand how particular differences get applied to specific situations.

Cultures and subcultures and their members can differ in the dimensions of difference their notions identify. They can differ in the number of distinctions made on a given dimension and the distance between points on a dimension, e.g. about what religious or ethnic differences make a marriage mixed. They can differ in the value they place on being different or even unique. They can differ in how