

# Limits of policy-making essay



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In today's society, policy makers face many limitations in the policy-making process.

The biggest limitation to date is the ever-increasing pluralistic values inherent in society. A pluralistic approach can be defined as “ different groups... in society are divided by ideology, economic and cultural factors; all seeking to have their interests reflected in public policy”<sup>1</sup> These competing interests from such groups as politicians, interest groups and the media play a big role in the outcomes of policy making. Other important factors in the limitations of policy-making include the short time horizon that politicians have to pass policy, as well as the unequal distribution of wealth; where the elite groups in society have the most financial and social clout, and therefore the most influence on the policy-making process. This essay will continue to describe the aforementioned limitations on policy makers, as well as discuss whether or not these limitations are necessary and/or functional; whether or not they serve a useful purpose or any particular interests; and whether or not they are a hindrance or help to effective, honest and meaningful policy-making.

The biggest limitation facing policymaking these days are the competing interests of several different groups. As McCool describes, “ Public policies are the product of many individuals with different values, preferences, beliefs and knowledge”<sup>2</sup> Firstly, it is politicians who make policy. Their main objective is to keep their jobs and therefore make policy that will get them votes in the next election. Successful politicians are ones who pass policies that will keep them in office or gain approval from other politicians or bureaucrats.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, interest groups attempt to influence policy makers

to achieve their own ends; which may or not be good for society as a whole.

In her introduction to the policy making process, Pal makes this clear : “ Each player or set of players tries to influence the policy process in their favour, to achieve the outcomes which reflect their interests.

4 So when certain groups participate in policy-making, it is only to defend their own interests. 5 Lastly, the media also plays a huge role in what topics get raised in the policy making process because the media has the greatest influence on what the public perceives to be important. For example, In a 1997 survey by Katherine Beckett, 90% of those polled said that the media represents the principle source of information about crime” 6 This wouldn’t be a problem in and of itself, but the for the most part the edia does not accurately portray current goings on in society. Instead, they too act in their own interest -that is ratings - and sensationalize much of what we see, and therefore skew what topics are thrown at policy makers.

Ismaili explains : “ This is manifested when policy makers interpret heightened media coverage as an indication of public concern warranting public action or as an opportunity for political exposure and/or direct political gain. 7 In the case of criminal justice policy Surette explains that “ The media do not provide the public with enough knowledge to directly evaluate the criminal justice system’s performance, but media content steers people toward particular policies and assessments. ” 8 Clearly, these three groups : politicians, interest groups, and the media are pursuing their own competing interests when it comes to policy making. But are their interests necessary or functional? For all three groups, competing for their interests, whether it is a

seat in office, or TV ratings are necessary for all three groups to keep their jobs. If their interests aren't met, they will lose their jobs.

For the media's case, it's not that they cannot show less sensationalized news analysis, but they cannot afford to do it, 9 The same problem goes for interest groups, if they cannot lobby their cause and receive government's financial assistance, they cannot survive. Furthermore, do these competing interest groups serve a useful purpose? In the case of politicians, bringing their own interests to bear does serve a useful purpose. If politicians want to make a real difference in any policy area, they must first keep their position. As Wilson states, " A political party without power cannot make policy.

" 10 Most interests groups also serve a useful purpose, as their causes are typically to improve society, such as MADD (mothers against drunk driving) or the CNCEW ( the Canadian National Coalition of Experiential Women, who fights for human rights for women involved in and around sex work). On the other hand, it is hard to think of any useful purpose the media serves, except for entertainment, which could be argues is not all that useful. Finally, the competing interest groups can hinder the honest, meaningful and effective policy making because policy makers must sift through every group's cause and attempt to decide which groups should have their causes met. As stated before, the media has the most negative influence because it does not accurately portray the current state of society. Another limit to the policy making process is the short ime horizon that politicians stay in office.

Their terms mostly last for only four years, which only makes room for about three years of political planning because the fourth year is dedicated to

planning for the next election. Again Wilson proclaims : “ Undoubtedly, the strongest incentive against the rational setting of, and adherence to, priorities is found in the inexorable ticking of the electoral clock. ” 11 On one hand, although it is a major limitation to policy making, the four-year stint in office is necessary. Politicians are known to promise things during election time that they may or may not deliver.

Once a politician holds a majority in office, he has almost free reign (assuming he is backed by his political party) to make decisions that will affect society as a whole. If we were to extend to the length of time held in office, it would give far too much power to the governing politician for far too long a time. On the other hand, having such a short time horizon also serves a useful purpose. As noted earlier, the main goal of politicians is to stay in office. The accouterments of public office – salary, prestige, status and influence – are valued and coveted...” 12 . The short time horizon provides a reason for competition between politicians.

They know must fight for votes if they want to stay in office. Competition amounts to a more qualified pool of competitors. This, in turn, will mean a more qualified elected official whose policies influence our society so greatly. In this sense, the short time horizon is a help to the effective, meaningful and honest policymaking process. However, there is a negative side. The process of policy-making is a very lengthy one.

With a limited time frame, only a small amount of policies can be passed during a certain periods. This could result in some important policies not being brought to the table, simply because of the lack of resources to

process all policies that some groups may consider very pertinent. One last limitation to the policy-making process has very significant consequences. Although all interest groups may have an equally important cause, not all voices get heard.

Certain groups have more financial resources than others. Some groups have more political influence than others. As stated above, the limited time horizon of holding office only allows certain policy proposals to be presented. Those groups with greater resources will have their voices heard far louder than smaller groups; whether or not their causes are more legitimate or not. Dahl ascertains that “...Beneath the facade of democratic politics a social and economic elite will usually be found running things.

13 “ Offenders, victims, and various other marginal groups have little access to the political process...” 14, Fairchild explains. Therefore, even if victim groups and the homeless may have just as much justification in their cries for help through policy, they do not have the resources to make their claims known. Although the power of the more elite groups is not necessarily equitable, the argument could be made that it is an inevitable consequence of our increasingly industrialized, pluralistic society and therefore necessary at this point in time. Dahl explains that the “ Concentration of power in the hands of an elite is a necessary consequence...of the enormous inequalities in the distributions of resources of influence – property, income, social status, knowledge, publicity, local position, and all the rest. ” 15

Furthermore, from the government’s point of view, listening to the more elite groups serves a particular purpose in that these groups are typically much more organized and already have some financial backing.

This makes backing their policies not only more time efficient, but more cost efficient as well. Cost and time are two important factors in the policy-making process. The fact that the powerful elite usurps the attention of government officials certainly serves a useful purpose for the interest groups involved. With the right amount of resources, their causes get attention and they can have their desired policies passed and receive more funding from the government.

It also serves a useful purpose for government in two ways: it gains the votes of this so-called elite group that is “actually running things” and can also mean positive media coverage for the elected officials. Both of these reasons will help keep these politicians in office: their ultimate goal. It certainly does NOT serve any purpose for the interest groups without adequate resources. Even with a legitimate cause, their voices will not be heard. This in turn is definitely a hindrance to the effective, honest and meaningful policy-making process. These elite groups only account for a small amount of the population.

The rest of us, with certain legitimate concerns are put on the back burner to make room for the elite groups are typically looking out for themselves, and not society as a whole. In conclusion, it is evident that policy makers face many limitations in the policy making process. The most significant limitations include the fact that every group – politicians, media, and interest groups – are looking out for their own interests first, the short time horizon given to process policy-making, and the fact that only the interest groups with social and economic clout are heard. In our pluralistic society today, it seems difficult to believe that we will ever have policies that everyone can

agree on. Dahl says it well when he asks "...In a political system where nearly every adult may vote, but where knowledge, wealth, social position, access to officials, and other resources are unequally distributed, who actually governs? " 16 End Notes 1. O’Gorman Stinson, Lori, “ CRM2308 B Class slides, Week 4, slide 16 2.

McCool, “ The Process of Policy Making” pg126 3. McCool, “ The Process of Policy Making” pg 126 4. Pal, “ Public Policy Analysis : an Introduction” pg 116 5. Pal, “ Public Policy Analysis : an Introduction” pg 103 6.

Ismaili, “ Contextualizing the Criminal Justice Policy-Making Process” pg 266 7. Ismaili, “ Contextualizing the Criminal Justice Policy-Making Process” pg 266 8. Surette, “ The Media and Criminal Justice Policy” pg 218 9. Surette, “ The Media and Criminal Justice Policy” pg 219 10. Wilson, “ From Inception to Assent : The Life of a Bill” pg 91 11. Wilson, “ From Inception to Assent : The Life of a Bill” pg 91 12.

Wilson, “ From Inception to Assent : The Life of a Bill” pg 92 13. Dahl, “ Who Governs? ” pg 104 14. Fairchild, “ Interest Groups in the Criminal Justice Process” pg 189 15. Dahl, “ Who Governs? ” pgs 104-105 16.

Dahl, “ Who Governs? ” pg 100