Chapter 2
What is policy and policymaking?

Key themes of this chapter:

- We need to define public policy to measure and explain policy change. However, there is no definition able to describe fully the richness of policy.
- One solution is to identify policy ‘tools’ and ‘instruments’ to measure policy change. This approach highlights the politics of policymaking, in which some policy changes are easier to sell or deliver than others.
- Another solution is to construct and compare narratives of policy change by interpreting the relative importance of key measures.
- We then need to define and identify the key elements of policymaking.
- A classic starting point is to identify key stages – including policy formulation and implementation - in a ‘policy cycle’. The cycle is best understood as an ideal-type to compare with real world policymaking.
- New concepts and theories help explain how policy is made in a more complex policymaking environment.

‘Public policy’ is important because the scope of the state extends to almost all aspects of our lives. However, it is one of many terms in political science – like democracy, equality and power – that are well known but difficult to define. The problem of definition is more than semantic: it affects how we analyse and understand real policy issues. Different definitions, drawing on different aspects of the policy process, give us multiple perspectives and set the agenda for the study of policymaking.

Therefore, the first aim of this chapter is to explore such definitions. It does not produce a comprehensive description. Rather, it identifies the key points that arise from the public policy literature when we analyse any definition in more detail. For example, policy can refer to an aim, a decision or an outcome. It may refer to issues that policymakers do not to address. Further, it is made and influenced by many actors who may or may not have formal authority.

The second aim is to think about how to identify and measure policy change. This task is easier said than done, but a useful starting point is to draw on established ways to categorize policy measures, with reference to the broad policy ‘tools’ (such as regulatory) or specific ‘instruments’ (such as a piece of legislation) used by governments to produce policy change. Such typologies show us that different kinds of policy measures are associated with different styles of politics because they are more or less easy to sell and deliver (Lowi, 1964; John, 1998: 7–8; 2011). A key tenet of the public policy literature is that we need to identify and account for this variation. Policy outcomes and processes vary according to the political system and territory, time period, policy issue, and measures we study.
This variation makes it difficult to characterize policy change. Although we can identify the types of policy instruments available to policymakers, the list of measures is long and it is difficult to know how significant each decision will be. Indeed, the more measures or decisions there are, the greater potential the researcher has to construct different stories of policy change. There is always more than one way to interpret the significance and direction of policy from the evidence available. This point may prompt us to consider different ‘narratives’ of policymaking depending on which policy decisions we attach the most importance (Cairney, 2013a).

This problem of defining and measuring policy is magnified when we account for the complex policymaking environment in which policy is made. Frameworks, theories, concepts, and models help us make sense of policy processes. For example, the policy cycle model provides a classic starting point, in which policy is made in stages including formulation, implementation, and evaluation. The model helps us identify a difference between a policymaker’s intention and the policy outcome, and has prompted a considerable literature devoted to the ‘implementation gap’. The cycle metaphor also suggests that the evaluation stage of policy one represents the first stage of policy two, as lessons learned in the past inform choices in the future. Policymaking is a continuous process rather than a single event; different actors are influential at different stages and previous decisions set the agenda for future decisions.

Yet, although a useful starting point, the cycle is best understood as an ideal-type to compare with real world policymaking. Concepts and theories help explain how policy is actually made in a more complex policymaking environment. So, this chapter considers the limits to a focus on stages to help explain the added value of policy theories.

**What is public policy?**
Hogwood and Gunn (1984: 13–19) identify different ways to understand ‘policy’: as a label for a field of activity (e.g. health policy); an expression of intent (e.g. ‘we will improve healthcare’); specific proposals (e.g. a manifesto or white paper); decisions of government and the formal authorization of decisions (e.g. legislation); a programme, or package of legislation, staffing and funding; intermediate and ultimate outputs (e.g. more doctors, better medical care); outcomes, or what is actually achieved (better societal health); and a process and series of decisions, not an event and single decision. Box 2.1 provides further descriptions of public policy, but the literature generally questions our ability to define policy (Smith and Larimer, 2009: 3–4; 25; 239; Colebatch, 1998: 72–3).

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 2.1 Definitions and Descriptions of Public Policy</th>
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<td>Whatever governments choose to do or not to do (Dye in Birkland, 2005: 18)</td>
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<td>The actions of government and the intentions that determine those actions (Cochran et al in Birkland, 2005: 18)</td>
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Decisions by governments to retain the status quo are just as much policy as are decisions to alter it (Howlett and Ramesh, 2003: 5).

Diverse activities by different bodies are drawn together into stable and predictable patterns of action which (as often as not) come to be labelled ‘policy’ (Colebatch, 1998: x)

Policy designs are observable phenomena found in statutes, administrative guidelines, court decrees, programs, and even the practices and procedures of street level bureaucrats (Schneider and Ingram, 1997: 2)

There is an underlying assumption that policy is a good thing, that it fixes things up. Policy makers are the ones who do the fixing (Bacchi, 2009: ix on the perils of making too many assumptions in policy analysis)

The next best thing is to explore the issues that arise when we start with a simple definition. Defining public policy as the ‘sum total of government action’ (Chapter 1) raises four key questions:

1. **Does government action include what policymakers say they will do as well as what they actually do?**

   Political parties produce manifestos and elected officials produce speeches describing their plans, but should we wait until those plans are carried out until we call them policy? This may seem appropriate because policymaking is often symbolic and policymakers often make statements to look like they are doing something (Althaus et al, 2007: 5; Dearlove in Colebatch, 1998: 9). Yet, it is difficult to know when to say that an aim has been pursued enough to constitute policy. Few would say that legislation is not policy until the budget is agreed to carry it out, but what about a consultation document officially setting out the government’s plans? The identification of substantive policy measures is often more art than science.

2. **Does policy include the effects of a decision as well as the decision itself?**

   We need to: (a) focus on policy outcomes as well as decisions; and, (b) recognize that those outcomes are influenced by factors outwith the control of policymakers. For example, they can ensure that money is put aside to pay for an output such as doctors or teachers. However, they can do less to ensure an outcome, such as an improvement on the health or education of the nation, because it also relies on the behaviour of the population (Colebatch, 1998: 114).

3. **What is ‘the government’ and does it include elected and unelected policymakers?**

   It is worth considering how actors gain membership within the policy process (Colebatch, 1998: 16; Hale, 1988). They may have a recognized source of authority, such as presidents and elected members of the legislature. Or, they may have a recognized form of expertise that gives them policy influence, or be required to make sure that policy decisions are carried out, such as interest groups and civil servants (Colebatch, 1998: 18–

4. Does public policy include what policymakers do not do?

Policymakers may ignore an issue, or attempt to look like they are addressing it, because: it is low on their list of priorities; they do not have the means to solve the problem; and/or, they know that they will face opposition if they try. Or, they may not consider an issue to be a problem. While some of these reasons may seem innocuous, they raise crucial issues of power and agenda setting discussed in Chapters 3 and 9. In many cases, issues are low on the agenda because actors exercise power to reinforce social attitudes – for example about the causes of poverty (Bachrach and Baratz, 1970) - or manipulate decision-making procedures. In some cases, this absence of attention allows policy to be processed without a formal statement of intent by elected policymakers (Colebatch, 1998: 99), raising important questions about who is accountable for the outcomes.

Overall, it is difficult to define policy, identify policymakers, and therefore provide certainty on the meaning of policymaking! This uncertainty makes it especially difficult to hope for ‘evidence based’ policy (Box 2.2).

**Box 2.2 ‘Evidence based’ policy and policymaking**

If it is hard to define policy and policymaking, it is even harder to define ‘evidence based’ policy and policymaking (Cairney, 2016a: 2). There is no single accepted definition of policy. There are blurry lines between the actors making and influencing policy. Although we can define evidence simply ‘as an argument or assertion backed by information’, there is much dispute about what counts as good evidence (2016a: 3). There is even disagreement about the metaphor to employ, with ‘based’ often seeming too absolute and ‘informed’ more realistic (Nutley et al, 2007). Consequently, many discussions of ‘evidence based policy’ are confusing ‘because people begin by complaining that they don’t have it without really saying what it is’ (Cairney, 2016a: 4). The same problem arises in definitions of policymaking. Key policymakers and practitioners describe a far messier policy process than the image portrayed by the policy cycle (Topp et al, 2018; Gluckman, 2011; Cairney, 2017a).

**Measuring public policy**

However, we can rely on well-established techniques to make the task of policy studies more manageable. The first solution is to identify different types of public policy, including broadly defined policy ‘tools’ (Box 2.3) and more specific ‘instruments’. When we begin to identify a wide range of instruments, it soon looks like an overwhelming list of measures (Cairney et al, 2012; Birkland, 2017; Wu et al, 2017):

1. **Public expenditure.** Deciding how to tax, how much money to raise, on which policy areas (crime, health, education) to spend and the balance between current (e.g. the wages of doctors) and capital (building a new hospital) spending.
Economic penalties, such as taxation on the sale of certain products, or charges to use services.

Economic incentives, such as subsidies to farmers or tax expenditure on certain spending (giving to charity, buying services such as health insurance).

Linking government-controlled benefits to behaviour (e.g. seeking work to qualify for unemployment benefits) or a means test.

The use of formal regulations or legislation to control behaviour.

Voluntary regulations, such as agreements between governments and other actors such as unions and business.

Linking the provision of public services to behaviour (e.g. restricting the ability of smokers to foster children).

Legal penalties, such as when the courts approve restrictions on, or economic sanctions against, organizations.

Public education and advertising to highlight the risks to certain behaviours, or ‘nudge’ techniques to influence individual choices.

Providing services and resources to help change behaviour.

Providing resources to tackle illegal behaviour.

Funding organizations to influence public, media and government attitudes.

Funding scientific research or advisory committee work.

Organizational change, such as the establishment of a new unit within a government department or a reform of local government structures.

Providing services directly, or via non-governmental organizations or via networks of public and private actors.

Providing a single service or setting up quasi-markets.

Providing state services for free, charging, or expecting the market to deliver.

Therefore, there is great value in providing a smaller and more manageable list of types of policy instrument, provided by the literature on policy tools (Box 2.3).

**Box 2.3 Policy Tools: their use and potential abuse**

Lowi (1964; 1972) distinguishes between regulatory, distributive, redistributive and constituent policies to argue that each measure is more or less difficult to sell and deliver. Subsequent typologies reflect some changes in the nature of measures available to, or preferred by, policymakers. Hood and Margetts (2007: 5-6) identify four types: *Nodality* describes being at the centre of the information network that underpins policy development; *Authority* refers to the power of policymakers to legislate and regulate; *Treasure* describes the money or resources available to support their policy decisions; *Organisation* describes the resources and coordinative capacity – such as staff, buildings, and technology – at their disposal. Combined, these tools highlight a range of potential central government roles in ‘public administration’, from directing public service delivery at the centre, to delegating authority and providing guidance with no obligation to comply (Hughes, 2017).
John (2011) draws on an expanded list of tools, including a focus on persuasion and the rise of psychological techniques to influence social behaviour, including the now famous ‘nudge’ method (Box 7.1) based on exploiting the ways in which ‘cognitive bias’ informs choices (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008). Pykett et al (2017) describe nudge often negatively as one type of ‘psychological governance’ to shape the way that citizens think or behave (see also Chapter 3 on Foucault). It contrasts with a more positive relationship with citizens during the ‘co-production’ of policy with service users (Durose and Richardson, 2015; Durose et al, 2017), as well as the many ‘tools of policy formulation’ used to generate good information before making choices (Jordan and Turnpenny, 2015). However, bear in mind that, if governments are aware of how their policy tools look, they may pay lip service to positive tools while actually using the full range. Or, they simply add new tools and instruments to a pile of existing measures (Peters et al, 2018: 8).

This focus on tools highlights a strong relationship between the type of measure and its political costs. For example, Lowi (1964; 1972: 299; Smith, 2002) argues that ‘policies determine politics’: the nature of the policy measure, and the level of coercion required to implement it, determines how policy is made. For example, in the case of redistribution, the difficulty relates to the sense that some populations clearly benefit at the expense of others (such as taxing A to provide benefits to B). Or, it highlights fundamental debates about how far the state should be allowed to go to tax and regulate the lives of its citizens. Distribution produces a reduced sense that one social group visibly benefits from public funding at the expense of another. Distributive policies, providing a benefit to a social group, also differ from regulatory policies if the latter incur costs (to comply or be fined) on individuals and private companies (Lowi, 1964: 690–1).

There are also variable effects within broad categories: ‘regulation’ ranges from energetic ‘enforcement’ using harsh penalties, to ‘standard setting’ and encouragement (Lodge and Weigrich, 2012). In each case, the likely effect of policy on individuals will influence their levels of opposition, the ways in which they mobilize to influence policy, and the amount of government coercion required to ensure success: ‘every category of policy has its own political dynamic’ (Lowi, 1988: 726; McCool, 1995: 246–8).

The boundaries between each type of tool are blurry and many policy measures can include elements of each (Steinberger, 1980; John, 1998: 7; Smith and Larimer 2009: 41). Policy measures also mean different things to different people, making it difficult for governments to predict and anticipate how individuals will mobilize in reaction to them (2009: 42). The idea that ‘policies determine politics’ should be treated with caution; Lowi’s point was that too many people assumed that policy analysis should begin with a discussion of policymaker aims rather than their environment, including the audience they face. Policymakers may act differently when they face different policy problems, or be more or less motivated to incur political costs. Different policy areas often have different characteristics, present different problems to solve, have different participants, and are associated with different styles of policymaking. They also have different starting points based on the legacies of past decisions (John, 1998: 7–8; Smith and Larimer, 2009: 234; Hill, 2009: ch7).
Narratives of public policy

A focus on such a wide range of policy instruments and scenarios suggests that we may come to different conclusions on the nature of policy when we examine different indicators (or interpret the same indicators differently). Our ability to analyse all of the measures that constitute ‘policy’ will always be limited and we may have different ideas about which measures are the most important (Lavis et al., 2002). Similarly, governments have far more aims than they could possibly deliver, each aim competes for attention and resources, and some of them contradict each other. This problem often prompts them to identify a small list of priorities from a huge list of stated aims (Barber, 2012).

For example, we may identify a high-profile policy measure that involves the use of legislation but does not have the money or resources to ensure that the policy aim is fulfilled. Or, we may find more successful examples of low-key, informal and unfunded agreements, between the government and other actors, to pursue a common aim (although see Baggott, 1986). In practice, most areas will contain a complex mix of high and low profile, formal and informal, funded and unfunded, successful and unsuccessful decisions, and the aim of the researcher is to identify the most important policies from a long list of actions.

The scope for different perspectives is demonstrated well by interview research. For example, I have interviewed interest groups, favouring tobacco control, who viewed UK legislation to ban tobacco advertising and smoking in public places as a watershed in public policy because previous regulatory measures were based on badly enforced voluntary agreements between the government and the tobacco and leisure industries. I have also interviewed government actors who argue that such legislation represents incrementalism because other policy instruments demonstrate a clear direction of travel towards tobacco control (Cairney, 2007a). Such competing accounts cannot be rejected simply because they are biased. All accounts are biased in the sense that they are based on a limited number of indicators, the decision to give some indicators more weight, and an interpretation of the motivation behind, or effect of, policy measures. The potential for different interpretations comes from many sources, including:

- **The timeframe.** We may conclude that nothing much has changed in the short term but that a lot has changed in the long term, or vice versa. ‘Vignette’ studies focus in detail on one key event, while historical studies track policy change over decades.

- **The level or type of government we study.** Policy can often be made by a wide range of organizations (executives, legislatures, courts, devolved authorities, agencies), but influenced by a range of non-governmental actors. If we ‘zoom in’ to analyse key organisations we might miss the dynamic of the wider political system; if we ‘zoom out’ we might miss important organisational details.

- **Our expectations.** When we identify policy change we link it, at least implicitly, to a yardstick based on how much we expect it to change (e.g. based on who we think is powerful) and how much we think policy should change under the
circumstances (e.g. given the size of the problem or the level of public attention). Crenson’s (1971) study examines why some policymakers did not do enough to control pollution when its effect became well known (Chapter 3), while Cairney et al (2012) explore the same argument on limited tobacco control.

- **Motivation.** Economic sanctions can be introduced to change behaviour or raise money. Policymakers can introduce measures to: satisfy a particular interest or constituency and ensure a boost to their popularity, do something that is relatively easy to achieve in the short term; or, focus on long term outcomes (perhaps to fulfil a commitment based on fundamental beliefs). The distinction is crucial if the political weight behind a measure affects its success (McConnell, 2010).

- **Statistical comparisons.** We may describe spending on an issue as a proportion of Gross Domestic Product, the government budget, or the policy area’s budget, or in terms of change from last year versus over many years. In some cases, the amount of money spent by government could be compared with that spent by industry (e.g. Cairney 2007a compares health education with tobacco companies’ advertising budgets). Or, the level of fines or taxes could be compared to the incomes of individuals or organizations (e.g. imagine a $1m fine on a small business versus Amazon).

- **Contradictory and inconsistent policies.** Things become complicated when governments appear to pursue contradictory policies in one area, or policies in one field that have unintended consequences for another (such as when school expulsion policies affect youth crime).

- **Researcher bias.** Richardson (1982a: 199) argues that most policy is processed in less visible and contentious arenas despite an understandable tendency for researchers to focus on ‘spectacular’ policy activity. Bacchi (1999: 200) argues that many policy scholars see themselves (incorrectly) as separate from the policy issues and processes they study, rather than people with personal ideas about the nature of policy problems and who should solve them.

One possible response is to construct and share different narratives of policy development. It is possible to produce competing and equally plausible accounts of the type, speed and nature of change for the same policy issue or series of events. This recommendation does not look particularly striking, but our choice of narrative has a crucial effect on the value of each theory. For example, theories of public policy that seek, primarily, to explain policy continuity are reinforced by narratives highlighting incremental change but not by narratives highlighting radical policy change. In other words, theories are only valuable if the evidence supports them, but the evidence is rarely incontrovertible (Head, 2008). Since it is difficult to talk of the evidence with certainty, we should not pretend otherwise just to bolster our pet theories and make our published studies seem important.

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**Narrative** – an account of a series of events; a non-fictional story. An attempt to ‘render various series of events into an intelligible whole’ (Kay, 2006: 23). Compare with Box 4.4.
Frameworks, theories, models and heuristics

**Heuristic device** – a tool used to guide investigation; learning based on direct investigation using models or ideal types.

**Framework.** For Ostrom (1999: 39-40), *frameworks* identify concepts and organize analysis, *theories* make general assumptions about the causal relationships between concepts, and *models* make specific assumptions about objects of enquiry (but see Cairney, 2013).

The final way to make sense of policy complexity is to use frameworks and apply models and theories. The initial aim of a model is to provide a simplified representation of a specific object or process. It need not be a completely accurate representation. For example, think of a model car (McCool, 1995: x), or the London Underground map (Parsons, 1995: 59–61). A model can be used as a guide to description; to simplify and manage analysis by identifying the key features of a more complex entity. It serves as a **heuristic device** to help describe the real thing.

A theory is more difficult to define, and there is some disagreement on how to define it, but let’s work with ‘a set of analytical principles or statements designed to structure our observation and explanation of the world’. For me, a theory sets out the object of study’s essential features and the relationship between those features (compare with *frameworks* in Chapter 7). Theories tell us what to look for and help explain what we find. Our initial aim when we use theories is to identify policy decisions and their main causes. Our ultimate aim is to examine the extent to which we can identify the same causes in other situations and therefore generalize from specific to numerous instances. Their usefulness is based on the idea that, although the world is immensely complex, we can still identify a manageable number of factors that explain what happens within it (Sabatier, 2007a: 5; John, 1998: 8). We might also hope that the theory is parsimonious; it explains to us what is happening in an efficient and not too-complicated way.

The theory-building process can often be divided into two stages. First, we move from the detailed identification of key events and decisions in particular cases, towards the identification of abstract ideas that apply across all cases. Second, we use those abstract ideas to inform our study of subsequent case studies and, in doing so, attempt to confirm or deny the value of the theory (a difficult task, to say the least – see Chalmers, 1999; Cairney, 2013a; Chapter 13).

For example, Baumgartner and Jones’ (1993) work on ‘punctuated equilibrium’ began as a way to explain why certain groups were able to exert power by monopolizing not only access to decision makers but also the way that people understood and addressed policy problems. They used rich case studies on tobacco, nuclear power, the environment and pesticides in the US. Then, Jones and Baumgartner (2005) developed the ‘general punctuation hypothesis’: a more abstract theory, based on the ability of policymakers to process information and pay attention to policy issues, with the potential to be applicable to all policy areas and beyond the US (Chapter 9).

However, no-one has managed to produce a theory applicable to public policy as a whole (Smith and Larimer, 2009: 15–17; Chapter 13). The world is too complex, and
there are too many causes of outcomes (some of which seem exclusive to individual cases), to allow for truly parsimonious explanation. Parsimonious theories are valuable but only to explain part of the process. Consequently, much of the public policy literature represents ‘thick description’; a process of modelling or mapping out complex terrain (John, 1998: 8–9; Hill, 1997: 2). Overall, the choice may be between using models to map particular outcomes and theories to explain many outcomes, but the boundaries between the two are not clear: both processes are based on the identification of the essential features of the world and how they relate to each other; and, the same model may be applicable to many cases, while some theories do not explain much beyond their initial case studies (despite the best efforts of their authors). Or, if many theories are useful, perhaps we can combine their insights (Chapter 13).

**What is the policy cycle?**

The policy cycle is the best known way to organize the study of policymaking (and the best way to introduce a discussion of policy theories). It is tempting to view the policy cycle as a theory because it is used to represent the policy process in multiple political systems. The same can be said for many of its stages – terms such as ‘agenda setting’ and ‘implementation’ are widely applicable. Yet, it is generally viewed as a simple model of complex processes which does not explain, for example, why issues arise on the policy agenda or why a particular decision is made. It is a model in two related ways:

1. **Prescription** – a model for how policymakers *should* operate, to make sure that their decisions are made in a systematic way.
2. **Description** – a model to describe how they *do* operate, to simplify the study of how they make decisions (Hogwood and Gunn, 1984: 42–3).

It divides the policy process into a series of stages, from a notional starting point at which policymakers begin to think about a policy problem to a notional end point at which a policy has been implemented and policymakers think about how successful it has been before deciding what to do next. The image is of a continuous process rather than a single event. There is some variation in the literature regarding the number of stages in a policy cycle, but most describe the identification of policymaker aims, the formulation of policies to achieve those aims, the selection and legitimation of policy measures, implementation and evaluation. Lasswell (1956) set the ball rolling with a short text highlighting essential policymaking *functions* (or requirements) - intelligence, recommendation, prescription, invocation, application, appraisal and termination – rather than stages in a cycle. In Jones’ (1970) book, each stage commands a chapter: defining the problem, setting the government’s agenda, formulating proposals, having a programme or coherent set of proposals legitimated by the legislature, assigning a budget, implementing and evaluating policy (see also Anderson, 1975; and Brewer and deLeon, 1983: 18–20; Smith and Larimer, 2009: 30; Parsons, 1995: 78–9).

Most texts were based on the US political system which enjoys a strong legislature and a budget process that must be agreed between the executive and legislative branches.
This explains why the legitimation and budgeting stages receive more attention than they might in a study of centralized, parliamentary systems. However, in a more abstract sense, the model portrays how any government attempts to translate ‘inputs’ such as public demands into ‘outputs’ such as public policies (Hill and Varone, 2016). Further, the idea that this is how the cycle should operate in a democratic system is widespread: the public expresses its will in elections, elected policymakers fulfil their promises and legitimize their decisions at separate stages, then civil servants and other bodies carry them out (Jann and Wegrich, 2007: 44). Comparable models for the UK and US (Hogwood and Peters, 1983: 8; Hogwood and Gunn, 1984: 7–11; Jenkins, 1978) and for Australia (Althaus et al., 2013; Bridgman and Davis, 2003: 100; Howard, 2005: 10–11), produced a very similar list of stages (set out in Figure 2.1):

**Figure 2.1 The Generic Policy Cycle**

- **Agenda setting.** Identifying problems that require government attention, deciding which issues deserve the most attention and defining the nature of the problem.
- **Policy formulation.** Setting objectives, identifying the cost and estimating the effect of solutions, choosing from a list of solutions and selecting policy instruments.
- **Legitimation.** Ensuring that the chosen policy instruments have support. Measures include legislative approval, executive approval, seeking consent through consultation with interest groups, and referenda.
- **Implementation.** Establishing or employing an organization to take responsibility for implementation, ensuring that the organization has the resources (staffing, money, legal authority), and decisions are carried out as planned.
• **Evaluation.** Assessing the extent to which the policy was successful; if the policy was appropriate, implemented correctly, and had the desired effect.

• **Policy maintenance, succession or termination.** Considering if the policy should be continued, modified or discontinued.

While the use of the cycle to explain policymaking has diminished, many of the stages or functions of policymaking still command their own literature, and the model provides simple descriptive lessons (the study of public policy does not end when a decision has been made) and prescriptive advice (think about implementation when you engage in formulation – Malbon, 2019).

**Agenda setting and policy formulation**

The study of agenda setting is really the study of power and ideas (Chapter 3), and discussed at length as part of our discussion of punctuated equilibrium theory (Chapter 9). Similarly, policy formulation (and legitimation) involves the production and selection of technically and politically feasible ‘policy solutions’, which forms part of a wider discussion of multiple streams analysis (Chapter 11). However, since this book focuses somewhat on ‘evidence based policymaking’ (Box 2.2), we should note two key points about these stages.

First, it is tempting to see each stage as part of a dry and technical process. However, agenda setting involves a fundamentally important competition to exercise power to define issues as policy problems and establish their severity and cause. Bacchi (1999; 2009) warns against assuming that policy problems exist naturally. Rather, we need to ‘think about policy in anthropological terms’, to understand how any dominant way to think of an issue came to be: why is the government involved in the first place, how does it describe the nature of the problem, who does it blame, who should benefit from any solution, and how much is it willing to help (2009: ix)? This process can involve evidence, but politics is about exercising power to establish how we understand the world, which goes well beyond the routine search for information. Other practices, including telling stories about policy issues (NPF) and characterising target populations (SCPD) are a key feature of Chapter 4.

Second, the ‘tools of policy formulation’ come in several forms, designed to ensure good decision-making procedures (e.g. to maximise public participation), policy implementation (e.g. regulations), and effective policy analysis (Howlett 2000, 2011; Radin, 2000; 2013; Turnpenny et al, 2015). The latter involves using evidence to generate a number of feasible solutions to meet a policy aim. This field has expanded in a big way, partly to reflect the proliferation of methods – from decision trees, to cost-benefit analyses, and complex systems modelling - to gather and analyse information (2015: 4). However, the availability of analytical tools does not match their use: there are waves of government interest in investing in them (2015: 4) and, even when they invest heavily in sophisticated tools, there is no guarantee that policymakers will actually *use* them (Nilsson et al, 2008: 335).
Implementation
The study of implementation is based on the simple point that decisions made by policymakers may not be carried out successfully. Instead, we can identify an implementation ‘gap’ which represents the difference between the stated expectations of policymakers and actual policy outcomes (deLeon, 1999: 314–5; Hill and Hupe, 2009: 11). Hogwood and Gunn (1984: 197) attribute implementation failure to three main factors: bad execution, when it is not carried out as intended, bad policy, when it is carried out but fails to have the desired effect, and bad luck, when it is carried out and should work, but it is undermined by factors beyond the control of policymakers. Cairney (2009a: 354) also suggests that expectations gaps are wide because participants have unrealistic expectations. These explanations can be standardized in much the same way as the stages of a policy cycle. The common aim is to highlight the conditions that have to be met to ensure ‘perfect’ implementation success (Hood, 1976: 6; Hogwood and Gunn, 1984: 198; Sabatier, 1986: 23–4; Cairney, 2009a: 357). The understanding is that, in fact, they explain why policies fail or achieve partial success:

1. **The policy’s objectives are clear, consistent and well communicated and understood.** A clear policy provides legal weight and acts as a ‘standard of evaluation’ (Sabatier, 1986: 23–4). A vague policy is subject to multiple interpretations and the potential for bad execution even by implementers with the best of intentions. For Hogwood and Gunn (1984: 204–6), perfect implementation requires that policymakers: agree on a common understanding of objectives; fully specify those objectives in the correct sequence; and, coordinate the implementation process with no breakdown in communication.

2. **The policy will work as intended when implemented.** The policy must be a good solution to the problem, based on a ‘valid theory of cause and effect’ (if we do X, the result will be Y) (1984: 201).

3. **The required resources are committed to the programme.** Commitment can refer to money, staffing, and physical materials (1984: 200), or giving the task to an organization that ‘would be supportive and give it a high priority’, providing the right legal and economic sanctions and incentives to ‘overcome resistance’ (Sabatier, 1986: 23), and investing attention and political will to an issue over the longer term.

4. **Policy is implemented by skilful and compliant officials.** The term ‘perfect obedience’ (Hogwood and Gunn, 1984: 206) reminds us that we are discussing an ideal type; in fact, the discretion held by implementing officials with specialized jobs is ‘unavoidable’ (Sabatier, 1986: 23; Lipsky, 1980: 13–6; Hill and Hupe, 2009: 26).

5. **Dependency relationships are minimal.** There are few ‘veto points’ or links in a ‘delivery chain’; the implementing agency does not rely on the cooperation of others (Sabatier, 1986: 23; Hogwood and Gunn, 1984: 202; Barber, 2012: 85-7).

6. **Support from influential groups is maintained.** The implementation process is long, and continuous support from key actors is crucial.
Conditions beyond the control of policymakers do not significantly undermine the process. Socio-economic conditions can often be unpredictable (Sabatier, 1986: 25) and affect the costs of, or support for, implementation (for example, consider the effects of an ageing population on pensions or personal care policies).

Pressman and Wildavsky (1973; 1979) draw on such factors to explain why the provision of US federal funds, for public works programmes to solve the problem of ‘high unemployment and racial unrest’, did not have the desired effect in Oakland, California. Many projects were not completed because: the building materials were not secured; there were too many ‘decision points’; the implementing agencies relied on cooperation with many other authorities and private companies; the costs in some projects were higher than expected; the legal framework was inadequate; there was disagreement about how spending money on training programmes would boost employment; the business loans programme contained incompatible aims; local groups opposed aspects such as low-cost public housing; and, the Economic Development Administration could not identify the influential groups from which it needed support (compare with Compton and ‘t Hart, 2019).

We may suppose that some of these problems, such as interdependence, are specific to the US model of government in which power is shared by many organizations. However, examples from the ‘majoritarian’ UK demonstrate comparable experiences (King and Crewe, 2014). Marsh and Rhodes (1992a) employ a similar framework to identify policy failures of the Thatcher government (1979–90): its privatization programme suffered because political objectives clashed with economic/ideological objectives; monetarist economic policy suffered because the causal link between inflation and the money supply was suspect; the control of local authority budgets was undermined by local authorities; industrial relations policies lacked an adequate legislative framework; a policy to reduce social security spending was undermined by rising unemployment, and demographic effects (an ageing population) undermined the policy of healthcare financial stringency.

In particular, they identify problems of interdependence exacerbated by the government’s unwillingness to consult with interest groups before making decisions (1992a: 185). Those groups and agencies which were affected by policy, but not consulted, ‘failed to co-operate, or comply, with the administration of policy’ (1992a: 181). As Jordan and Richardson (1987: 242) show, there are four main advantages to consultation. First, it secures wider participation in the political system, and hence support for that system. Second, it creates a sense of involvement, and thus ensures greater commitment to the success of a policy. Third, it allows the government to benefit from the practical experience of those consulted. Finally, it allows some portion of responsibility for that success to be transferred to other participants. The argument that consultation allows a more informed government with fewer problems of agreement and compliance is almost universally applicable (albeit not applied universally).

Top-down and bottom-up implementation
This approach is often labelled ‘top down’ because it is built on two related assumptions:

1. **Descriptive** – decisions are made at the ‘top’ (by central government or the legislature) and carried out at the ‘bottom’ (by implementing organizations).
2. **Prescriptive** – decisions should be made at the top and carried out at the bottom.

Indeed, Barber (2012: 293-4) describes his approach as ‘modelled on how the chief executive of a business would drive key priorities’ and to help strengthen the power of policymakers at the centre of government.

In contrast, the ‘bottom up’ literature questions the assumption that central government is – or should be - the main influence on policy outcomes. Lipsky’s (1980) classic argument is that policy is, to a large extent, made by the ‘street-level bureaucrats’ (including teachers, doctors, police officers, judges, and welfare officers) who deliver it. Bureaucrats are subject to an immense range of, often unclear, requirements laid down by regulations at the top, but are powerless to implement them all successfully (1980: 14). This is not necessarily an argument based on ‘disobedience’: committed workers do not have the resources to fulfil all of their job requirements (1980: xii). Instead, they use their discretion to establish routines to satisfy a proportion of central government objectives while preserving a sense of professional autonomy necessary to maintain morale. Indeed, there is now a large literature describing the ‘coping’ mechanisms of ‘front line workers … interacting with clients’ to ‘master, tolerate, or reduce external and internal demands and conflicts they face on an everyday basis’ (Tummers et al, 2015: 1101-2). The irony is that the added pressure from central government policy obliges implementers to manage their own day-to-day activities (see Cook, 2018). Therefore, policy change at the top will not necessarily translate to change at the bottom.

Hjern (1982: 213–6) argues that the hope or assumption that policy is controlled by a single central actor (possessing clear and consistent aims) exacerbates policy failure. Inattention to the complexity of implementation causes difficulties in the administration of policy, producing feelings of powerlessness when no one seems to be in charge. Instead, we should recognise *intra-departmental conflict*, when central government departments pursue programmes with competing aims, and *interdependence*, when policies are implemented by multiple organizations. Programmes are implemented through ‘implementation structures’ where, ‘parts of many public and private organizations cooperate in the implementation of a programme’. It is difficult to force decisions on actors within the structure who are employed by other organizations, so it is unrealistic to think that a sole central actor could secure its own aims and objectives irrespective of the actions of the others involved. Although national governments create the overall framework of regulations and resources, and there are ‘administrative imperatives’ behind the legislation authorizing a programme, the main shaping of policy takes place at local levels by implementation structures in which national considerations may play a small part (Hjern and Porter, 1981: 213). Although published decades ago, this narrative of limited central control is just as relevant today, and described with
reference to complex, multi-level, or polycentric governance (Chapters 6-8; Cairney et al, 2019a).

The ‘bottom up’ alternative is summed up by Barrett and Fudge’s (1981: 4) description of decisions made at the top as part of a bargaining process, with policy modified continuously as each actor involved in implementation, ‘attempts to negotiate to maximize its own interests and priorities’. Central government may prove to be the most influential actor, but we should not assume so, particularly when it appears not to have a strong interest in the subject. We should also not assume that everyone involved attaches the same ‘meaning’ to policy measures (Yanow, 1996; Schofield, 2004). Instead, we could shift our focus to the ‘bottom’ by identifying the implementing agencies involved and exploring how they operate. Policy from the top may represent only one of many factors (including the lower level ‘environment’ in which local demands and needs arise) relevant to the deliberations and actions of those agencies (Barrett and Fudge, 1981: 25; Colebatch, 1998: 12; 28–9). Can we call the outcomes of practices so removed from the top ‘government policy’ (Colebatch, 1998: 30)?

These differences in approach led initially to the ‘top-down versus bottom-up’ debate. Their differences centred on empirical issues (e.g. the extent to which implementing actors can thwart the intentions of the centre), research design (should we focus on decisions made at the top or the implementation structure?) and prescription (who should make policy? How clear should the policy aim be? Who should implementers be accountable to?) (deLeon and deLeon, 2002: 474; Hudson, 1993: 392–5; Hupe and Hill, 2007; Hill and Hupe, 2009: 15–6). The debate was followed by ‘third generation’ studies that sought in vain to distil the vast range of variables, or causes of policy outcome variation, into a manageable and testable general theory (Goggin et al., 1990; Smith and Larimer, 2009: 170–2; Parsons, 1995: 480–1; Howlett and Ramesh, 2003: 90).

To some extent, top/bottom debates reflect biases in research design. A focus at the bottom highlights a multiplicity of influences and distance from central government, but does not tell us how many organizations meet targets set at the top. A focus at the top highlights the central control of a small number of issues, ignoring the bulk of government responsibilities which are delivered routinely and with minimal attention from elected policymakers (Cairney, 2009a: 360). Therefore, if you are a fan of easy compromise, you can conclude that different approaches are valuable in different circumstances (Matland, 1995: 165–7; Lundin, 2007; compare with Hill, 2009: 140). There have also been attempts to combine the merits of top-down and bottom-up approaches (Hill and Hupe, 2009), set new directions in implementation research (Carey et al, 2019), and incorporate implementation issues into the study of policy learning (Chapter 12).

**Evaluation**

Evaluation involves assessing the extent to which a policy was successful. A top-down approach might identify success if the implementation gap is small or if there is evidence of compliance (Matland, 1995: 154). It might link success to common arguments about representative democracy, in which policymakers at the top enjoy the most legitimacy
when they are elected and accountable, and policy success happens when they deliver on their promises to the public (Linder and Peters, 2006: 31; Hill and Hupe, 2002: 71; Cairney, 2009a: 358–9). Indeed, in some cases, policy is implemented using top-down evaluation techniques: published targets provide an expectation of implementer behaviour (but often produce unintended consequences – Hood, 2007; Hoque et al., 2004; Barrett, 2004; Carey and Harris, 2015) and dedicated units are created to monitor and evaluate levels of compliance (Lindquist, 2004; Duffy, 2017).

Yet, the ‘top’ often produces contradictory or vague policy aims. There may also be competing forms of legitimacy. Many local officials are elected. Even if not, it is sensible to build some form of discretion into policy design to allow locally knowledgeable experts to adapt policies to particular circumstances (Hogwood and Gunn, 1984: 207–8; 198; Colebatch, 1998: 68; deLeon, 1999: 320; deLeon and deLeon, 2002: 478). This normative dimension is a key feature of complexity theory, MLG, and polycentric governance (Chapters 6–8). It has been debated for some time in the US literature on intergovernmental relations, studies of member state ‘compliance’ in the EU, and in relation to UK devolution (Mastenbroek, 2005; Falkner et al., 2004; Duina, 1997; Pülzl and Treib, 2007: 97–9; Cairney, 2009a).

Evaluation is also complicated because success is in the eye of the beholder and difficult to measure. Relatively technical forms of measurement involve the selection of a large mixture of indicators that are hard to compare, or a small number of measures that are handpicked and represent no more than crude proxies for success (Cairney, 2009a: 369; Andrews and Martin, 2007). Relatively political measurement involves a convoluted process that Marsh and McConnell (2010: 571; 580) distil heroically into seven factors. They include practical issues, such as how long we should wait before evaluating a policy, how much information there is, how we can separate the effects of this policy from others and what the benchmark should be (e.g. the government’s intentions, past outcomes, the success of other countries?). They also include the more fundamental questions:

- **whose success are we measuring**: the government, its stakeholders or its target group?
- **what successes do (and should) policymakers care about**: the impact of policy on their popularity, how easy policy change is to achieve, or the long term impact on the population?

Such discussions demonstrate that evaluation measures are not ‘objective’ (Marsh and McConnell, 2010: 575) and that common evaluation terms such as ‘effectiveness, efficiency and equity’ give the misleading impression that they are technical (Brewer and deLeon, 1983: ix). Rather, any measure of success has to consider which measures we should select, who benefits the most from policy outcomes, and what should be done following evaluation. Evaluation is ‘an inherently political activity’ (Taylor and Balloch, 2005: 1; Hogwood and Gunn, 1984: 221; Bovens, ‘t Hart and Kuipers, 2006). It should not be considered as an afterthought in our policy analysis. Indeed, the likelihood of success in terms of popularity may be the key reason that policymakers seek positive long term outcomes (McConnell, 2010).
Therefore, although there is now a massive technical literature devoted to evaluating policy (see for example the online Campbell Library [https://campbellcollaboration.org/library.html]), how this evidence is used remains unclear, and almost no account highlights a clear and direct impact on policy (Oliver et al, 2014a; 2014b). For example, it may: have an ‘enlightenment’ function, to help reshape thinking over the long term (Weiss, 1976; 1977a; 1977b; 1979); be just another form of evidence to be used to set the policy agenda (Henry and Mark, 2003); and/ or be used largely to justify exiting policies (Boswell, 2009). For example, the UK New Labour government described evaluation as part of its evidence-based policy agenda - in which it projected the sense that evidence would trump ideology, empower citizens, and help join up government – but, like all governments operating in political contexts, actually used evaluation evidence in the ways outlined above (Sullivan, 2011: 501).

**Policy maintenance, succession and termination**

The notional final stage is when policymakers decide if the policy should be continued. This stage reinforces the idea that ‘policy determines politics’ because new policies are often pursued largely to address the problems caused by the old (Wildavsky, 1980: 62). As Jones (1970: 135; 11) puts it, ‘the end is the beginning’, because government action results from the, ‘continuing application and evaluation of ongoing policies’ (perhaps with scope for larger departures during periods of crisis, Geva-May, 2004). A decision made in the past influences how the next decision will be made (Colebatch, 1998: 10–11). For example, it may be easier to amend a policy, and present it as new, than create a new one.

Hogwood and Peters (1983: 26–7) suggest that ‘policy succession’ is more likely than ‘innovation’ because most of the hard work has already been done: the issue is recognized as a legitimate problem for the government to solve; a service delivery organization exists; the policy has resources devoted to it; and, it has an established clientele. More significant innovations would require a process to establish these factors and perhaps the termination of another policy. The latter has immediate financial costs, may produce the perception of policy failure, and may be opposed by interest groups, clients and the organizations that depend on the policy to survive (Hogwood and Peters, 1983: 16–7; 1982; Geva-May, 2004; Parsons, 1995: 574–5; deLeon, 1978; Hogwood, 1987). The policy cycle therefore tends to ‘end’ with succession (Hogwood and Gunn, 1983: 61–84).

**Beyond the policy cycle**

The policy cycle has three good points:

1. *Prescriptive*. The idea that elected people make policy and unelected officials carry it out has normative weight (Colebatch, 1998: 77).

2. *Practical*. Policymakers might use a sequence of stages to describe or plan their work (see Althaus et al, 2013; Bridgman and Davis, 2003 on Australia, Marchildon, 2001 on Canada, and the European Commission, 2011). It often represents the ‘public face of public policies’ (McConnell, 2010: 222).
3. **Descriptive.** It is a simple model understood by most students (Wu et al, 2017).

However, we can question its value with reference to all three points:

1. **Prescriptive.** There are many alternative models of good policymaking, many of which stress the benefits of multi-level, ‘polycentric’, or pragmatic governance to address (a) multiple sources of governing legitimacy, and (b) the need to accept the limit coordinative capacity at the ‘top’ (Cairney et al, 2019a). Indeed, central policymakers would often rather delegate responsibility to other actors and find pragmatic ways to legitimize actions by unelected bodies (Jordan and Richardson, 1987: 233; John, 1998: 29).

2. **Practical.** Fewer policymaking organisations use the cycle to describe what they actually do (Box 2.2). Everett (2003: 65; see also Colebatch, 1998: 102) also questions its practical value: it is sold as the basis for ‘rigorous scientific method’ to produce good, equitable, policies, but really exists to ‘smooth’ policymaking after difficult decisions have been made (Everett, 2003: 66–8).

3. **Descriptive.** It does not provide an accurate description or good scientific explanation of how policy is made. It is simplistic as well as simple: a better theory would describe ‘multiple interacting cycles involving numerous policy proposals and statutes at multiple levels of government’ (Sabatier, 2007a: 7; Topp et al, 2018). For such explanation, academic accounts draw primarily on policy theories.

The cycle was useful when it emerged but has now ‘outlived its usefulness’ (Sabatier, 2007a: 7; compare with Jann and Wegrich, 2007: 56; Hogwood and Gunn, 1984: 6–11; Smith and Larimer, 2009: 235; Parsons, 1995: 80–1). Radin (2000: 15; 34; see also Howard, 2005: 4) associates the cycle and comprehensive rationality models with the early post-war period of radical change in countries like the US. Policy scientists were able use those models because the overall direction of policy was driven by a small number of policymakers at the centre who relied on an elite group of analysts to produce ‘objective’ ways to gather facts, analyse and solve policy problems. This post-war image contrasts with modern day policymaking characterized by four main factors.

The first is a diminished sense of optimism regarding the government’s ability to solve problems through objective scientific analysis; the status of policy analysis has diminished (John, 1998: 32–3) and policy scientists now have to compete with many other actors for policymaker attention. In that context, the modern reference to ‘evidence based policymaking’ is to bemoan its non-existence rather than identify its central role (Cairney, 2016a). The second is what Hece (1978: 94) describes as an end to the ‘clubby days of Washington politics’ and Jordan (1981: 96-100) links, in other countries, to a shift from corporatism, in which group-government relations are centralized and exclusive, towards a more fragmented system with many more policy participants. The rise in government responsibilities mobilized more groups and stretched the government’s resources, producing its increased reliance on outside advice. This rise in activity from multiple sources often caused issues which were once ‘quietly managed by a small group of insiders’ to become ‘controversial and politicized’ (Heclo, 1978: 105). The third is the
focus on not one but multiple centres of authority; the dispersal of power from a single central actor towards many organizations and sources of authority and influence. The latter can range from highly visible sub-central organisations led by elected policymakers, to almost invisible or specialised networks of unelected policymakers and influencers.

Overall, we have a rather complex and shifting picture. On the one hand, it is a source of instability: populated by a fragmented government and many participants, potentially with different values, perceptions and preferences (Sabatier, 2007a: 3–4). On the other, influencers often share close and stable relationships with government officials who operate out of the public spotlight.

Contemporary theories seek to capture and explain this picture of policy choice within a complex policymaking environment (Cairney and Weible, 2017; Heikkila and Cairney, 2017). As chapters 3-12 demonstrate, there is a wide range of concepts and theories on which to draw, and each theory provides its own explanation. However, most of the theories in this book try to capture the elements summarised in Figure 2.2. In this image, we retain simple description but dispense with the idea of an orderly process of stages. It does not describe any substantial interaction between the concepts to show cause and effect. Rather, it provides a check list of the concepts that we need to include, to understand each theory and provide a full account of the policy process. Therefore, Figure 2.2 provides a more useful reference point for each chapter in the book: how does each theory account for policy choice, and how does it conceptualise an environment containing many actors, institutions, networks, ideas, and influenced by events and changing contexts?

**Figure 2.2 Key elements of policy choice in a complex policymaking environment**

![Diagram](#)

Source: Cairney (2017a). Compare with the simpler Figure 13.1
Conclusion
The study of public policy is challenging because the subject matter is so complex, with too many causes of variation in policy outcomes to make it as predictable as we would like. We can address this problem by producing a checklist of ways to simplify and manage our task:

Define, categorize and measure. Seek ways to define policy, then measure and describe the nature of policy change, by considering basic distinctions (such as between aims, decisions and outcomes) and identifying policy instruments and types. We use these indicators to describe the nature of policy decisions and measure the extent to which policy has changed in each area. Categories and typologies help us move from the general identification of complexity towards a specific understanding of key processes.

Consider the factors that affect our narratives of policy development. All narratives of public policy are based on our selective interpretations of a limited number of measures. We need to be self-aware when constructing narratives and be open to different accounts of empirical results. One way to encourage reflexivity is to produce more than one narrative and compare their outcomes. It should make us more sensitive to some of the assumptions in our favoured version of events (rather than take them for granted). Particular narratives may support particular theories of public policy.

Raise questions about power. We can explore issues of power (Chapter 3) by considering who has formal authority and the reputation for being powerful, who makes and influences the most important decisions, and why some key decisions seem not to be made (some problems and solutions receive attention while others remain off the agenda).

Map the policymaking environment. We can appreciate the context within which decisions are made by considering the nature of the policy problem, the pressure that policymakers are under to address it, and the resources they can use to solve it. The idea that policy is influenced heavily by the policymaking environment is explored further in Chapter 6.

Consider the policy cycle. The image of a cycle helps us consider the idea of ‘policy as its own cause’, the stages through which policies appear to go before an authoritative decision is made, and the difference between a policy decision and its implementation.

Use theories of public policy. A general aim within science is to examine the proportion of outcomes that can be linked to the same causes. Our aim is apply this broad approach to public policy: to explain why certain policies exist, how they were made and what happens when they are made. To do so, we identify the most important factors in the policy process, such as: how and why choices were made; the role of institutions; the relationship between governments and interest groups; the socio-economic context; and the role of ideas.
We then examine how these factors relate to each other by learning from the most established theories of public policy. Our aim is to examine how each theory of public policy gives us a better understanding of policy processes. To this end, most chapters outlines a particular theory and describe what it tells us about the policy process; what factors we should identify and how they relate to each other. In most cases we consider the application of theories to a single policy process (usually the political system in which the theory developed) before considering how applicable they are in other countries. Chapter 13 then considers what these theories tell us when considered together. Can we use these theories to accumulate knowledge of policy processes?