

An Overview of Approaches to the Study of Public Policy

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Abstract: Political and social scientists have developed many theories, models and approaches for analysing policy-making. The theoretical approaches include elite theory, group theory which are primarily concerned with public policy-making as a process. This paper therefore, attempts to examine each theory, pointing out its strengths and limitations. The study relied heavily on secondary sources for data collection. The paper reveals that one cannot authoritatively see which of these theoretical approaches is the best or the most satisfactory as each approach focuses on different aspects of policy-making, and this seems more useful for understanding some situations or events than others. It is, therefore, wise not to be bound too dogmatically to one approach. A good rule for the policy maker is to be eclectic and flexible, and to draw from theories that seem most useful for the satisfactory and fair-minded description and explanation of policies. The objective explanation of political behaviour rather than the validation of one's preferred theoretical approach should be the goal of political inquiry. Each of the theories discussed, if drawn upon skilfully and selectively, can contribute to a better understanding of policy-making.

Keywords: Public Policy, Group Theory, Elite Theory etc

INTRODUCTION

We usually view policy as designating behaviour of some actor or set of actors, such as an official, or government agency, or legislator, in area of activity such as public enterprise or poverty reduction. Public policy also may be seen as whatever a government chooses to do or not to do. Such definition may be sufficient for ordinary discourse, but definitely inadequate for a systematic analysis of public policy, hence a more precise definition is needed to structure our thinking and to facilitate effective communication with one another (Anderson, 1997). Nonetheless, there is still common reference point by all users of various disciplines. It is used mainly in reference to what government does in order to meet the needs of the citizenry. Public policy may refer to what government intends to do to achieve certain goals. This definition makes public policy look like a mere decision. That is to say that mere declaration of intentions, wishes, principles, or expression of desires cannot be called public policy. Public policy should mean actual resource allocation presented by projects and programmes designed to respond to perceived public problems and challenges requiring government action for their solution. That is, it should mean hard patterns of resource allocation presented by projects and programmes designed to respond to perceived public demands. This conception of public policy can be identified with a political scientist, James E. Anderson who defines policy as a relatively stable, purposive course of action followed by an actor or set of actors in dealing with a problem or a matter of concern (Anderson, 1997). This statement focuses on what is actually done instead of what is only proposed or intended, and it differentiates a policy from mere decision, which is essentially a choice among competing alternatives. Public policy, therefore, is that policy developed and implemented by government agency and officials, though non-state actors and factors may influence its process. The

scope and content of public policies will obviously vary from country to country, depending on the system of government and ideology in force in that country. In most developing countries where so much is expected of government and where government actions transcend virtually all aspects of life of the citizens, the range of public policies is usually very broad and almost unlimited. This study therefore, attempted to overview approaches to the study of public policy, highlighting the strengths and limitations of each approach.

Group Theory

According to the group theory of politics, public policy is the product of the group struggle. What may be called public policy is the equilibrium reached in this group struggle at any given moment, and it represents a balance which the contending factions or groups constantly strive to win in their favour. Many public policies do reflect the activities of groups (Anderson, 1997). This means that this theory attempts to analyse how each of the various groups in a society tries to influence public policy to its advantage at the policy formulation level. In other words, the central practice of this model is that interaction among groups is a critical ingredient in politics. Public policy is thus a temporary point of compromise reached in the course of competition between mosaics of numerous interest groups with cross-cutting membership. The ability of the group that is favoured at one point to sustain its gain depends on its power to counteract the powers of other groups that would make efforts to tilt decisions to their favour. It is this type of competition between groups that determine pattern of allocation of societal resources (Enemuo, 1999: 24). The locus of power in the society changes from time to time, depending upon the group that succeeds in exerting its own supremacy over the others. Accordingly, the power to determine policy direction changes with the changes in the fortunes of each or a combination of these groups. It is in appreciating the fluidity of power base in society that Latham contends that what we regard as public policy is in reality a temporary equilibrium reached in the course of the inter-group struggle (Latham, 1965). As soon as the equilibrium point is altered in the favour of new groups another policy will emerge or the old policy will be modified. Politics in essence entails a dynamic equilibrium created by the struggle between different groups. In Latham's opinion the legislature acts only as a referee to the inter-group struggle and it ratifies the victories of the successful coalitions, as well as record the terms of the surrender, compromises, and conquest in the form of statutes or Bills (Latham, 1965). Since the power to dominate policy decision is dependent on group solidarity and power, the dynamics of the policy process is expected to be more vibrant and fierce in plural societies than in homogenous ones. In such societies the ability of a group to tilt the policy to its favour depends on a number of factors, prominent among which are:

- Wealth
- Organisational skill
- Leadership quality
- Bargaining skill

A modicum of luck Wealth is essential because political mobilisation is resource absorbing. All over the world, even in the most democratic societies, politics involves a lot of expenditure; as such only the wealthy can afford to mobilise the electorate and those in authority to tilt decisions in their favour. Wealth alone without organisational skills will render a group ineffective. It is the ability to conceive

of ideas and get people to subscribe to such ideas that can get a group or person to succeed in tilting policy decision in its favour. In contemporary period, organisational skill requires the tack of bringing all stakeholders on board in the process of policy decision. For example, the group that attempts to mobilise the public in order to push its ideas would have to be tactful in main-streaming various interest groups such as the women, youth, professional groups and, in some cases, traditional rulers. Central to organisation ability in mobilising the public is leadership. Without a concrete rallying focalpoint a wealthy group, with a sprinkling of persons with diffuse organisational skills, will fail woefully in pushing its agenda in the policy process. But, when there is a strong leadership, especially a charismatic on the group can succeed in pushing its agenda through with relative ease. One of the virtues of good leadership is the ability to bargain successfully even in a turbulent environment. A group would thus succeed in pushing its agenda through the parliament when it has strong bargaining skill. The power of lobby is often complemented by the degree of visibility of the lobbyist. Persons that are well known and respected in society could easily influence decision makers to support their ideas in parliament. In the Nigerian parlance it is said that those with proper "connection" with those in the corridor of power could easily get their request granted by the legislators. The connection could be political, economic or socio-cultural in the form of ex-school mates, same ethnic group or religious affiliation. Dahl observes that the good thing about pluralism is that no single group has monopoly over all these resources (Anderson, 1997). The equilibrium point will thus continue to shift position as different groups manipulate these resources to get public policies to their favour, either singly or in concert with other groups that share common interest with them. Coalition building, compromises, trading of favour and conflicts among groups are the key tactics used in the struggle. In this situation the majority or more dominant group will have its way but the minority or less dominant group for the moment will have their say. The struggle will continue without rancor. This is the virtue of democracy, as conceived in the Western world and subscribed to by Dahl. In reality however, especially in Africa and specifically in Nigeria, some groups could hold on to power perpetually and block all conceivable possibility of weaker groups from taking the full advantage offered by democracy. Those in privileged positions either because of their professional background such as the military or business class, or through hereditary entitlement to leadership (traditional rulers) tend to dominate the policy-making process. By doing they succeed in ring-fencing themselves within the enclave of power and prevent other groups from gaining access to it. The group theory has been criticised on the following grounds: – First, the group theorists did not really define in clear terms what they mean by the two key concepts in the analysis; group and interests. Thus, while Bentley sees groups as a relation between men, a process of adding man to man, Truman defines it as any collection of individuals who have some characteristic in common. None of these definitions clearly tells us what a group that is really relevant to politics and decision making is. – Second, the theory was so concerned with the role of groups that it leaves out the individuals and society in their analysis. While not disputing the fact that politics is a struggle between and among groups, one can also not forget that the role of particular individuals is a very important variable. This is particularly important in third world countries, where one-man dictatorship has proved that an individual could indeed hold a whole country to ransom and dictate what happens mostly after decimating all competing groups. Also, the role of the society in this competition for power is completely left out which is a defect.

3.3. Systems Theory

The systems theory in political science owes its origin to David Easton who is reputed to be the scholar that attempted to analyse politics from the perspective of systems in his famous work "political system" which appeared in 1953. His work which was regarded as the

foundation of the behaviourist revolution in political science outlined eight major characteristics. He described the characteristics as the intellectual foundation stone of behaviourism which are regularities, verification, techniques, quantification, values, systemisation, pure science, and integration. According to Varma, Easton was able to distill these characteristics from a range of behavioural literature and while they are not unique to systems theory, they do form the basis for the natural linkage between systems thinking and behaviourism (Obi et al, 2008). In other words, a political system may be that system of interactions in any society through which authoritative allocations are made and implemented in the form of policies and decisions. Public policy may also be seen as a political system's response to demands arising from its environment. The political system, as Easton defines it, comprises those identifiable and interrelated institutions and activities (what we usually think of as government institutions and political processes) in a society that make authoritative allocations of values (decisions) that are binding on society (Anderson, 1997). This environment consists of all phenomena-the social system, the economic system, the biological setting - that are external to the boundaries of the political system. Thus, at least analytically one can separate the political system from all the other components of a society (Easton, 1965). If the open system model is applied in public policy analysis the issues to reflect on include the nature of the components of the system which constitute the sub-systems, and the outside components that impinge on the system directly, which is referred to supra-system (Dlakwa, 2004). Inputs into the political system from the environment consist of demands and supports. Demands are usually the claims for action that individuals and groups make to satisfy their interest and values. Support is rendered when groups and individuals abide by election results, pay taxes, obey laws, and otherwise accept decisions and actions taken by the political system in response to demands. The amount of support for a political system indicates the extent to which it is regarded as legitimate, or as authoritative and binding on its citizens. On the other hand, outputs of the political system include laws, rules, judicial decisions, and the like. Regarded as the authoritative allocations of values, they constitute public policy. The concept of feedback indicates that public policies (or outputs) made at a given time may subsequently alter the environment and the demands arising therefrom, as well as the character of the political system itself. Policy outputs may produce new demands, which lead to further outputs, and so on in a never-ending flow of public policy.

Elite Theory

This model posits that, contrary to the belief that pluralism has in-built mechanism for ensuring equity in the share of power and influence in society, in reality public policy is by and large the mirror image of the ruling elite's interest. Vilfredo Pareto in his book „Mind and Society argues that persons of ability actively seek to confirm and aggrandise their social position. The elite group is divided into governing and non-governing ones. These few that possess unique qualities such as skills, material wealth, cunning and intelligence have the rights to supreme leadership, while the bulk of the population (masses) is destined to be ruled. Thus social classes are formed (Obi et al, 2008). In his own work entitled „The Ruling Class“ Gaetano Mosca, an Italian sociologist, posited that in the history of man, only one type of government had existed which was Oligarchy. He argued that:

- Society is divided into the few who have power and the many who do not have. Only small number persons allocate values for society; the masses do not decide public policy

- The few who govern are not typical of the masses who are governed. Elite are drawn disproportionately from upper socio-economic strata of society.
- The movement of non-elites to elite positions must be slow and continuous to maintain stability and avoid revolution. Only non-elites who have accepted the basic elite consensus can be admitted to governing circles.
- Elites share a consensus on the basic values of the social system and the preservations of the system.
- Public policy does not reflect demands of the masses but rather the prevailing values of the elite. Changes in public policy will be incremental rather than revolutionary. Incremental changes permit responses to events that threaten a social system with a minimum of alteration or dislocation of the system.

Active elites are subject to relatively little direct influence from apathetic masses. Elites influence masses more than the masses influence elites (Dye and Zeigler, 1990)

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

One cannot authoritatively say which of these theoretical approaches is the best or the most satisfactory as each approach focuses on different aspects of policy-making, and this seems more useful for understanding some situations or events than others. It seems wise not to be bound too dogmatically to one approach. A good rule for the policy maker is to be eclectic and flexible, and to draw from theories that seem most useful for the satisfactory and fair-minded description and explanation of policies. The objective explanation of political behaviour rather than the validation of one's preferred theoretical approach should be the goal of political inquiry. Each of the theories discussed, if drawn upon skilfully and selectively, can contribute to a better understanding of policymaking.

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