
UNIT 3 UNDERSTANDING POLICY IN CONTEXT OF THEORIES OF STATE*

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you should be able to:

- Understand the concept of public policy;
- Explain the theories of State with regard to public policy;
- Describe the terms 'Marxism', 'Pluralism' and 'Elitism'; and
- Examine the globalist perspective of the policy process.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Making of public policies is a prime function of the State (presently there are 193 member States in the United Nations, engaged in making varied policies). On public policies depends the governance of the entire polity. How does the State make policies that work for the welfare of people and how can these policies be made better by the State are big questions that need to be addressed. It is argued that public policies would be better, if only different people exercise more influence on policy process. The policy process is a complex political process in which there are many actors: politicians, pressure groups, civil servants, academic and professional experts, journalists and even sometimes those who see themselves as the passive recipients of policy (common citizens).

Policy process can be best understood in the context of the State. In order to have a good understanding of policy, we need to explain the place of public policy in the realm of State theories. This Unit will discuss the concept of policy with

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regard to Pluralist, Elitist and Marxist theories of State. The study of the policy process is essentially the study of the exercise of power by the State in the making of policy.

3.2 CONCEPT OF PUBLIC POLICY

Meaning of Public Policy

It means different things in different contexts. There are many actors involved in public policy. Policy can be written or unwritten, but it is the force behind State's process to achieve the desired goals. Let us see what it actually means.

The Chambers Dictionary has defined 'policy' as "a course of action, especially one based on some declared and respected principle". This definition looks at policy as something more than a decision. Unfortunately, the policy itself is something which takes different forms. There is a thrust to designate policy as the "outputs" of the political system and in a lesser degree to define public policy as "more or less interdependent policies dealing with many different activities". Dror (1968), one of the foremost advocates for the development of policy sciences, has defined policies as "general directives on the main lines of action to be followed".

David Easton (1965) has defined public policy as "the authoritative allocation of values for the whole society". Public policies are formulated by what Easton calls the "authorities" in a political system, namely, "elders, permanent chief executives, legislators, judges, administrators, councillors, monarchs, and the like". According to him, these are the persons who "engage in the daily affairs of a political system", and are "recognised by most members of the system as having responsibility for these matters", and take actions that are "accepted as binding most of the time by most of the members so long as they act within the limits of their roles".

Birkland (2011) has discerned the following key attributes of public policy:

- (i) "Policy is made in response to some sort of problem that requires attention.
- (ii) Policy is made on behalf of the 'Public'.
- (iii) Policy is oriented towards a goal or desired state, such as the solution of a problem.
- (iv) Policy is ultimately made by government, even if the ideas come from outside; government or through the interaction of governmental and non-governmental actors.
- (v) Policy is interpreted and implemented by public and private actors, who have different interpretations of problems, solutions, and their own motivations.
- (vi) Policy is what the government chooses to do or not to do".

In view of Thomas Dye (1978), "public policy is whatever governments choose to do or not to do". B.C. Smith (1976) has suggested that "the concept of policy denotes....deliberate choice of 'action' or inaction, rather than the effects of interrelating forces". He has emphasised 'inaction' as well as action and reminds

us that “attention should not focus exclusively on decisions, which produce change, but must also be sensitive to those which resist change and are difficult to observe because they are not represented in the policy-making process by legislative enactment”.

Taken as a whole, policy may be defined as a *purposive course of action taken or adopted by those in power in pursuit of certain goals or objectives*. It should be added here that public policies are the policies adopted by government, but implemented by both government officials and private actors. Ultimately, public policy is about people; their values and needs.

Public Policy in Context of State

When we talk of public policy in context of the State, *two* dimensions have an important role to play in the political process: (i) politics involving conflict, power and ideology; (ii) administration, involving analysis, organisation and methods. It must be recognised that the power flows from the State (government in action). When applied to the acts of governments in backing up their policy decisions with the effective use of sanctions, it is commonly referred to as ‘State power’. Power conveys the notion of a capacity to inflict penalties through coercion of a kind usually reserved by the State itself. On the other hand, influence conveys the notion of inducement and persuasion (Wootton, 1970). Thus, the State has the legitimacy of power in public policymaking. This, however, takes us into *two* difficulties- one about the nature of the State, the other about the role of the State as a provider of policies.

Max Weber (1947) has defined ‘State’ as: i) “an administrative and legal order subject to change by legislation, and ii) claiming binding authority....over all actions taking place in the area of its jurisdiction”. It can be identified in terms of both the institutions that make it up and the functions these institutions perform. State institutions include legislative bodies, executive bodies, including governmental bureaux and departments of State, and judicial bodies with responsibility for enforcing and, through their decisions, developing the law. State institutions are located at various levels-national, regional and local.

But in addition to these, there are also inter-and supra-State institutions which act, to some degree, as superordinate States or larger umbrella States. These include both international organisations, the United Nations, the World Trade Organisation, the World Health Organisation, the World Bank, etc., which may seek to impose policies on Nation States – and supra-national institutions like the European Union, which operate quite specifically as superordinate law makers. The increasing importance of supra-State bodies and from changes within the Nation State (sometimes known as the ‘hollowing out’ of State). The discussion here relates to specifying a variety of theories of State, which may help us to understand the study of the policy process.

3.3 PLURALIST THEORY OF STATE AND POLICY

Pluralist theory/approach of State assumes that public policy is ultimately the outcome of a free competition between ideas and interests. According to Robert Dahl, who represented such views in his text, ‘*Who Governs*’ (1961), pluralist accounts for democracy in which power was seen as widely distributed and the political system, so organised that the policy was essentially driven by public demands and opinions.

However, this view of liberal democracy was challenged by Schattschneider (1960), when he argued: “it is not necessarily true that people with the greatest needs participate in politics most actively- whosoever decides what the game is about, will also decide who gets in the game”. Thus, his remarks show that there was a liar, which operated in favour of some and against others. Lindblom, originally a pluralist, has in the *Politics and Markets* (1977), argued that policymaking was constrained by the workings of capitalism, specifically, the interests of business and the market. Dahl (1982) too was also to modify his view in this direction. Decision-making, he concluded, is not a neutral affair; the demands of business interests predominate over the demands of other groups.

Pluralist approaches have also developed new models, which aim to take into account the evolution of policymaking processes and structures, which have taken place in recent decades. One of the most important of these is the notion of policy networks and communities. Smith (1976) has argued that the idea of policy networks/communities is, however, multi-theoretic and may be applied by approaches other than that of Pluralism. In the context of new developments, a Pluralist model might provide a common framework within which a multiplier approach to public policy could develop. It is certainly a new direction.

Check Your Progress 1

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answers.
ii) Check your answers with those given at the end of the Unit.

1. What do you understand by the term ‘public policy’?

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2. Discuss the impact of Pluralist approach of State.

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3.4 ELITE-MASS THEORY OF STATE AND POLICY

Much of the current literature on political power adopts the Elite-Mass theory perspective. Elite-Mass model suggests that power is concentrated in the hands of a few elites. Policymaking, according to the Elite-Mass theory, is a process, which works to the advantage of these elites. The theory argues that in the society, there are those at the top ‘with power’ and at the bottom, the masses ‘without power’. The theory also holds that the elite, whose members share common values and have more money, education and power, governs the masses, who are apathetic and ill-informed about public policy. In an environment, which is characterised

by apathy and information distortion, elites influence mass opinion on policy issues more than masses influence elite opinion. Policy flows downward from the elite to the masses.

Thus, one way to study policymaking is through the Power approach. This approach views decision-making as something, which is influenced and determined by the structure of power: class, interest groups, bureaucratic and political arrangements and so on. According to Birkland, policymaking under the influence of elites is “dominated by the best educated, wealthiest and most powerful elites”. In the Elitist perspective, public policy is viewed as “the preferences and values of a governing elite” (Cited in Dye and Zeigler, 2000). Public officials and bureaucrats merely implement the policies decided on by the elites.

Although this theory is associated with sociologist C. Wright Mills, it has its origins in the work of Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto. They have argued that, contrary to Karl Marx, Elitism is inevitable and that classless society is a myth. Later, Mosca modified his view and argued that democracy could be viewed as a form of politics in which elites compete for the people’s votes in order to secure legitimacy for the elite rule. Drawing upon Mosca’s ideas, Robert Michels in a study of political parties has argued that there was an ‘iron law of oligarchy’, which operated in organisations (Michels, 1915). Over time, organisational elites tend to generate their own interests and goals, which are different from those of the masses. The decision-making process, according to Dahl and Lindblom (1976) in their revised view, is biased in favour of the powerful, and functions to the disadvantage of the less powerful and less well-resourced.

Propositions of the Elite-Mass Theory

Some of the important propositions of the Elite-Mass theory are as follows:

- (i) In the society, there are those at the top ‘with power’ (elite group) who govern and have the power to decide on public policies, and those at bottom ‘without power’ (the masses) who are governed and do not have power to decide on public policies.
- (ii) Elite members are drawn disproportionately from the higher socio-economic strata of the society. They share common values and have money, education and power than the masses that are apathetic and ill-informed.
- (iii) The bases of elites, who share consensus on the common values of the social system, are the sanctity of private property, limited government and individual liberty.
- (iv) Public policies do not reflect what the masses (the governed class) demand, but rather the preferences and values of the governing elite (the ruling class).
- (v) Elites shape mass opinion on policy issues more than masses shape elite opinion.
- (vi) The Elite-Mass theory recognises the scope of elite-mass conflict.

Critical Evaluation of Elite-Mass Theory

The Elite-Mass approach, like many other approaches to the policy process, is subjected to a lot of criticism. First, decision-making, according to the Elite-

Mass theory, is a process which works to the advantage of elites in whom power is concentrated. This theory holds that public policy does not reflect the demands of the masses so much, as it does the preferences of elites. Therefore, changes in public policy occur as a result of redefinition by elites of their own values and choices. Because elites share a consensus in preserving the social system, changes in the public policy are brought about through reforms (incremental in nature) when events threaten the system.

The stability of the system, therefore, depends on elites sharing in a consensus about basic values underlying the system, and only policy alternatives that fall within the shared consensus will be taken into account. For example, the welfare of the masses may be an important element in the elite decision-making, but the responsibility for the welfare rests on the shoulders of elites rather than masses.

Second, Elitism views the masses to be apathetic and ill-informed about public policy. It is found that elites manipulate mass opinion and sentiments on policy questions more than masses manipulate and influence elite values and opinion. In his study of the hidden dimensions of the elite power and domination, Gaventa (1980) has noted that power is a dimension of politics, as it may involve “locating the power processes behind the social construction of meanings and patterns that serve to get ‘A’ to act and believe in manner in which ‘B’ otherwise might not, to A’s benefit and B’s detriment”.

3.5 MARXIST PERSPECTIVE OF STATE AND POLICY

Karl Marx sought to show how power is exercised in a capitalist society in ways beneath the surface levels of political institutions. For Marx, people who are socially and politically strong ignore the desires of the politically weak and exploit them. Marxists have come to accept a picture of class domination in a society as everlasting. In the view of Marx, State is an instrument of class power. This so-called ‘instrumentalist’ approach has focused on the surface levels of decision/policy-making. Ralph Miliband (1977), for example, has argued that the State in a capitalist society is an instrument of a ruling class, which rules in the interests of that class comprising politicians, civil servants and business and financial elites, who come from the same social class and are educated at the same schools.

But structural critics of this theory, such as Nicos Poulantzas (1973), have disputed this view of the State as an instrument of capitalism, as it fails to take account of *two* factors. *First* is the ‘structural’ power of capitalist (and not the ruling class), which ultimately structures the decision-/policy-making process. And, *second* is the State’s autonomy from the capitalist system (capitalist interests) to make decisions.

This model of the State being autonomous from capitalist interests in a capitalist society, has been widely applied in critical or radical approaches to the study of the policy process. In a sense, this Relative Autonomy model argues that decision-making in capitalist society is more complex than the one in operation under the State as an instrument (Instrumental model). Poulantzas (*op.cit.*), for example, has maintained that the State in a capitalist society is engaged in multifarious activities. The State on the one hand, is involved in a process of maintaining or managing different ‘fractions’. On the other, the State appears as some kind of arbiter or neutral force as to better serve the interests of capital and the capitalist

class. The 'Functionalists' have sought to show how, in order to maintain social order, the State promotes the interests of capital accumulation, and in order to secure legitimacy, the State manages public policy through allocating resources between 'social expenses', 'social investment' and 'social consumption spending' (Dunleavy and O'Leary, 1987).

This Dual-State model, as maintained by Cawson and Saunders (1983), argues that the State in a capitalist society seeks to structure policy-making to address the policy concerns of the capital at the higher reaches of State decision-making. However, at the lower levels, where legitimacy is of prime concern, the State will permit a more pluralist policy-making style. They argue that decision-making takes place in a corporatist form at the level of central ruling-class (producer) interests and a more pluralist open form, at the level of working-class and middle-class (consumer) interests.

However, Goldsmith and Wolman (1992) have suggested that this model is more appropriate to the UK and Scandinavian circumstances than to the US. In particular, they observe that "Saunders is wrong in assuming that the local level was not concerned with production issues" and that corporatist modes of decision-making do not take place at the local level. The key point is that where Marxists saw an evolutionary process leading towards social crisis, sociologists in the United States or Western Europe saw their own societies as 'progressing', with their institutions adapting in response to evolving social needs.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answers.

ii) Check your answers with those given at the end of the Unit.

1. Discuss the Elite-Mass theory.

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2. Describe the impact of Marxist theory of State.

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3.6 GLOBALIST THEORY AND NATIONAL POLICY AGENDA

Globalist theory has developed on a massive scale, and in the process, it has contributed to contemporary policymaking. As has been already mentioned that the country's 'political system' also functions within the 'world system' and the boundaries of the political system are no longer impermeable to outside pressures

and influences. The world has become a single social system as a result of growing ties of interdependence. The point is that there is a new kind of interplay between transnational companies (often called as ‘hollowing out’ of State) and national and world economies. To Giddens (1989), transnational corporations, growing economic integration, and the globalisation of communications and media are major factors that make for Globalism.

Globalisation as a term under Globalism has gained wide attention and recognition. To Albrow (1990), ‘Globalisation’ refers to “all those processes by which the people of the world are incorporated into a single world society, global society”. He further states that “Globalism is one of the forces, which assists in the development of Globalisation”. The implications of the notion of Globalisation are that policy makers must consider agenda formation and problem definition within a global context. The “policy makers in one country seek to emulate the success of colleagues overseas”. In a global environment, it is possible to speak of the convergence of concerns for which global strategies may be formulated. As such in a global context, more and more issues will be structured by larger forces outside the nation’s Constitutional framework of public policymaking. The policy agenda is now becoming part of the global environment.

With Globalisation, there is a greater scope of interaction between a Nation State and other countries. A Nation State has now come to exercise less control on policy agenda than it was in the second half of the twentieth century. From the national perspective, this means that the policy agenda may be global, but the policymaking and implementation remain national.

Thus, there is a new kind of interplay between transnational companies and the national and world economies. Global politics has an added role to play in the determination of national policies, especially of the developing nations. Global issues interact with national issues, which in turn interact with the local level. Globalisation posits that these layers are becoming ever more interactive and permeable and that a new policy is emerging. What we have witnessed, March 2020 onwards, in the case of Covid 19, which is a world-wide pandemic, is a clear case of global policy and national level policy implementation.

Impact of Global Events on National Policy Agenda

It is important for policy-makers at the international level to take account of global issues, when considering the context of policy problems in a national setting. The Globalist theory faces several challenges of policy, such as:

- Environmental despoliation;
- Poverty and population growth;
- HIV/AIDS and Pandemics;
- Drugs and health issues;
- Trade and industry;
- Privatisation;
- Terrorism; and
- Other global issues.

Giddens(*op.cit.*) has identified *three* theories to explain the process of globalisation:

1. Imperialism and neo-imperialism: Globalism as the product of the expansion of capitalism;
2. Dependency: Globalism as uneven development and the domination of the underdeveloped world by the industrialised world;
3. World system: Globalism as the product of the world economy, leading to centralisation around a core, semi-peripheral and peripheral system of relationships.

It may be added that the world is becoming reluctantly internationalist, recognising that diversity of domestic social and economic issues (social welfare, trade, industry, agriculture, health, education, nuclear war, famine, etc.) are items on the national political agenda, which are tied up with global issues. This has been accompanied by growing regionalisation and internationalisation. The global environment forms much of the context of national policy-making.

In conclusion, it is largely felt that in developing as well as developed democratic countries, policy agendas are driven by global forces. Problems arise in a context in which economic and social conditions play a major role in shaping opinions and political strategies. For example, the economies that got stuck with the planning model experienced slow growth, stagnation, or worse. The collapse of the socialist economies was but “the final nail in the planning coffin”. Since the 1990s, countries around the world have been actively engaged in privatising public enterprises.

But the power of decision or policy and the capacity to implement it remains largely within the Nation States. There is therefore a tension between the spill over, which may be said to be taking place at the global level and the reality of the maintenance of national sovereignty. Against the pressure of global agendas, the fact remains that at time of crisis “governments are prone to withdraw from intergovernmental co-operations and supranational policy-making rather than move positively into closer collaboration”.

Common issues and problems within a global context may be increasingly identified in international terms, but decision-making and implementation still remain largely within Nation States. The global socio-economic framework interacts with the political processes and policies pursued by governments of Nation States. The success of Nation States in policy performance will diverge, notwithstanding the convergence of the global policy concerns. At some places, there appears to be a decline of globalisation worldwide. The UK’s withdrawal from the European Union signals that there is something with the ‘globalisation’ era that some states are not able to connect with. Now it is felt that most countries want to remain independent in their monetary, fiscal, immigration and labour policies.

Check Your Progress 3

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.
 ii) Check your answer with that given at the end of the Unit.

1) Bring out impact of Globalist theory on State.

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3.7 CONCLUSION

A theory should be able to simplify and clarify our thinking about politics and public policy. It should offer explanations for public policy. Certainly, the usefulness of a theory lies in its ability to simplify political life or add order to it, so that we can understand the processes we encounter in the real world. In brief, the theory should communicate what is relevant about the worth of a public policy. The concepts ingrained in a theory make policy decipherable. We know what concept or approach is influencing policy.

There is a Feminist approach that influences public policy too. It propagates equality of treatment for women at work place and everywhere. It challenges male domination in public and private spheres. The 'gender' dimension of policy is the main focus.

If the government wants to go in for State protection of labour interests, we know the Marxist approach has an influence; and when Rights and Feminist approaches have their way, we understand why the wages for men and women have been made equal, or why laws against domestic violence have been made stricter. Likewise, when stakeholders like NGOs and civil society are given credence, we understand the influence of Pluralist approach on policy. The Elitist perspective becomes clear when policies for the private sector are made to favour certain businesses and corporate power houses.

A variety of State theories discussed in this Unit suggest that there is a need to look at the challenges posed by theoretical discourse, which are used to support distribution of power or to enhance the power of specific interests. Each theoretical framework posits a different set of issues for the State. It needs to be conceded that actions take place within the structures, and are influenced by those structures, but in actual practice, what happens is a complex situation.

3.8 GLOSSARY

Environmental Despoliation: An act of environmental plundering. Destroying environmental resources to a substantial extent and many a time, beyond repair.

Feminism: The belief that women should have the same rights as the men. Equality of sexes is central to Feminism for norms and values for work places, as well as home spaces.

Globalisation: Globalisation refers to all those processes (economic, political socio-cultural) by which the people of the world are incorporated into a single world society.

Hollowing Out of State: It denotes that the State is slowly losing many of its predominant functions. In a web of associations within a community wielding legalistic power; the State has been rendered as one of the associations. It has been taken over by private bodies or associations or partnerships between the private, public and not-for-profit sectors. The term was coined by Raw Rhodes in 1994.

Pandemic: A disease or a health condition prevalent throughout the country or the globe. Recent outbreak of COVID19 (Coronavirus disease) has spread over the entire world and has been declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation or WHO.

Pluralism: It is a 'representative democracy' in which a political executive responsible to a legislature is seen as making policy on behalf of the people.

Relative Autonomy of Capitalist State: This concept is based on Marxist distinction between the dominant class and governing caste. The holders of State power are not normally the same people as those who control the means of production. The State therefore has the potential to operate autonomously of the ruling class.

Superordinate: Something that represents a superior order or category within a system of classification.

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3.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

1. **Your answer should include the following points:**

- Policy is a course of action.
- It is an authoritative allocation of values.
- It is what governments choose to do or not do.
- It is interpreted and implemented by multiple stakeholders.

2. **Your answer should include the following points:**

- In pluralism, power is widely distributed.
- It is essentially driven by public demands and opinions.
- Business interests conflict with public interests in pluralism.
- In Pluralist framework, multiplier approach to public policy could develop.

Check Your Progress 2

1. **Your answer should include the following points:**

- In Elite-Mass model, powers are concentrated in a few elites.
- Power flows downwards, from elites to masses.

- Elites compete for people's votes and legitimacy.
- Elite members are drawn from higher social and economic strata of society.
- Public policies reflect what governing classes desire.
- Policies are not connected with demands of the masses.

2. **Your answer should include the following points:**

- Marxist perspective shows how power is exercised in a society away from political institutions.
- State is involved in maintaining resolution amongst conflicting fractions.
- State promotes the interests of capital accumulation to obtain legitimacy.
- State manages public policy by allocating resources between social expenses, social investment, and social consumption spending.
- Relative autonomists in Marxists oppose the view of State as an instrument of ruling class.

Check Your Progress 3

1. **Your answer should include the following points:**

- The Globalist theory helps in determining the importance of contemporary policy making.
- Transnational corporations, economic integration, communication and media make for globalism.
- Policy makers are compelled to consider agenda formation and problem definition within a global context.
- Policy agenda is a part of global environment.
- Global politics has a role to play in determination of national policies.