



Debates in Public Policy—Problem Framing, Knowledge and Interests

Abstract There are different types of public policy problems. In democratic political systems, policy problems arise in very diverse political and institutional contexts. These influence how the problems are debated and resolved. Policy decision-making is structured through organisational processes that reflect historical institutional arrangements. Complex policy problems often involve conflicting interests and divergent perceptions among various stakeholder groups. Disagreements about problems and policies arise from many factors, including material interests, socio-cultural values and political (dis)trust. The framing of problems and solutions is expressed in different ways, through the language of economic benefits, ideological outlooks, group values and political loyalties. Leaders of political, economic and social organisations argue for the priority of some issues over others, depending on their judgements about threats, rewards and opportunities. Leaders typically offer simplified and persuasive narratives about problems and solutions, in order to attract wide support for their preferred approach. Evidence and expertise are mobilised selectively by policy actors to influence the perceived credibility of their own favoured policy options. However, rigorous evidence is not privileged in everyday politics—policy debates are structured through the interplay of many forms of knowledge, values, emotions and interests. Expertise can assist in managing complex problems but never determines the outcomes.

Keywords Policy framing · Policy agendas · Policy debates · Simple and complex problems · Expertise · Gun violence · Road congestion · Refugees

INTRODUCTION TO PROBLEM FRAMING

This chapter provides a brief background about public policy in democratic political systems, and especially the central importance of how policy problems are ‘framed’ by various actors in policy debates. This background sets the scene for the main discussion (in Chapter 2) of the ‘wicked problems’ framework. It also provides a foundation for later analysis (in Chapter 3) of policy instruments for achieving policy goals and the institutional capacities required for successfully tackling complex problems.

Disagreements arise among stakeholders about the nature of policy problems and how to address them. These divergent viewpoints are shaped by different assumptions, values, and interests. These differences of perspective have major impacts on policy decision-making and implementation, because the way a problem is defined or interpreted tends to correlate with particular remedial actions to address the identified problem.

The fundamental proposition in this chapter is that divergent ‘framing’ of policy problems generates conflict about the nature of these problems and about how to address them. Competing policy perspectives and viewpoints are inevitable. These differences are often entrenched or resistant to change, owing to their complex anchoring in values, interests, emotions and ideological assumptions. Such perspectives about the nature of the issue, and about actions to be taken, are not derived from the ‘agreed facts’ about an issue – they are more likely to be influenced by a combination of ideological orientations, economic interests, political identities, professional or managerial assumptions, and past institutional legacies (Edelman, 1988; Majone, 1989; Head, 2010a; Cairney, 2016). The role of ‘evidence-informed’ analysis and expertise can be important, but is only part of the policy process (Head, 2016).

In democratic systems, public policy debates are focused on the ‘problems’ that stakeholders claim require greater public attention. Deborah Stone argues that an issue only becomes a public policy ‘problem’ when

groups demand that action be taken; and when plausible stories are advanced concerning the causes and remedies for the problem (Stone, 1989, p. 299). The agenda-setting aspects of public policy debates are essentially arguments about the nature and urgency of policy problems and how to address them. Scoping the problems, proposing feasible solutions, and mobilising support for priority actions, are three important and closely related dimensions of the policy development process (Crowley et al., 2020; Kingdon, 1995; Majone, 1989). In every jurisdiction, diverse political actors, stakeholders and advocates are continually striving to place their key issues on the policy agenda for further debate and thus the consideration of decision-makers. The types of problems that attract public attention shift over time, depending on changes in leadership, changes in socio-economic conditions, changes in communication technologies, and changes in the design of policy programs and service systems.

The modern policy analysis literature—whether in health, education, criminology or environment—emphasises the importance of problem definitions or perceptions in influencing how policy debates unfold. ‘Framing’ here refers to how an issue or problem is defined and presented to wider audiences, as part of the process of setting policy agendas and priorities. Problem framing is about how actors attempt to persuade other citizens and decision-makers about the nature and significance of issues under discussion (van Hulst & Yanow, 2016). It is clear that very different stories tend to emerge about the causes and severity of the problems (and therefore the preferred actions to tackle the problems). ‘Framing’ is about how actors’ understandings of problems, contexts and responses are articulated, represented through narratives, and further shaped through interaction (Fischer, 2003, p. 144). Schön and Rein consider framing ‘a way of selecting, organising, interpreting and making sense of a complex reality to provide guideposts for knowing, analysing, persuading and acting’ (Schön & Rein, 1994, p. 146). Framing is also central for articulating the core values and identities that underlie social movements seeking policy change—for example, those advocating for substantive civil rights and non-discrimination on the basis of gender, religion or ethnicity (Benford & Snow, 2000). Under modern conditions in a democratic society with diverse media channels and technologies available to citizens, the fragmentation of media framings may generate ‘preference-based reinforcement’ (or group-think) among each of these

media audiences (Cacciatore et al., 2016) rather than generalised impacts across the mass population.

Rittel and Webber argued that problem framing had become more difficult under modern conditions of social pluralism and political communication.

By now we are all beginning to realize that one of the most intractable problems is that of defining problems (of knowing what distinguishes an observed condition from a desired condition) and of locating problems (finding where in the complex causal networks the trouble really lies). In turn, and equally intractable, is the problem of identifying the actions that might effectively narrow the gap between what-is and what-ought-to-be. (Rittel & Webber 1973, p. 159)

The dynamics of problem framing are important for many reasons, including the close connection generally found between how a problem is defined (or ‘structured’) by stakeholders and the preferred solutions they propose (Dery, 1984; Gusfield, 1989). Peters demonstrates that specific policy ‘problems’ (such as environmental pollution) emerge under specific political conditions and institutional contexts (Peters, 2005). He shows how the problems are interpreted by various actors in the light of issue histories, the balance of key participants, and their dominant ideologies and interests. The way a problem is framed by stakeholders and decision-makers is strongly correlated with their preferences for specific policy tools (e.g. market-based instruments vs state regulation).

Thus, the way problems are interpreted is closely tied to proposed solutions recommended by various government agencies, business groups and community stakeholders. To take an everyday example, poverty and economic inequality are widely seen as conditions of life in most countries. However, despite apparent agreement that poverty is a ‘real’ and ongoing problem, there are very different underlying narratives about the causes of poverty, the degree of urgency, and the proposed solutions. If poverty is seen as an individual-centred problem (generated by deficits in personal skills and motivation), the proposed solutions will be oriented towards encouraging individuals to take more responsibility for their unfortunate situation and challenging them to develop their work skills and their ‘achievement orientation’. However, if poverty is seen as an enduring structural feature of society (generated by impersonal market forces which primarily benefit wealthy elites), the solutions proposed might be oriented

towards political action to improve employment security and the public funding of social services. In the same way, people enmeshed in long-term unemployment can be seen either as unwilling to grasp opportunities to develop new skills, or alternatively can be seen as the unfortunate victims of structural and technological change.

Debates about the nature and causes of problems provide the foundations for considering policy solutions and governance arrangements. Bacchi argues that the assumptions underlying policy arguments need to be carefully scrutinised. Policy dynamics can best be understood by ‘problematising’ the assumptions, interests and values underlying each viewpoint, and by identifying the likely impacts of adopting one position rather than another (Bacchi, 2009). Her critical analysis of social policy fields reveals some of the hidden interests and value assumptions embedded in mainstream social policy programs, including youth welfare, drugs policy, immigration, education and equal opportunity.

According to the policy analysis literature, policy debates always include key moments when the nature and scope of problems are intensely disputed and redefined (Dery, 1984). The contest over problem definitions and priorities evolves over time, constituting the contemporary public policy agenda. This agenda-setting process is crucial, because it shapes the selection of issues deemed worthy of attention, the manner in which they are considered, the nature of solutions regarded as feasible and supportable, and ultimately the pattern of winners and losers in various policy fields (Kingdon, 1995; Stone, 2012). Agenda-setting involves the exercise of power and influence, conducted through a contest of ideas and interests. For example, in responding to crises and emergencies, political leaders seek to influence how the media portray the nature of the challenges and how the proposed solutions are publicly defined, in order to avoid blame and to mobilise coalitions of support for particular policy outcomes (Boin et al., 2009).

In filtering out some proposed courses of action and favouring others, framing contests have real impacts on the policy process. A classic example of why problem-framing matters is to consider how the phrase ‘sustainable development’—originally a policy framework critical of the status quo—became a mainstream goal endorsed across a wide spectrum. Nevertheless, goals and methods of ‘sustainable development’ have become interpreted in radically different ways by corporate interests (who promote business profitability and continuous economic growth) and by ecological activists (who regard protection of natural assets as paramount). Thus

the policy debate over how to interpret ‘sustainable development’ has been bitterly polarised between pro-growth advocates and those seeking to protect environmental values (Dovers & Hussey, 2013; Schandl & Walker, 2017).

Framing of policy problems and solutions occurs in specific contexts, necessarily linked to policy histories and the local array of political and economic stakeholders. For example, the problem of ‘gun violence’ has been handled in very different ways internationally. Policy diversity regarding gun control has been evident, even within the OECD group of liberal democracies. In a study of three federal countries—the USA, Canada and Australia—Newman and Head (2017b) showed how political and ideological factors led to very different outcomes. In the USA, a coalition of economic and political stakeholders have entrenched a permissive ‘gun culture’ that allows widespread civil access to weapons. This permissive outcome has been facilitated by an expansive reading of the Second Amendment of the US Constitution, and buttressed through intensive political lobbying by the financially powerful firearms industry. Canada and Australia have been different, despite having had strong rural lobbies advocating for the rights of hunters and sporting shooters. Regulatory controls have been more acceptable in those two countries, and in the case of Australia those controls were significantly tightened through a concerted political and legislative response to mass shootings in 1998. The Australian regulatory approach was recently influential in New Zealand, which suffered a mass shooting in a mosque in 2019 (Every-Palmer et al., 2020). Response to a tragedy can generate diverse policy pathways, dependent on the interplay between actors in various political and institutional contexts and their contest of ideas (Béland & Cox, 2011).

SIMPLE AND COMPLEX PROBLEMS

Some types of policy problems are more simple or straightforward than others. Simple problems are defined exactly or narrowly. Owing to their narrow scope, they are more likely to be managed and resolved with a high level of agreement. In short, simple policy problems tend to be defined precisely by the policy actors and stakeholders. The latter agree on the knowledge base for understanding the problem, relevant technical parameters, cost-effective options and the locus of responsibility and capacity for addressing the problem. These apparently simple policy

issues are unlikely to be overlaid with moral judgements, thus making issue-management more straightforward. The analogy with laboratory experiments is useful—much of science is focused on precise measurement of narrowly specified variables and their observable interaction.

And yet the notion that some policy problems are ‘inherently simple’ can be misleading, because seeing a problem as simple might be strongly influenced by the availability of widely accepted solutions to manage the problem. Consider the challenges of traffic mobility in a large city. One of the (many) identified problems for improvement might be the high incidence of collisions and related injuries on public roads; thus, the (apparently simple) policy challenge would be to reduce collisions. Several possible solutions to improve road traffic safety have had wide support, ranging from regulatory to engineering approaches. Regulatory solutions with low costs include restrictions on driver behaviour (e.g. licensing tests; ban on use of intoxicants; and specific maximum vehicle speeds designated for various locations). Other regulatory solutions, though with higher costs, include requirements for vehicles to meet safety performance standards. Infrastructure redesign provides decision-makers with other avenues for reducing the incidence of collisions and injuries. For example, the construction of dedicated walkways and bike paths can reduce the co-mingling of pedestrians, cyclists and motor vehicles.

By focusing on one specific aspect of urban transportation (e.g. high incidence of traffic accidents and injuries), policy analysis is likely to focus on various technical solutions for reducing that problem. However, if the urban transportation problem is instead characterised as ‘traffic congestion’ rather than road injuries, a different range of considerations emerge. Traffic systems engineers will lobby for installing coordinated traffic signalling systems with digitised traffic flow technologies. This optimises existing traffic flow, especially benefiting private drivers. On the other hand, major construction contractors will lobby for building more freeways and bridges, which aim to deliver increased road capacity and connectivity, and create significant employment on major projects. But these supply-side options can be very expensive and, even if successful in reducing congestion in the short term, may soon induce larger volumes of private traffic.

A third way of framing the key policy problems in urban transport is to emphasise the importance of access to affordable and efficient mass transit systems (provided by or heavily subsidised by government authorities). The policy problem is here framed as an historical over-reliance

on private vehicles and lack of alternative transport services. On the supply-side of mass transit facilities, provision of new equipment and infrastructure for new services may be expensive and public funding may be constrained. On the demand-side, the main challenge is to provide financial incentives and service improvement incentives for commuters to switch towards mass transit. The above examples all show that a policy field such as urban transport comprises a nested series of simple and complex issues. The focus of debate shifts according to whether the ‘problem’ demanding attention is seen as safety, travel time or mass transit efficiency. A related series of debates will focus on who pays—e.g. whether government authorities will carry the costs of new investment or whether private citizens will contribute through a user-fee approach to accessing services and infrastructure facilities.

Within the category of complex problems, some are more intractable and controversial, and therefore much more difficult to manage successfully. These intractable problems, described by Rittel and Webber (1973) as ‘wicked’ problems, are likely to be ongoing and recurrent, rather than being resolvable on the basis of scientific evidence, expert plans and competent project management. Many of these ‘big’ problems are manifested across different levels or scales—such as institutional complexity, geographical breadth and historical evolution. At the national level, intractable and complex policy problems might include the persistence of domestic or family violence, criminal behaviour, environmental degradation, natural disaster management and effective responses to health pandemics. At the international level, the United Nations formulated 17 Sustainable Development Goals (see <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgs>), all of which qualify as complex and intractable challenges at global scale, including climate change, food security, water and energy security, biodiversity protection, gender equality, and peaceful resolution of major disputes. These problems typically provoke divergent views about the nature of each problem, responsibilities for addressing the problem, and the design and funding of policy responses.

As noted previously, a common policy problem is the persistence of poverty. Its complex, contested and ubiquitous nature implies that it takes many forms and has many causes. Hence, no single policy lever can ‘fix’ the problem, even in those rare situations where governmental and community leaders wish to take strong action. As many analysts have noted:

Poverty is a systemic problem. It has hundreds of mutually reinforcing causes. No central authority, top-heavy investment committee, or cadre of policy makers —however brilliant— will ever be able to comprehensively address poverty’s causes or fully redress its innumerable consequences. (Wood & Hamel, 2002)

Many modern policy issues have these systemic qualities. There are important interconnections across issues and across institutional processes. This high level of interdependence means that changes in one part of the system may have unpredictable effects elsewhere.

Understanding complex issues is hard work, and few leaders have an interest in investing in the required knowledge base. Leadership is about direction-setting, sense-making and selling a compelling narrative to supporters. In recent years, some of these leadership narratives have been strongly influenced by populist appeals and identity politics, which have intensified the polarisation of views about the nature of policy problems and how to address them. For example, the mass influx of refugees from the Middle East and Africa into Europe in the last two decades (Murray & Longo, 2018), the strident concerns of the Trump administration about Mexicans entering the USA, and the immigration controls debated in the Brexit plebiscite (King, 2021), have drawn attention to the polarisation of views about the nature of complex social problems and appropriate ways to resolve such problems. Mass migration movements are generally interpreted as security threats, and cultural challenges, as well as a fiscal burden for receiving countries. Alternatively, refugee and civil rights groups see the challenge as a humanitarian crisis for the victims of civil war or political persecution. Christine Boswell also points to shifts in the policy frames over time, in response to changing external contexts. Thus, in relation to policies and administrative practices in the UK for ‘processing’ displaced people who are seeking asylum or refugee status, she notes that refugees have at various times been positively welcomed as tragic victims of oppressive political regimes, while at other times they have been demonised as illegal immigrants who should be separated from civil society in remote locations (Boswell, 2009).

Another complex and contested problem area is global warming and climate policy responses (a matter discussed further in Chapter 4). Despite a high degree of scientific consensus about the bio-physical causes and the systemic effects of global warming, the range of stakeholder perspectives is exceptionally large. At one end of the spectrum is the conspiratorial

proposition that global warming problems are not real but have been fabricated by the enemies of economic prosperity. But even among the majority who accept that climate challenges are real, there are serious differences concerning the desirable scope and pace of policy reform. Some believe that rapid and transformative policy changes are necessary, while others support incremental policy adjustment. Some believe that global reductions in greenhouse gas emissions must be the primary goal, while others are more concerned about managing natural disasters and adapting to climate variability. Some have faith that technology will facilitate all the necessary solutions, e.g. renewable energy and drought-resistant crops; whereas others are concerned that protection of biodiversity and ecological assets must be given high priority.

It is not surprising that key concepts and their associated values (e.g. democracy, freedom, equity, social justice, equality, well-being) are often framed in different ways. There is an extensive literature on why some concepts are inherently contentious or disputed. Gallie (1956) argued that some concepts are ‘essentially contested’, owing to their breadth, their ambiguity and their normative implications. Value differences underlie many disputes about concepts, goals and problems—these are inherent in modern pluralistic societies and thus in democratic debates about public policy (Collier et al., 2006; Mason, 1990). These differences highlight the importance of problem ‘framing’ in policy debates.

KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERTISE FOR POLICY IMPROVEMENT

The role of expertise in policymaking, and its potential to overcome major differences among stakeholder perspectives, has been much discussed. The rational-optimist approach to valuing the role of expertise has emphasised the potential contribution of rigorous research-based knowledge in the policy sciences. Given the proven reliability of technical knowledge in tackling engineering and medical problems, advocates of evidence-based policymaking have anticipated that a similar approach could be successfully adapted for problem-solving in the social and economic policy sciences (Rivlin, 1971). This rational-optimist view suggests that reliable knowledge about human behaviour and institutions can improve our collective understanding of complex social problems, clarify the likely effectiveness of potential interventions and thus reduce stakeholder disagreements and achieve better policy outcomes. Indeed, there are many examples of substantial incorporation of rigorous evidence

into decision-making processes, and with measurable benefits for social policy program (Boaz et al., 2019; Head, 2010a, 2016; Haskins & Margolis, 2014; Nutley et al., 2007). There have been many attempts to institutionalise closer links between evidence-producers and decision-makers. In some government agencies and legislative assemblies, processes have been established to enhance interaction between decision-makers, service delivery managers, technical experts and social researchers. Institutional venues that have been established to consider expert advice (from researchers, stakeholders and practitioners) include ad-hoc public inquiries on complex or controversial topics; together with more enduring advisory committees that provide regular advice on technical issues (Owens, 2012; Crowley & Head, 2017b). Since the 1980s there have been major investments in building more systematic information systems and drawing upon expert knowledge to advance the ‘problem-solving’ approach to policy improvement.

However, the policymaking process is highly political, and the full range of expertise can easily be overlooked or ignored. The dynamics of each policy field are different. Processes and outcomes are shaped by many factors—the power of stakeholder networks, the embedded preferences of decision-makers, the extent of media scrutiny, the confidentiality of information and the specific ways in which varieties of expertise are accessed. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic which confronted every country in 2020–2021, the ‘problem’ faced by policy-makers—how to control a dangerous infectious disease—was ostensibly similar. However, the responses of government leaders, and their reliance on expert advice, varied widely internationally, with some demonstrating reckless indifference (Baldwin, 2021, p. 3). Important forms of expert information and advice accessed by leaders ranged from medical advice about methods for controlling and treating the disease, testing and monitoring systems, information about vulnerable social groups, procurement and transportation of vital supplies and various scenarios concerning the economic effects of restricted social mobility. The reliability of available information and the coherence of expert advice varied greatly. This variability was partly due to data quality issues—linked to previous investment in information systems—and partly due to political judgements about the urgency of the public health challenge and the contentious trade-off between preserving lives and protecting economic livelihoods. Different stakeholder groups harnessed their concerns to different elements of this sweeping policy agenda. In the liberal-democratic countries (but not in

centralist-authoritarian countries), this debate about public health and economic recovery was played out in the glare of media attention and competing agendas about the public interest.

By contrast, in matters of foreign policy or defence policy, the secretive processes and lack of public debate can sometimes lead to rapid decisions guided as much by emotion and loyalty as by evidence. One well-known example is the process by which the US and UK governments were drawn into military action against Iraq in 2003. Subsequent analyses of the US and UK decision-making have demonstrated the key role of political advisers and intelligence services in filtering information about critical issues such as the existence of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Moreover, having commenced a strategy of military occupation, and found no evidence of WMD, the policy goals were adapted in accordance with evolving interpretations of the strategic and operational context of governance in Iraq (Jamieson, 2007; Thomas, 2017).

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The central importance of policy framing and reframing is widely understood by policy practitioners themselves. Leaders, advocates and managers in each policy field understand the vital importance of persuasive narratives, whether for initiating or resisting policy reform. Policy narratives may refer to ‘the facts’ or the ‘realities’ of the situation, but they are fundamentally anchored in appeals to certain values and identities (Mols, 2012). Among the ‘tools of government’, persuasion is seen as the most economical and cost-effective (Bell et al., 2010).

For policy analysts and scholars, understanding how policy ‘problems’ are conceptualised, prioritised and contested provides a solid platform for understanding the dynamics of policy debate, decision-making and policy change. This insight applies at all levels, from the micro and local levels through to the macro and international levels. The way in which policy problems are defined and scoped is central to political and ideological debates (Dery, 1984; Gusfield, 1989; Hoppe, 2010; Peters, 2005). Gathering or mobilising relevant evidence in a selective way to support a preferred policy stance is also important but is a secondary consideration for many practitioners.

The definition of a policy problem—its nature, scope and causation—is not self-evident; indeed, research about ‘problem framing’ has highlighted the need for de-mystification of political rhetoric and partisan

claims. The analysis of problem framing is essentially about problematising how policy problems are defined, debated and acted upon (Bacchi, 2009; Fischer, 2003; Schön & Rein, 1994). The analysis of how policy actors frame problems allows scholars to gain a closer understanding of the effects produced by different ways of framing policy issues, and understanding whose interests underlie particular framings. By interrogating or questioning the common-sense meanings and values that are embedded in claims about policy problems and solutions, it is possible for analysts and scholars to clarify and reveal the underlying interests, ideological positions and cultural assumptions. These insights are fundamental for understanding the ‘wicked problems’ analysis offered by Rittel and Webber (1973).

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