

## **Part 1**

### **Introduction**

#### **Chapter 1 Studying the policy process**

##### **SYNOPSIS**

After this introductory chapter the book is divided into two further parts. Part 2 (Chapters 2–7) explores a range of theories that have been developed to explain all of, or key aspects of, the policy process. Then Part 3 (Chapters 8–15) looks at various aspects of the policy process, essentially developing and applying some of the main ideas from the first part. Connections between the theories in the first part and the discussions of the issues in the second part will be made in various ways, including summarising observations at the ends of chapters.

This introductory chapter looks at some important overall considerations about the study of the policy process. It explores the implications of the three key words in the title in reverse order. Thus it starts with an exploration of what is implied in examining the policy process. That examines the relationship between the ‘descriptive’ aim of this book and the ‘prescriptive’ objectives that motivate much policy analysis. A particular aspect of this that requires some introductory exploration here is the fact that many prescriptive approaches involve very explicit views about the ‘staged’ shape that the policy process should take whilst a descriptive approach involves a much more agnostic perspective on that. This leads on to a general exploration of the relationship between the study of the policy process and political science, and other social science disciplines. Two policy examples are used at the end of this discussion to illustrate these points. They are then also used to illustrate the examination of what may be meant by policy. Here it will be shown again that a distinction may be drawn between approaches to this concept – often from a prescriptive perspective – that endeavour to use a very precise meaning and the stance taken in this book that political and ideological contests make that activity difficult and/or contentious. Finally there is consideration of what is distinctive

about the study of public policy. The examination of this topic involves a recognition of the extent to which there are problems with identifying a distinctive public sector, something which is emphasised in modern stresses upon the extent to which 'government' needs to be seen to have been replaced by 'governance'.

## **Introduction**

We are all critical of public policies from time to time. Most of us have ideas about how they could be better. When we engage in ordinary conversations about the defects of policies we put forward, or hear advanced, various propositions about why they are defective. Those propositions tend to involve views about policy makers as ignorant or misled or perhaps malign. They often embody views that policies would be better if only different people had more influence on policy, including, of course, perhaps ourselves.

This book is based on the belief that before you can really start to suggest alternative policies to the ones we have, or to suggest alternative ways of making policy, it is essential to try to understand how policy is made. Many of the popular prescriptions for improving policy rest upon essential misunderstandings of the nature of the policy process. For example:

- views about the need for policy makers to be more aware of 'the facts' often disregard the way the facts are actually matters of dispute between different 'interests', 'beliefs' and 'values';
- suggestions for taking 'politics' out of policy making disregard the fact that politics is much more than simply the interplay of politicians;
- statements about the roles of politicians (including many they themselves make) suggest that they have much more influence over the policy process than in fact they do. It may be said that there is both extravagant 'claiming' and 'blaming'.

The view taken in this book is that the policy process is essentially a complex and multi-layered one.

It is essentially a political process, but in the widest sense of that term. The policy process is a

complex political process in which there are many actors: politicians, pressure groups, civil servants, publicly employed professionals, academic experts, journalists and even sometimes those who see themselves as the passive recipients of policy.

To explore further what studying the policy process implies it is appropriate to start with an examination of the place of this approach in the context of the many different approaches adopted to what can be generically called ‘policy analysis’. That then leads on to some more specific considerations about adopting a process perspective. From there we can then go to what that implies for the way public policy is examined in this book.

### **Description and prescription in policy analysis**

Some policy analysts are interested in furthering understanding of policy (*analysis of policy*); some are interested in improving the quality of policy (*analysis for policy*); and some are interested in both activities (see Parsons, 1995, for an overview of the many approaches). Further, cutting across the distinction between ‘analysis of’ and ‘analysis for’ policy are concerns with *ends* and concerns with *means*.

The typology set out in Box 1.1 identifies a range of different kinds of policy analysis.

#### **Box 1.1 about here**

##### **Box 1.1 Different kinds of policy analysis**

###### **Analysis of policy**

- Studies of policy *content*, in which analysts seek to describe and explain the genesis and development of particular policies. The analyst interested in policy content usually investigates one or more cases in order to trace how a policy emerged, how it was implemented and what the results were. A great deal of academic work concentrates on single policies or single policy areas (social policy, environment policy, foreign policy, etc.).
- Studies of policy *outputs*, with much in common with studies of policy content but which typically seek to explain why levels of expenditure or service provision vary (over time or

between countries or local governments).

- Studies of the policy *process*, in which attention is focused upon how policy decisions are made and how policies are shaped in action.

### **Analysis for policy**

- *Evaluation* marks the borderline between analysis of policy and analysis for policy. Evaluation studies are also sometimes referred to as impact studies as they are concerned with analysing the impact policies have on the population. Evaluation studies may answer descriptive questions (which intended impacts are observed?), causal questions (which factors explain the missing impacts?) and/or normative questions (which policy modification would improve the intended impacts).
- *Information* for policy making, in which data are marshalled in order to assist policy makers to reach decisions. An important vein of contemporary studies of this kind manifests a pragmatic concern with ‘what works’, trying to ensure that policy and practice are ‘evidence based’ (Davies et al., 2000).
- *Process advocacy*, in which analysts seek to improve the nature of the policy-making systems through the reallocation of functions and tasks, and through efforts to enhance the basis for policy choice through the development of planning systems and new approaches to option appraisal. Much of the academic work in the sub-fields of ‘public administration’ and ‘public management’ has this concern.
- *Policy advocacy*, which involves the analyst in pressing specific options and ideas in the policy process, either individually or in association with others, perhaps through a pressure group.

Typology based upon ones offered by Gordon et al. (1977) and by Hogwood and Gunn (1981, 1984).

This book’s concern is with the policy process, the third of the varieties of policy analysis identified

in Box 1.1. However, many studies of policy outputs contribute to our understanding of the policy process. Similarly, evaluation studies give much attention not merely to what the policy outputs or outcomes were but also to questions about how the policy process shaped them. Much the same can be said of studies that seek to offer information for policy making, since ‘what works’ may be determined by the way the policy process works. Overall it is often not easy to draw a clear line between ‘analysis of’ and ‘analysis for’ policy.

The desire to examine how the policy process works was in many respects a minor concern in the period between 1950 and 1980 when policy studies in their own right mushroomed dramatically. If the right policies could be found, and their design difficulties solved, then progress would be made towards the solution of society’s problems. Only a minority – radical analysts on the ‘Left’ who doubted that modern governments really had the will to solve problems, and radical analysts on the ‘Right’ who were sceptical about their capacity to do so – raised doubts and suggested that more attention should be paid to the determinants of policy decisions. While many of the leading figures in the development of policy analysis certainly moved between prescription and description, endeavouring to ground solutions in political and organisational realism, prescription was dominant in policy studies.

This book’s original predecessor (Ham and Hill, 1984) was, when it was first published, comparatively unusual in asserting that it was appropriate to concentrate on description, to explore the nature of the policy process, to help to ensure that proposals about policy content or about how to change policy should be grounded in the understanding of the real world in which policy is made. Nowadays that is a much less exceptional stance to take towards the study of policy. Rather, the problem may instead be that scepticism is so widespread that it is hard to make a case for the development of more sophisticated approaches to the policy process. That contributes to a widening gulf between the practical people – politicians, civil servants, pressure group leaders, etc. – whose business is achieving policy change and the academic analysts of the policy process – who aim to describe and interpret causal mechanisms at work in policy processes.

This book’s stance, then, is to assert that we must continue to try to understand the policy process – however irrational or uncontrollable it may seem to be – as a crucial first step towards trying to

secure effective policy making. The stance taken here can be compared to one in which effective engineering needs to be grounded in a good understanding of physics. While – at least in the past – many successful engineers have operated pragmatically, using trial and error methods and accumulating experience with only an intuitive understanding of physics, the latter can inform their activities. When things go wrong, moreover, for example when a bridge collapses, questions will be asked about the extent to which practice was based upon the relevant body of scientific knowledge.

However, as will be indicated below, there is a need to be cautious about use of the word scientific in relation to the study of political and social life. In reality, much of the so-called knowledge of the policy process derives from the observations of practical people, much more interested in prescribing than in describing. The aim here is merely to try to stand back critically from their eagerness to prescribe, leading often to either complicity with the goals of the powerful or, as Rothstein has put it, to ‘misery research’ (1998, pp. 62–3) reflecting how often what is prescribed fails to be realised.

### **Does a process perspective need to start with any assumptions about the shape it takes?**

If you are engaged in one of the prescriptive forms of policy analysis you are likely to be relating your activity to one of the stages of the policy process: helping agenda setting or policy formulation through the provision of information, advising how actors might seek to steer or control the implementation process or evaluating policy outcomes. But if you are engaged in description you may even need to be sceptical about notions that policy development follows a staged process. There seem to be common sense reasons why we should expect there to be stages in a policy process. Many human activities are staged in this way. Take for example going on a journey, you may typically:

- determine where you want to go;
- work out the best way to go there;
- go on the journey;
- (and perhaps) reflect on that process for future reference.

However, this activity does not always take that shape. You may go for a walk in which choices of the

route and even the ultimate destination emerge as you engage in the process, depending on how you feel and what you see as you go along. Similarly, it is important not to assume that policy processes will necessarily take the shape embodied in the journey model set out systematically above. The problem is then that much of the activity observed by the student of the policy process is presumed by key actors to take that form, and that (as suggested above) much analysis of it takes that for granted.

The issues about the extent to which the 'stages model' of the policy process is, can or should be used will be explored further (in Chapter 8). However, there is one point about it that must be mentioned here. Readers of the last paragraph may have said to themselves that, while that statement about the book apparently presents an open-minded view of whether the policy process involves stages, several of the chapter headings of this book seem to take some of those stages for granted. The defence against a charge of inconsistency here is that any textbook, or teaching activity, needs a structure. The topic examined needs to be divided up in some way. The justification for the divisions adopted – as John, one of the stages model's severest critics, has recognised – is that there is a pragmatic case for the model as it 'imposes some order on the research process' (1998, p. 36). What had to be recognised in shaping this book was that if every process is continuously seen as interacting with every other process, there is no way to divide up discussion into separate chapters or sections. Hence, limited use is made of the stages model by recognising that there are somewhat different things to say about agenda setting, policy formulation and implementation respectively. At the same time, interactions are regularly stressed. Moreover the view taken here is not quite as radical as John's: very many policy processes do take shape along staged lines (albeit often with feedback loops).

### **Studying the policy process**

As an issue for academic study, the exploration of the policy process is most evidently a part of political studies or political science. We are concerned here with the explanation of the outputs of politics – the 'how' aspect of Lasswell's terse definition of the study of politics as being about 'who gets what, when, how' (1936). At the same time, much of the study of politics is about how power is

acquired and used, without reference to policy outputs, inasmuch as it is concerned with elections, legislative processes and so on.

Any discussion of the public policy process needs to be grounded in an extensive consideration of the nature of power in the state. Any consideration of how the process works will tend to involve propositions about who dominates. Omission of this, in statements about the policy process, will tend to have the implication that there are no dominant elements in the state. That is in itself a stance on this much debated subject, congruent with the pluralist perspective that power is evenly spread and openly contested. This has been widely opposed by views which draw upon Marxist theory or elite theory, which see power as very distinctively structured or which suggest that dominance is very much embedded in the nature of the machinery of the state itself.

An important element in the controversy about control over the state concerns the nature of power itself. This will be explored further in the next chapter. Controversy about the state and about power is closely related to the debate about democracy. Broadly, there is a conflict about the extent to which it is possible to identify, in the society that is under scrutiny, a system of power over the state which can be regarded as reasonably according with some of the criteria for a democracy. While modern political scientists recognise problems about the realisation of any ideal model of democracy, there are differing views about the scope any specific system offers for public participation. Sometimes these differences seem like little more than debates about whether the bottle is half full or half empty. However, there has been a strong division between a pluralist camp, taking an optimistic view of democracy, particularly American democracy, and a neo-Marxist or elitist camp emphasising, for example, the dominance of the 'military-industrial complex' (Mills, 1956) or the structural power of business (Przeworski and Wallerstein 1988; Swank 1992).

Having identified the study of the policy process as so closely related to the study of politics, it is pertinent to note, without going too deeply into the argument, the problems about adopting too restrictive a view of the 'political'. Hay, in exploring what is meant by 'political analysis', makes the following point:

. . . the political should be defined in such a way as to encompass the entire sphere of the social.

The implication of this is that events, processes and practices should not be labelled 'non-

political' or 'extra-political' simply by virtue of the specific setting or context in which they occur. All events, processes and practices which occur within the social sphere have the potential to be political and, hence, to be amenable to political analysis. The realm of government is no more innately political, by this definition, than that of culture, law or the domestic sphere. (Hay, 2002, p. 3)

Hay goes on from that to argue for the need for political analysis to include 'extra-political variables', to be concerned with economic and cultural processes, for example. He thus argues: 'Political analysts cannot simply afford to leave the analysis of economics to the economists, history to historians and so forth' (ibid., p. 4). But there is also a need to turn that argument the other way about and acknowledge that economists, historians, etc. can make a contribution to the understanding of the policy process.

In some parts of this book attention will be paid to arguments about the nature of the policy process that derive from economics: arguments about the extent to which it can help us to understand the policy process if we identify some or all of those engaged in it as 'rational actors' following their interests, and engaged in forms of gaming, that have much in common with the way economists analyse human behaviour in the 'marketplace'. We will also have to examine a very different kind of economics which sees decision making as determined by powerful economic forces.

Another discipline which contributes to the understanding of the policy process is sociology. It may be argued that analysis of political behaviour is political sociology. But quite apart from that, the sociology of organisations makes an important contribution to the study of the policy process, inasmuch as most policy making occurs within institutions. The sociology of organisations is particularly important for the interpretation of the translation of policy into action, exploring issues about the behaviour of workers within complex organisations (amongst which state bureaucracies loom large).

It is important to stress that there is no reason to suggest that the study of policy processes is any different from any other social science research enterprise. However, a little more needs to be said about the way in which the characteristics of the policy process pose certain challenges for research.

The object of study is normally a unique sequence of events. This means that there will be little scope for testing earlier research by looking for a situation in which a process is replicated. Policy

experiments are rare, and when they occur they are not necessarily set up in ways which make research evaluation easy (Booth, 1998; Bulmer, 1987). The political environments in which they are conducted mean that they are very unlikely to run their course without ongoing adjustments. When they do occur, the very fact that they are atypical limits the lessons that can be drawn from them.

Policy process studies are very often case studies, using qualitative methods, such as documentary analysis, discourse analysis, interviews with key actors or direct observation. Where quantitative methods are used they are likely to deal with impact, from which deductions can be made back to process. Perhaps the ideal here is some combination of qualitative observation of process with quantitative work on the inputs and outputs of this process (e.g. written surveys of interest groups, secondary analysis of official statistics, quantitative coding of the votes in legislatures, the consultations procedures organized by the administration, etc.). For example, many empirical studies establish a causal link between the increasing saliency of an issue and the subsequent policy change (see John et al. 2013 for British examples). Concretely, a major policy change is expected only when a particular issue attracted the attention of the media, interest groups and elected officials.

Quantitative and longitudinal studies are required to capture the media coverage of an issue (e.g. a dramatic nuclear accident, such as in Fukushima in 2011), the mobilization of pressure groups (e.g. street-demonstrations and protest activities by environmentalist organizations) and the reactions of elected politicians (e.g. bills proposed by green parties), and how the increase of issue saliency might eventually translate into a major policy change (e.g. the phasing out from nuclear power).

However, there are many relevant activities that are very hard to observe, to measure and to quantify. This brings us back to the issue of power. The fact that many power processes are not readily accessible to analysis but kept covert – indeed, their very success may depend upon them being so – is acknowledged in many colloquial expressions (‘the power behind the throne’, the ‘kitchen cabinet’, the *‘éminence grise’*). Official secrecy is openly used as a justification for restricting access to situations or data necessary to evaluate policy processes. Very much more is just kept secret without any attempt to offer a justification for doing so.

Analysts of policy processes are thus thrown back on methods which must involve inference from the data they can secure. They also find themselves in situations in which – like journalists or private

detectives – they cannot validate their findings by revealing their sources. All social scientists are open to accusations that their theories and ideologies predispose them to particular interpretations of their qualitative and/or quantitative data. Those who study the policy process are particularly vulnerable to this charge.

One, first, interesting way of trying to deal with this problem is to acknowledge openly the validity of competing theoretical frameworks of reference and then to explore a case study using each as an alternative lens (likely to amplify some parts of the subject and obscure others). Allison's (1971) use of this approach is described in Box 8.2. A number of other writers have followed Allison's lead, using different models. A particular concern has been to try to evaluate the evidence for the interpretations of policy processes to be discussed in the next chapter, as fairly open and competitive ones or as ones that are strongly structured or biased in favour of particular actors or interests (Blowers, 1984; Ham, 1992; Hill *et al.*, 1989).

A second complementary way is to investigate and then to compare several policy processes. The comparison of similar or different cases is very often a promising research strategy to move beyond the singularities of a specific policy process, and to identify common patterns across policy domains, across countries or over time. In chapter 7 we will address both ways by illustrating how a compound research design can combine various theoretical frameworks and types of comparisons.

Nevertheless, in the social and political sciences we recognise how complexity, change and the consciousness of the actors we are studying limit our scope for the establishment of generalisations (that is propositions going beyond the investigated cases). We also recognise how, particularly in a field like the study of policy process, the use of experimental methods remains rather exceptional (see John *et al.* 2011 for such applications) and we must often use qualitative techniques in single or comparative case studies to grasp social and political phenomena. Hence, whilst the study of the policy process is claimed to be an academic discipline (Lasswell, 1951, 1968, 1970) upon which the more active contributions to policy analysis need to be based, there is a need not to overwork the distinction between academic and practical approaches. People describe and try to understand because they want to prescribe. Conversely, people who dedicate themselves directly to prescription will always want to root what they have to say in a realistic appreciation of what 'is', whether derived

from academic studies or from their own practical experience.

There is a need to recognise the extent to which this activity may be considered as a form of historical study. Obviously the events observed have taken place in the past, though of course often the immediate past. Two issues emerge from that comparison. One is that what is involved is efforts to generalise from observations of past events in order to predict future ones or identify patterns. Historians differ on the feasibility of this (see Macmillan, 2009, for a cautious statement on this, or Hobsbaum 1997, for a strong one). The other concerns the veracity of the observations of the past and the objectivity of the observer (see Evans, 2000 for a discussion of this).

A number of books have taken these observations further to pose a challenge to efforts to generalise about the policy process. This is not a book on methodology, let alone one which will extend into some of the difficult questions about the philosophy of the social sciences. But the fact that even the cautious empiricism set out above is challenged by some writers, including some who have discussed policy processes, cannot be left entirely without comment. Some theorists (who are here labelled 'postmodernist') argue that it is impossible to draw a distinction between 'analysis of' and 'analysis for' policy. The starting point for their argument is a view that few realistic social scientists will contest, namely that when we attempt to study a topic on which we have strong views on what 'ought' to happen that may distort our interpretation of what does happen. That distortion is then even more likely if we have difficulties in developing a methodology for our work which enables the establishment of undisputable facts. What we face here, of course, are the issues about the extent to which social or political studies can be called 'scientific'.

In debates in English about the claim that social sciences are scientific, the core of the argument is about the extent to which 'positivist' methods can be used, involving the formulation and testing of causal hypotheses. The difficulties about doing this are partly practical problems about the extent to which it is possible to set up experimental situations or to design comparative research projects to control some of the variables so that the (net) impact of others may be tested. These problems are tackled by those who subscribe to positivist approaches by seeking situations in which there are variations between research sites in the extent of the presence of key variables. Sophisticated statistical methods are used to sort out the impact of a complex mix of variables (Haynes, 2003). But

there are other problems. When we try to develop explanations of what people do we need to be aware that they have their own explanations of their behaviour; and their behaviour is influenced by the way they think and speak about what they are doing. Then we must also not forget that researchers themselves are people developing hypotheses about other people. Hence, not only do they bring biases to their studies but they are also likely to be in situations in which their views and what they are doing will be communicated to those whose activities they are researching and thus will be influencing future behaviour. While even in the physical sciences there are some problems about the relationship between researchers and the 'matter' they study, in the social sciences these problems are more fundamental. The objects of studies can understand what is being hypothesised and can react to that.

Postmodernist theorists go further to argue that when reporting 'facts' the observer is an active shaper both of the message sent and of the message received. For postmodernists, the language with which evidence is reported is important. The social construction of reality involves discourses and the presentation of 'texts' in which issues about language usage are at the core of the postmodern argument (Farmer, 1995). At its strongest, the postmodernist perspective challenges all attempts to generalise about the policy process. It is often not clear in this 'postmodernist' writing whether it is only being argued that more attention needs to be paid to discourse, and the need to deconstruct dominant discourses, or whether an entirely relativist stance is being taken. In much postmodernist writing there is an emphasis on the need for the 'democratisation of discourse' (Drysek, 1990; Fischer, 2003; Fox and Miller, 1995). This is particularly important for the issues about evidence in political analysis.

The position taken in this book is to support the positivist 'project' inasmuch as it involves the systematic search for truth, in a context in which there are great difficulties about either accumulating good evidence or avoiding biases. But there must be a concern to recognise the significance of discourse and to allow for the possibility of alternative interpretations of evidence. This position has been described as 'critical modernist', explained by Pollitt and Bouckaert as still holding to 'the importance of the empirical testing of theories and hypotheses, although accepting that this is only one kind of test, and that arguments concerning whether the appropriate conditions for falsification

will be met will never cease' (2000, p. 23). They go on to emphasise that 'reality is socially constructed, but not all constructions have equal claim to our credulity', and that there is a need to 'discriminate between more – and less – adequate descriptions and explanations' (ibid.).

### **Focussing on the policy process: exploration through examples**

This section will use two examples from the UK to clarify some of the issues that have been discussed so far and to introduce the issues about the definition of policy that are the concerns of the rest of this chapter. The examples have been chosen to offer a clear contrast between example 1 (Box 1.2), a case where a comparatively straightforward process analysis is possible, and example 2 (Box 1.3), a case that is difficult and may be controversial.

#### **Box 1.2 about here**

##### **Box 1.2      The right to roam**

The roots of the quest for wider rights of access to the countryside than embodied in the long-standing English and Welsh 'rights of way' goes back to efforts by ramblers to gain access to privately owned moorland in the 1930s. In its 1997 manifesto the Labour Party promised: 'Our policies include greater freedom for people to explore our open countryside. We will not, however, permit any abuse of a right to greater access'.

That promise was kept and a right of access to specifically designated land was included in the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. That Act contains very specific provisions on the land involved. This is designed to exclude cultivated land, parks and gardens, golf courses, military land etc.; in other words, it confines the right to roam to open, comparatively wild country. The land remains in private ownership, and owners have rights to make use of it in various ways (including putting animals to graze on it); conversely there are also limitations on the things the public can do on it (horse riding, camping, driving a vehicle on it). The land in question has to be designated on official maps, and 'access authorities' (local governments or National Parks Authorities) have explicit powers to manage it (setting up entrance points, fences, notices etc.).

### **Box 1.3 about here**

#### **Box 1.3**      The reduction of child poverty

The attack on child poverty is of course a topic that is a widespread subject of policy advocacy. Pressure groups exist that address themselves wholly or partly to this; note for example the Child Poverty Action Group in the UK. Unlike the legislation discussed in Box 1.2, the 1997 Labour manifesto contained no specific commitment to an attack on child poverty but did include a variety of measures that might be expected to make a contribution to that goal either quite directly (the reduction of unemployment, the introduction of a minimum wage, reduction of taxes that imposed heavy burdens on lower income families) or indirectly (measures to improve health, education, housing, for example). However, in 1999 the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, proclaimed that the government had a ‘20 year mission’ ‘to end child poverty for ever’ (see Stewart in Seldon, 2007, p. 411; also Hills and Stewart, 2005, for wider discussion of this policy issue). That pledge was followed by the specification of interim targets, and various official indications about how the pledge might be interpreted. Crucial here is the use by the government of a definition of poverty in terms of below 60% of ‘equivalised’ (meaning a technique for taking into account household composition) median income after meeting housing costs.

This policy was put into an Act of Parliament (the Child Poverty Act 2010) setting goals, not for the eradication of child poverty, but for specific improvements in respect of indicators by 2020–21. The measure had cross-party support and not was repealed when the Conservative led Coalition Government assumed power in 2010, despite changes of government and the fact that expenditure cuts have made the goals of the Act harder to achieve. The debate about the precise definition of the issue, however, rumbled on, and at the time of writing the measure seems likely to be replaced by an even more ambiguous Life Chances Act.

There has been extensive academic activity to track progress towards the specified goals (Stewart, 2011), and of course pressure groups have paid careful attention to evidence on that subject. More specific policy changes (in particular the development of tax credits) have been evaluated in terms of the contributions they make to the proclaimed goal.

Both of the policy examples are set out in the boxes in terms which can be seen as descriptive rather than prescriptive. But both developments can be seen in terms of wider goals, which can be (and in the case of the poverty issue very much are) the concerns of policy analysts. The chain of events following Blair's poverty pledge involved the translation of that into something to which actual government activity might be related; prescriptive analysts have much to say about how that has been done. But from a descriptive point of view there is also much to be said. In the case of the right to roam the original manifesto commitment may be seen, from its cautious terms, to be a product of an agenda-setting process in which the influence of interests contrary to those eager to open up the countryside can be detected. The actual elaborate designation process set up testifies to the further importance of this. What is then interesting is the extent to which the freedom of access acquired in practice has depended upon a quite complex, and indeed expensive, implementation process concerned with the designation, mapping and setting out of the access land. The anti-poverty pledge offers a much more extreme example of how complex a policy process may be. It was itself quite meaningless until accompanied by an official definition and until a very long-run goal was accompanied by interim goal statements. But even then, where the countryside access pledge implied a quite specific measure, the poverty pledge required realisation in terms of the development of a sequence of activities (in fact further policies, we will come back to that in the next section).

In terms of what was said earlier about the notion of policy as 'staged' it may also be noted that it is quite easy to separate out agenda setting, more detailed policy formulation and implementation in respect of the 'right to roam'. The logical sequence predicted by the stages models was followed. But then it was a comparatively low-profile measure (it is not even mentioned in Seldon's two edited volumes on the Blair governments) with fairly low implications either for those opposed to it or for other public policies. On the other hand, actually following through the events since Blair's anti-poverty pledge takes us down a tortuous path of interacting policies, some of which advance the nation towards that goal whilst others lead away from it.

At this point some readers may protest that in comparing 'right to roam' with 'anti-poverty' policy is not comparing like with like. Some may even want to say that the first is a policy the second just an aspiration. It does indeed seem probable that Blair's famous pledge may have been meant as a

vague rhetorical aspiration (Dean, 2011, Chapter 6). However, it was then set out in an Act of Parliament, passed with all-party support, containing targets which were not specifically repudiated by later governments formed from the parties in opposition at the time. The important point is that the word ‘policy’ is regularly used about both the policies discussed. This obviously leads us to the issues about the definition of policy.

### **The meaning of ‘policy’**

Chambers’ dictionary defines policy as ‘a course of action, especially one based on some declared and respected principle’. That definition clearly sees policy as something more than simply a decision: it embodies the idea of action – indeed, rational action – inasmuch as some ‘principle’ is involved. In everyday speech we sometimes say things like ‘my policy is always to . . .’.

This book is, of course, about *public* policy. Interestingly, the *Oxford English Dictionary* describes the following as ‘the chief living sense’ of the word ‘policy’: ‘A course of action adopted and pursued by a government, party, ruler, statesman . . .’. In the next section we come back to the implications of the word ‘public’.

These definitions do not get us very far towards identifying a policy. Perhaps we can do no more than adopt the very British pragmatism of Cunningham, a former top British civil servant, who argued that ‘Policy is rather like the elephant – you recognise it when you see it but cannot easily define it’ (1963, p. 229). A rather similarly vague approach is adopted by Friend and his colleagues, who say: ‘policy is essentially a *stance* which, once articulated, contributes to the context within which a succession of future decisions will be made’ (Friend *et al.*, 1974, p. 40). However, others have sought to do better than that. Box 1.4 sets out some examples.

The definitional problems posed by the concept of policy suggest that it is difficult to treat it as a very specific and concrete phenomenon. Policy may sometimes be identifiable in terms of a decision, but very often it involves either groups of decisions or what may be seen as little more than an orientation. The attempts at definition also imply that it is hard to identify particular occasions when policy is made. There is a temptation here to adopt a more specific definition of policy for the

purposes of this textbook, since there are grounds for seeing some usages as too vague for systematic analysis. This is perhaps the case with the poverty policy example discussed above. But it is unhelpful for social scientists to give terms in wide general use specific meanings for the purposes of their own analyses. In analysing the policy process it is important to recognise that different actors will be using the word policy in different ways, often with the specific objective of influencing how others view their actions.

#### **Box 1.4 about here**

##### **Box 1.4 Definitions of policy**

- Heclo's definition of policy, like the Chambers' dictionary one set out in the text, emphasises action: 'A policy may usefully be considered as a course of action or inaction rather than specific decisions or actions' (1972, p. 85).
- Easton offers a variant of this, noting that 'a policy . . . consists of a web of decisions and actions that allocate . . . values' (1953, p. 130).
- Jenkins sees policy as 'a set of interrelated decisions . . . concerning the selection of goals and the means of achieving them within a specified situation . . .' (1978, p. 15).
- Smith suggests that 'the concept of policy denotes . . . deliberate choice of action or inaction, rather than the effects of interrelating forces': he emphasises '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' (1976, p. 13).

Let us look a little more at the implications of the fact (emphasised in Easton's and Jenkins's definitions in Box 1.4) that policy involves a course of action or a web of decisions rather than just one decision. There are several aspects to this. Perhaps the most important of these is that the term 'policy' is being applied to many very different substantive topics. When we move away from talking about policy in general terms we discover very different usages. We return to this issue in a later section. Meanwhile, we list the general issues to be considered.

First, a decision network, often of considerable complexity, may be involved in producing action.

A web of decisions, taking place over a long period of time and extending far beyond the initial policy-making process, may form part of the network. Both of the examples above (Boxes 1.2 and 1.3) involve this; it is very clear in respect of the issue of anti-poverty policy but even the right to roam policy was shown to imply a quite elaborate pattern of implementation actions.

A second point is that policy is not usually expressed in a single decision. It tends to be defined in terms of a series of decisions which, taken together, comprise a more or less common understanding of what policy is. That is, of course, crucial for the anti-poverty policy example, where from the very start a pragmatic response to the core issue of how to define poverty was of fundamental importance.

Third, policies invariably change over time. Yesterday's statements of intent may not be the same as today's, either because of incremental adjustments to earlier decisions, or because of major changes of direction. Also, experience of implementing a decision may feed back into the decision-making process. This is not to say that policies are always changing, but simply that the policy process is dynamic rather than static and that we need to be aware of shifting definitions of issues. Again the way in which a decision that something should be done about poverty led on to a sequence of other decisions is quite evident. But the much more concrete policy making around the right to roam also had implications for related actions. There remain issues about the extent to which the originally designated access land can be extended, and it may be noted that later legislation (the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009) goes on to set up related new approaches to access to the coast.

Fourth, it is therefore important not to fall into the trap of seeing the policy process as if it exists on a desert island. Most of the policies that are likely to be studied in the modern world are changes to existing policies. Even when they seem to address a new issue or problem they will nevertheless be entering a crowded policy space, impacting upon and being influenced by other policies. Hence, as Wildavsky puts it, 'any major move sets off a series of changes, many of which . . . inevitably transform any problem they were originally supposed to solve' (1979, p. 71). If we take a broad policy issue like the reduction of poverty it may be noted that this extends more widely to redistributive issues in society as a whole. Someone has to pay for any gains made by the poor. Furthermore, the concentration on raising incomes close to the poverty threshold has implications for the situations of those further up the income 'ladder'. Perhaps most significantly of all, the fact that

the incomes of many who secure state benefits are below the officially defined poverty level generates a dilemma for the government, which they find easier to respond to in terms of efforts (often controversial) to get people off benefits than to change the rates of benefit.

Fifth, a development of this fourth point is that much policy decision making is concerned, as Hogwood and Gunn (1984) have stressed, with attempting the difficult task of 'policy termination' or determining 'policy succession' (see also Hogwood and Peters, 1983). In this sense the anti-poverty pledge may be seen as crucial for partial shifts in the benefit system from basic social assistance guarantees to tax credits only available to those in work. This implication has been very evident of the way in which more recent governments have approach this issue.

Sixth, the corollary of the last three points is the need to recognise that the study of policy has as one of its main concerns the examination of non-decisions. This is what Hecló and Smith are pointing to (see Box 1.4) in their references to inaction. It has been argued that much political activity is concerned with maintaining the *status quo* and resisting challenges to the existing allocation of values. Analysis of this activity is a necessary part of the examination of the dynamics of the policy process.

Seventh, the definitions cited raise the question of whether policy can be seen as action without decisions. It can be said that a pattern of actions over a period of time constitutes a policy, even if these actions have not been formally sanctioned by a decision. Dery takes this point even further to argue that often we can write of 'policy by the way . . . the by-product of policies that are made and implemented to pursue objectives other than those of the policy in question' (1999, pp. 165–6). In this sense policy may be seen as an outcome, which actors may or may not want to claim as a consequence of purposive activity. Having proclaimed that they have an anti-poverty policy, a government may be able to claim credit for reductions of the numbers of those below the poverty line whether or not is a result of their interventions.

Writers on policy have increasingly turned their attention to the action of lower-level actors, sometimes called 'street-level bureaucrats' (Lipsky, 1980), in order to gain a better understanding of the policy process. It has been suggested that in some circumstances it is at this level in the system that policy is actually made. It would seem to be important to balance a decisional, top-down perspective on policy with an action-oriented, bottom-up perspective. Actions as well as decisions

may therefore be said to be the proper focus of policy analysis. Later we will explore some of the issues surrounding the evolution of policy, noting writers who see the policy process as involving distinctive stages or a cycle and a literature which draws a stronger distinction between policy making and implementation. Such an approach rests very much upon a taken-for-granted version of the Chambers' definition set out above. It may be contrasted with a view that in many respects policy needs to be seen as what happens, rather than as what politicians say will happen.

The view that policies may simply be outcomes of political and bureaucratic processes as opposed to courses 'of action adopted and pursued' leads to two important themes for the study of the policy process: (1) the relationship between policy and politics, and (2) the dominance in much that is said and written about policy of the view that political action is (or should be) purposive.

A deeper exploration of the *Oxford English Dictionary* reveals that the word 'policy' has an interesting history in English. Amongst usages of the word that are now obsolete are the notions of policy as a 'prudent, expedient or advantageous procedure' and as a 'device, expedient, contrivance . . . stratagem, trick'. Parsons points out that Shakespeare used 'policy' in various ways:

Policy encompassed the arts of political illusion and duplicity. Show, outward appearance and illusions were the stuff of which power was made. Shakespeare employed the terms of Machiavellian philosophy . . . Power cannot be sustained purely with force. It needs, in a Machiavellian sense, *policy*: and 'policy sits above conscience', as the bard tells us in *Timon of Athens*. (Parsons, 1995, p. 14)

Furthermore some languages, including French and Italian, do not draw a clear distinction between 'policy' and 'politics'. Richard Jenkins argues that the 'apparently objective distinction between politics and policy is actually likely to be deeply political in its own right; in this sense, the other European languages have definitely got it right' (2007, p. 27). Thus he attacks the 'technocratic illusion of "rational" policy' (ibid.). We have here another aspect of the distinction between descriptive and prescriptive approaches to the policy process. Much prescriptive writing depends upon taking an explicit stance on what policy *should* be, but in the study of the policy process it is important to be aware of the complexity and ambiguity of the concept of policy. Hence, the purpose

of this very brief excursion into linguistic history is to emphasise not merely that policy has been seen as a simple and expedient, even duplicitous, ingredient in political strategy but also that this may still be an appropriate way to think of it. We need to ask: what is being said when someone stresses that they have a policy? May they not simply be trying to convince us that they are acting effectively and purposefully? Edelman (1971, 1977, 1988) has devoted considerable attention to the ‘symbolic’ uses of the concept of policy. Further, even if people can convince us, we still need to ask: what are the implications of their policy? Phenomena like the proclaimed ‘anti-poverty policy’ particularly need unpacking in this way. The notion here that policies are ‘claims’ takes us back to the simplest of the dictionary definitions, that is, that when we (and by the same token politicians) say we have a ‘policy’ we are in a sense making a claim to have a ‘property’. And, of course, then – as has been shown in respect of anti-poverty policy – such claims may provoke challenges.

It is a particular feature of the modern discourse about policy that it is seen as desirable that politicians should have policies – so that electorates may make choices – and that governments should enact those policies in a systematic way. It was suggested above that the very rise of the study of policy was dominated by that perspective, and that many contributions to policy analysis are motivated by a desire to assist a rational policy-making process. Yet politicians do not necessarily see their roles in this way – power may be more important to them than policy, and power may be used for personal ends rather than to try to solve problems in the way presumed in discussions of policy analysis.

What, then, needs to be understood as we examine the policy process is that, although the concept of policy is vague and elusive, it is nevertheless widely used to suggest a rational process. Readers need to be sceptical about writing which takes it for granted that a policy-making process is organised and has specific goals. It may be desirable that it should be like this, but whether it actually is or not must be an issue for research.

### **Public policy**

The *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of policy quoted above refers to action ‘by a government,

party, ruler, statesman, etc.’. But it goes on to note the more private usage of ‘any course of action adopted as advantageous or expedient’. It was noted that individuals sometimes talk of adopting ‘policies’. Organisations of all kinds regularly do so. This book is about ‘public policy’. Is there anything intrinsically different about the definition arising from the fact that it is the state or state organisations that are seen as the makers of the policy? The answer to that is surely ‘no’ as far as the simple characteristics of policy are concerned, but ‘yes’ inasmuch as special claims are made about the legitimacy of state policy and its primacy over other policies. This takes us into two difficulties – one about the nature of the state, the other about the special justifications used for the role of the state as a provider of policies.

A basic definition of the state is enshrined in Max Weber’s definition of it as (1) ‘an administrative and legal order subject to change by legislation’ and (2) claiming ‘binding authority ... over all action taking place in the area of its jurisdiction’ (Weber, 1947, p. 156). It can be identified in terms of both the institutions that make it up and the functions these institutions perform. State institutions comprise legislative bodies, including parliamentary assemblies and subordinate law-making institutions; executive bodies, including governmental bureaux and departments of state; and judicial bodies – principally courts of law – with responsibility for enforcing and, through their decisions, developing the law. State institutions are located at various levels – national, regional and local.

But there are also inter- and supra-state institutions which act, to some degree, as superordinate states. These include both international organisations – the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, the World Health Organization, 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 very fact that this supra-national power is controversial and is to some degree challenged by nation states offers a reminder of the fact that many states have gone through a process of struggling to achieve a legitimate superordinate role.

The identification of a complex of institutions as making up the state introduces another complication. This is that the state may operate through institutions which have many features that are regarded as private rather than public. In the past, particularly in the early years of state formation,

states hired mercenary armies, subcontracted tax collection and delegated law enforcement to local, quasi-autonomous barons. In many of the early nation states the whole apparatus of government was initially no more than an extension of the royal household. In other societies the establishment of a centralised governmental system was very much a partnership between the sovereign and a religious body.

The modern manifestation of the phenomena discussed in the last paragraph has been a deliberate shift to the delegation of what had become accepted as governmental functions. What this implies is a contract between government and a 'private' body to operate all or part of a public service. This is often presented as simply a mechanism for policy 'implementation' with policy making remaining in government hands, but it will be shown later that this policy making/implementation distinction is not easily drawn. The delegation of a major activity, particularly a monopoly activity, tends to involve some shift of control over policy. A related phenomenon is a public/private partnership where resources are drawn from both publicly collected revenues and private sources; policy control is obviously particularly likely to be shared in these circumstances. Finally, in introducing this subject the word 'private' was deliberately put in inverted commas. Like the concept 'public', this is hard to define when there is a complex partnership between different elements, including state ones. Furthermore, 'private' does not necessarily imply a private profit-making organisation – in this respect institutions bringing voluntary organisations into association with the state may be seen as ways of further integrating state and society and increasing democratic participation.

These complications, arising both from the increasing importance of supra-state bodies and from changes within the nation state (sometimes described as the 'hollowing out' of the state – see Milward *et al.*, 1993) – have led many contemporary writers to speak of a movement from 'government' to 'governance'. Richards and Smith thus say:

'Governance' is a descriptive label that is used to highlight the changing nature of the policy process in recent decades. In particular, it sensitises us to the ever-increasing variety of terrains and actors involved in the making of public policy. Thus, it demands that we consider all the actors and locations beyond the 'core executive' involved in the policy making process. (Richards and Smith, 2002, p. 2)

That definition perhaps gives insufficient emphasis to the supra-state issues, that is, that the key actors may be outside as well as inside the nation state. There is a debate (see Chapter 2, pp. xx) about the extent to which globalisation and the development of international governing institutions are important for contemporary governance (see Pierre, 2000).

Pierre and Peters' exploration of the use of the term 'governance' suggests that it is confusing since it is used both to describe empirical phenomena and to explore how those phenomena operate (2000, p. 12). Some writers emphasise a need for a shift from government to governance because of new realities, while others use this terminology to analyse how processes are actually changing.

To sum up then, there is an obvious objection to seeing the public policy process as only about policies delivered and/or enforced by governments. Private actors may do this for governments. But that still leaves a problem about identifying governments in situations of over-lapping supra-national and sub-national governments, even perhaps competing governments. To return to the example of anti-poverty policy: the European Union, the United Kingdom government, the devolved governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and many local authorities all claim to have anti-poverty policies (the actual terms may vary – for example, in the European Union case the issue is often embraced within the notion of 'social exclusion'). Moreover since, as has already been stressed, effective action in this area depends upon many different activities it is implicit that this may involve different governments, whose actions may or may not be consistent with each other.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This chapter has stressed that this book deals with the description of the policy process. However, it has been noted that it is impossible to maintain a rigid distinction between description and prescription because so many of those who have written about the policy process have combined the two. Descriptions have been offered in order to justify or criticise the way policies are made and implemented. Some of the most important controversies in policy analysis have been between analysts who differ on what they observe and what they want to observe.

One widely quoted proposition from Karl Marx is: 'The philosophers have only *interpreted* the

world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it' (1845, in Marx, 1958, vol. 2, p. 405). Marx was clear that he needed to offer a realistic description of the world in order to establish his political programme. The study of policy processes has been dominated by people concerned to show how power is concentrated or how politicians may be called to account or how administrators distort the intentions of their political chiefs and so on. Whilst this account attempts to achieve a measure of neutrality in that respect, it would be foolish of its writer to pretend that his prescriptive biases will not show through from time to time. And in the last resort Marx is right – the justification for trying to understand is a desire to do things better.