

Book Review

Advanced Introduction to Public Policy, by Peters, B. G., Cheltenham:
Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2015, 203 pp.

Public policy study is multi-disciplinary, encompassing political sciences, economics, law, sociology, physiology, and other social related studies. In order to study public policy comprehensively and practically, the authors proposed the concept of policy design focusing on the interaction between policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation. The problem, mainly caused by market failure, social failure, and governance failure, is the core business of public policy. According to the authors, the commonly known characteristics of the problem – boundary-spanning problem; public goods and divisibility; scale; solubility; complexity, certainty and risk; tragic choices; and monetization – are not suitable to describe unstructured problems, or what the authors dubbed "wicked problems."

This book consists of three main parts, namely the model of causation in policy-making (Chapter 3 and 4), intervention in policy implementation (Chapter 5 and 6), and policy evaluation (Chapter 7, 8 and 9). In line with the multi-disciplinary nature of public policy, the authors also emphasize political aspects in public policy and stress the importance of economic and social contexts in the public policy process.

A good plan is half of the job done. Chapter three explains the models of decision-making by adopting public administrative and political science perspectives. Rationality model states that policymakers tend to maximize their personal or organization utility through the policy-making process. This model later contributed to the development of game theory and bounded rationality approach, which identifies that decision-making is being conducted in a much more complex world through incrementalism. However, this approach is deemed unsuitable for solving crisis and adhoc problems as it does not provide any guidance on the scale of adjustment.

Other conservative approaches such as the Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework, the multiple streams and the garbage can model are models that strengthen the roles "of political and governmental institutions in the policy-making process. On the other hand, the political models of policy-making emphasize the political content, analyzing how institutions and opportunities for participation affect the policy choices made by political and governmental institutions. It explained the causal relationship between policy and political influence in the policy-making process and assumed the process to be linear. There is another viewpoint that policy-making could be understood as "chaos of purposes and accidents,"

given the possibilities of unexpected circumstances along the policy process, such as the changing of political power and natural disasters.

In the following chapter, the authors identify three forms of policy agendas, namely systematic or informal agenda, institutional agenda, and recurrent agenda, where bureaucracy and government institutions are the main players. Placing the right issue is important in agenda-setting. While emergency, crisis, and political symbol are the main actors in the shaping of issues, political interest, and media also play a role in influencing agenda-setting and framing. Meanwhile, the agenda for policy-making is based on the demands of political actors, government institution, and the public.

Policy-making without action or biased policy implementation would fail and would be subject to criticism. Chapter five focuses on designing intervention and policy implementation. Bureaucracy is the principal actor in the implementation of policies, while the involvement of non-governmental organizations or individuals is significant in ensuring successful implementation. Legislation, politics, multiple actors, and performance standard are the fundamental barriers in policy implementation. In the implementation process, there are clearance points which require positive decisions from the policy formulators to be cleared. Backward mapping, which considers the feasibility of policy implementation to minimize the negative effect of such interventions, is then desirable. This, however, increases the possibility that feasible, rather than effective, policies would be given priorities.

Apart from interventions and feasibility, structures and networks of organizations also play a role in policy implementation. Policymakers should be sensitive to the social and technological circumstances because of the rapid change of these two components. The relationship between government and society can be reflected in policy implementation. While this chapter provides a rather comprehensive picture on policy intervention and implementation, other factors such as risk management and unexpected circumstances that might occur in the implementation process should also be considered in ensuring successful policy implementation.

Chapter six introduces policy instruments in political science and constructivist approaches. The four instruments in the political science approach are economic, legal, persuasive, and others. The constructivist approach argues that these instruments should also be understood in a political and social context. An instrument is chosen based on four main considerations - individual decision-maker; institutions and instrument choice; ideas that influence the substance of policy as well as the public policy theories; and the interplay of social and economic interests. The political, economic, administrative, and ethical are criteria in evaluating an instrument. There is no one-fit-all instrument, as every policy is unique. Therefore, every policy must be implemented based on the current situation.

The evaluation of policies contributes to "evidence-based policy-making," which may strengthen public confidence in policymakers. Chapter seven states that the purpose of policy evaluation is to assess how well the programs are performing such that they can be improved upon, and for accountability. The leading expert in policy evaluation, Evert Vedung (2013) proposed six models of evaluation where each of these models has a set of mechanism in evaluating policy through different perspectives.

Chapter eight extends the discussion on policy evaluation by focusing on the cost-benefit perspective based on the Pareto optimality, where the interest of the individual is prioritized. On the other hand, the Kaldor-Hicks criterion provides an alternative in policy evaluation from the social perspective where one group gains a benefit while another group could obtain compensation in another form. These two concepts focus on reaching a win-win situation during the implementation process. Other fundamental idea underlying the cost-benefit analysis includes "consumer's surplus," which relates to the willingness of the people to pay for better services. Besides cost-benefit analysis, risk-benefit analysis, regulatory impact analysis, and environmental and social impact, the analysis could also serve as alternatives in evaluating policy implementation.

Chapter nine presents another view on policy evaluation based on normative and ethical analysis, which emphasizes the "logic of appropriateness" instead of consequentiality — public interest and fairness of individual in the society are the concerns of policymakers. The authors explain the concept of justice developed by John Rawl (1971) based on the "veil of ignorance." It is human nature to prioritize one's benefit. These three chapters provide a basic understanding of policy evaluation and how evaluation is done. While there are numerous ways to evaluate a policy, the objective of policy as well as the agenda behind the policy should be considered in choosing the evaluation criteria. Furthermore, these chapters could be further enriched by including discussions on different evaluations for the policy of different duration given the different nature and expectations of these policies.

Overall, this book is useful for new researchers and those who are in the early stage of understanding the public policy process. It provides a comprehensive introduction of public policy from the political perspective for the three components of public policy, which are policy-making, implementation, and evaluation. Apart from the practical side of the public policy process, this book also highlights existing literature on related theories and models. Lastly, the authors underline a lack of literature on innovation in public policy, providing an idea for future research in this area.

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