

POLITICS AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Basic Concepts

Polity, Politics, Policy, Power, and Authority

Polity refers to the entire political domain (organization, institution, state, society, community, political entity), the space where political actors (political parties, special and public interest groups, lobbyists, etc.). Polity is the political fields where these actors compete for power; try to maintain or increase their power, struggle to have their interests prevail, etc.

Politics refers to the activities that people engage in within the political domain. It is about competition for resources and ideas. It also involves striving to holding sway over the ideas of others concerning the manner in which things are distributed and the ways in which competition takes place. Politics can also be defined as the struggle for power, the seizure of power, and the consolidation of power. Crafting bills, trying to influence legislators, campaigning for elections or on specific political issues, all these activities constitute politics. And as with any social activity, there are norms in place as to what is or is not acceptable.

Policy refers to public action, public policies and the actual products of governance. Also as a course of action, a policy is defined as a program of actions adopted by a person, group, or government, or the set of principles on which they are based. These actions are usually distinguished by domain of activity so that we often speak of economic policy, environmental policy, labor policy or educational policy, for instance. All of these are public policies.

- **Power**

“Power is the capacity to direct the decisions and actions of others. Power derives from strength and will. Political scientists principally use “power” in terms of an actor’s ability to exercise influence over other actors.

There are different types of power, though. A first distinction refers to how power is exercised. **Hard power**, or **coercion**, is the exercise of power through force or the threat of force. Military power, for instance, is the ultimate form of hard power, so is a parent spanking a child. **Soft power**, or **influence**, refers to the exercise of power through persuasion. Diplomacy, for instance, is a form of soft power whereby political actors try to convince other parties to see things their way and agree to their demands. Is one more effective than the other? Hard power

may result in compliance on the short term. But because it generates resentment, it might have negative effects on the long term. Soft power tends to generate better, and more long-term, effects in that the recipients do not feel bullied or forced against their will. These concepts were developed by foreign policy analyst Joseph Nye (2005).

- **Authority**

Authority is legitimate power; it is the right to be obeyed; the right to make decisions. Authority lies in the office and not in the individual. It can also be exercised on the basis of one's extensive and specialized knowledge or expertise in a particular field. Authority comes about through the process of *Legitimation*. This refers to the process by which power is not only institutionalised but more importantly is given on moral grounding (Turner, 2000).

Politics and Social Problems

Politics has a lot of influence on what issues become social problems in society. Social problems reflect society and its dominant values and interests. Expressing concern about certain conditions in a society is perceived as a threat to those values and interests – that is, to the power structure in society.

To maintain the legitimacy of those values and interests, the power holders seek to remove social problems from the social sphere either by shifting them through explanation or deliberate action to places and forces beyond the control of the state, or by relating such problems through residualist conversion to the characteristics of the population strata experiencing them. Sometimes, a problem may remain in the public and private spheres, its position being contested by parties with conflicting interests, according to their respective perceptions and interpretations.

For example, unemployment has been explained by government policy, by unfair competition from other countries, or by the influence of some imported films or fashions being reflected in young people's 'disruptive' social behaviour and unwillingness to accept the discipline of formal and sustained employment obligations. Once a social problem is effectively located in a particular population group, it may further serve to maintain the legitimacy of those dominant values and interests by being used as an illustration of the penalty suffered by those who 'fail' to actively pursue the dominant values and corresponding goals.

Issues which become social problems are selected from among many issues which parts of the population may perceive as problematic. Groups differ in their definitions of social problems in accordance with their self-interests and their ideology. For an issue to become a social problem, a complex political process develops around the views and experiences of major institutional actors: the media, public officials, and private interest groups etc.

Interest Groups and Social problems

- **Interest Groups**

Interest groups play a critical role in all democratic systems of government. Yet, the basic definition of an interest group – a group of individuals organized to seek public policy influence, usually though not exclusively by attempting to influence government actors – masks an enormous amount of diversity among interests and interest groups.

These groups vary considerably in every imaginable way – in age, size, sophistication, resources, tactics, policy focus, geographic focus, and ideological orientation. Some groups focus on only a single issue, while others focus on broader areas of public policy. Some groups are born and disappear over the period of a single election, while others have a long tradition of influencing elections and public policy choices. Some choose to focus not only on government, but on persuading the public or other non-governmental organizations to support their objectives.

Representative government is designed to encourage the representation of competing interests while moderating the conflict that inevitably accompanies group competition. In the classic formulation of representative government known as pluralism, competing interests balance each other by bringing resources and arguments to bear on different sides of important public policy decisions. Institutions are designed to accommodate the inevitability of diverse and competing interests, as well as the need to prevent any one group, either a numerical majority or minority, from becoming powerful enough to undermine the rights of others. Groups compete on a more or less level playing field created by the national and state constitutions as well as by laws. As a result, multiple competing interests are believed to create a stable political environment that allows those interests to be represented before the government (Brym Robert, 2000).

The pluralist vision of politics is an ideal vision of interest group politics and political institutions. In practice, for instance, in Zambia interest groups do not enjoy uniform capabilities

or effectiveness, despite having equal rights to attempt to influence government. Institutional arrangements, such as the design of the Legislature and the laws regulating interest group activities, also shape both the capabilities of interest groups to affect policy making and the distribution of influence among groups.

Types of interest groups

1. Public Interest Groups:

Public interest groups seek to achieve results that may be enjoyed by the general population. They promote policies that produce widely distributed benefits that anyone can enjoy – for example, prevention of HIV/AIDS or improvements in public health. Unlike a private interest group, if a public interest group achieves its goals, the benefit to any one person tends to be quite small. Hence, public interest groups tend to rely on numerous small donations and contributions of goods and services to maintain their staffs and programs. As public interest groups have grown and proliferated, the more successful groups have imitated narrower special interest groups to the extent that they can afford to do so, by utilizing specialized professional help from consultants, marketers, and lobbyists. But in general, most public interest groups tend to have fewer resources at their disposal than special interest groups. Interest groups, both private and public, are essentially Non-profit Organisations.

2. Private Interest Groups:

Groups that seek to influence public policy for the specific and often exclusive benefit of their members or of people with similar interests are known as private interest groups, often called “special interest groups” in the media and casual use.

We use the term “private” instead of “special” for two reasons. First, the term private points us to the nature of the objectives these groups seek to fulfill, which are policies that provide benefits targeted to specific individuals and groups. Interest groups made up of financial institutions, for example, promote policies that further their interests, like preventing legislation that might limit the fees they charge for financial services.

We also use the classification “private interest groups” because the term “special interests” has acquired a negative political connotation. Political partisans often use the term in a derogatory way to attack their opponents, regardless of party or ideology. If we are in a political race, my

supporters are friends, voters, and concerned citizens; your supporters are “special interests,” implying that your supporters somehow work against the public good.

How do they do it: techniques?

Interest groups have an array of tools and techniques at their disposal for seeking political influence. The specific tools and techniques that an interest group might utilize depend on its resources, the policies it advocates, and the context in which a group is acting. Typical interest group tools and techniques include:

- lobbying
- petitions and letter writing campaigns
- public demonstrations
- media campaigns
- attending public meetings
- legal action
- illegal action

This list of techniques illustrates the great variety in strategic choice that interest groups may enjoy when attempting to influence public policy. Some of these techniques are narrowly tailored to directly influencing government officials such as legislators, elected members of the executive branch, or members of the government bureaucracy. Other tactics aim to mobilize public opinion in favour of an interest group’s objectives – often with the ultimate objective of using public opinion to pressure decisions makers. Some of these tactics may not aim at government at all, instead attempting to influence the behavior of private entities like business enterprises or even individuals. Most interest groups – even those organized around private interests – are formed as non-profits organisations. Groups must be aware of their tax status and engage only in activities that the legislation permits.