The Social Construction of Target Populations

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SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF TARGET POPULATIONS: IMPLICATIONS FOR POLITICS AND POLICY

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We argue that the social construction of target populations is an important, albeit overlooked, political phenomenon that should take its place in the study of public policy by political scientists. The theory contends that social constructions influence the policy agenda and the selection of policy tools, as well as the rationales that legitimate policy choices. Constructions become embedded in policy as messages that are absorbed by citizens and affect their orientations and participation. The theory is important because it helps explain why some groups are advantaged more than others independently of traditional notions of political power and how policy designs reinforce or alter such advantages. An understanding of social constructions of target populations augments conventional hypotheses about the dynamics of policy change, the determination of beneficiaries and losers, the reasons for differing levels and types of participation among target groups, and the role of policy in democracy.

Contemporary political scientists consider many variables to be significant political phenomena that previously were viewed either as irrelevant or as the proper domain of another discipline. The importance of gender in understanding political behavior and the role of money and media in politics are examples. Although the question of who benefits or loses from policy has long been interesting to political science, most other dimensions of policy designs have been considered the purview of economists, lawyers, and other specialists. With the emergence of public policy as a major subfield of political science, however, attention has turned to new aspects of the policy process, such as agenda setting, formulation, implementation, and consequences, (Arnold 1990; Ingram and Schneider 1991; Kingdon 1984; Lipsky and Smith 1989; Mazmanian and Sabatier 1983; Rose 1991; Smith and Stone 1988; Pressman and Wildavsky 1973) as well as additional elements of policy design, such as goals, tools, rules and target populations (Ingram and Schneider 1992; Linder and Peters 1985; Ostrom 1990; Schneider and Ingram 1990a, 1990b; Stone 1988). We argue that the social construction of target populations is an important, albeit overlooked, political phenomenon that should take its place in the study of public policy by political scientists.

The social construction of target populations refers to the cultural characterizations or popular images of the persons or groups whose behavior and well-being are affected by public policy. These characterizations are normative and evaluative, portraying groups in positive or negative terms through symbolic language, metaphors, and stories (Edelman 1964, 1988). A great deal has been written (mostly by sociologists) about social constructions of social problems (Best 1989; Spector and Kitsuse 1987). The more specific topic of social construction of target populations is important to political science because it contributes to studies of agenda setting, legislative behavior, and policy formulation and design, as well as to studies of citizen orientation, conception of citizenship, and style of participation.

Our theory contends that the social construction of target populations has a powerful influence on public officials and shapes both the policy agenda and the actual design of policy. There are strong pressures for public officials to provide beneficial policy to powerful, positively constructed target populations and to devise punitive, punishment-oriented policy for negatively constructed groups. Social constructions become embedded in policy as messages that are absorbed by citizens and affect their orientations and participation patterns. Policy sends messages about what government is supposed to do, which citizens are deserving (and which not), and what kinds of attitudes and participatory patterns are appropriate in a democratic society. Different target populations, however, receive quite different messages. Policies that have detrimental impacts on, or are ineffective in solving important problems for, certain types of target populations may not produce citizen participation directed toward policy change because the messages received by these target populations encourage withdrawal or passivity. Other target populations, however, receive messages that encourage them to combat policies detrimental to them through various avenues of political participation.

The theory is important because it helps explain why some groups are advantaged more than others independently of traditional notions of political power and how policy designs can reinforce or alter such advantages. Further, the theory resolves some long-standing puzzles political scientists have encountered in attempting to answer Lasswell's question, "Who gets what, when, and how?" (Lasswell 1936). The theory returns public policy to center-stage in the study of politics, offering an alternative that

goes beyond both the pluralist and the microeconomic perspectives.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF TARGET POPULATIONS

A theory that connects social constructions of target populations to other political phenomena needs definitions of target populations and of social constructions, an explanation of how social constructions influence public officials in choosing the agendas and designs of policy, and an explanation of how policy agendas and designs influence the political orientations and participation patterns of target populations.

Conceptualizing Targets and Constructions

Target population is a concept from the policy design literature that directs attention to the fact that policy is purposeful and attempts to achieve goals by changing people's behavior (see our earlier work, Ingram and Schneider 1991). Policy sets forth problems to be solved or goals to be achieved and identifies the people whose behavior is linked to the achievement of desired ends. Behavioral change is sought by enabling or coercing people to do things they would not have done otherwise. By specifying eligibility criteria, policy creates the boundaries of target populations. Such groups may or may not have a value-based cultural image, however. Therefore, they may or may not carry out any social construction.

The social construction of a target population refers to (1) the recognition of the shared characteristics that distinguish a target population as socially meaningful, and (2) the attribution of specific, valence-oriented values, symbols, and images to the characteristics. Social constructions are stereotypes about particular groups of people that have been created by politics, culture, socialization, history, the media, literature, religion, and the like. Positive constructions include images such as "deserving," "intelligent," "honest," "public-spirited," and so forth. Negative constructions include images such as "undeserving," "stupid," "dishonest," and "selfish." There are a wide variety of evaluative dimensions, both positive and negative, that can be used to portray groups.

Social constructions are often conflicting and subject to contention. Policy directed at persons whose income falls below the official poverty level identifies a specific set of persons. The social constructions could portray them as disadvantaged people whose poverty is not their fault or as lazy persons who are benefitting from other peoples' hard work. On the other hand, not all target populations even have a well-defined social construction. Motor vehicle policies identify automobile drivers as a target population; but these persons have no particular social construction, at this time. Policies directed at drunk drivers or teenage drivers, however, have identified a subset that carries a negative valence.

The actual social constructions of target groups, as well as how widely shared the constructions are, are matters for empirical analysis. Social constructions of target populations are measurable, empirical, phenomena. Data can be generated by the study of texts, such as legislative histories, statutes, guidelines, speeches, media coverage, and analysis of the symbols contained therein. Social constructions also can be ascertained from interviews or surveys of policymakers, media representatives, members of the general public, and persons within the target group itself.

One of the major contentions of some social constructionists (sometimes called strict-constructionists) is that there is no objective reality but only the construction itself (Spector and Kitsuse 1987, J. Schneider 1985). Those who make this argument contend that research should focus on the constructions, not on the reasons the constructions have arisen or how constructions differ from objective reality. The point of view adopted here, however, is more like that expressed by Edelman (1988) and Collins (1989). Target populations are assumed to have boundaries that are empirically verifiable (indeed, policies create these empirical boundaries) and to exist within objective conditions even though those conditions are subject to multiple evaluations. One of the important issues for analysis is to understand how social constructions emerge from objective conditions and how each changes.

Social Constructions and Elected Officials

Research has uncovered a number of important motivations for elected officials (Arnold 1990; Kelman 1987; Kingdon 1984). Two of the most important are to produce public policies that will assist in their reelection and that will be effective in addressing widely acknowledged public problems. Social constructions are relevant for both of these considerations.

Social constructions become part of the reelection calculus when public officials anticipate the reaction of the target population itself to the policy and also anticipate the reaction of others to whether the target group *should* be the beneficiary (or loser) for a particular policy proposal (Wilson 1986). Thus, the electoral implication of a policy proposal depends partly on the power of the target population itself (construed as votes, wealth, and propensity of the group to mobilize for action) but also on the extent to which others will approve or disapprove of the policy's being directed toward a particular target.

The convergence of power and social constructions creates four types of target populations, as displayed in Figure 1. Advantaged groups are perceived to be both powerful and positively constructed, such as the elderly and business. Contenders, such as unions and the rich, are powerful but negatively constructed, usually as undeserving. Dependents might

FIGURE 1

Social Constructions and Political Power: Types of Target Populations

		Constructions	
		Positive	**Negative**
Power	**Strong**	**Advantaged** The elderly Business Veterans Scientists	**Contenders** The rich Big unions Minorities Cultural elites Moral majority
	Weak	**Dependents** Children Mothers Disabled	**Deviants** Criminals Drug addicts Communists Flag burners Gangs

include children or mothers and are considered to be politically weak, but they carry generally positive constructions. Deviants, such as criminals, are in the worst situation, since they are both weak and negatively constructed. Public officials find it to their advantage to provide beneficial policy to the advantaged groups who are both powerful and positively constructed as "deserving" because not only will the group itself respond favorably but others will approve of the beneficial policy's being conferred on deserving people. Similarly, public officials commonly inflict punishment on negatively constructed groups who have little or no power, because they need fear no electoral retaliation from the group itself and the general public approves of punishment for groups that it has constructed negatively. Figure 1 shows other examples of how a hypothetical elected official might array a variety of target populations within these dimensions.
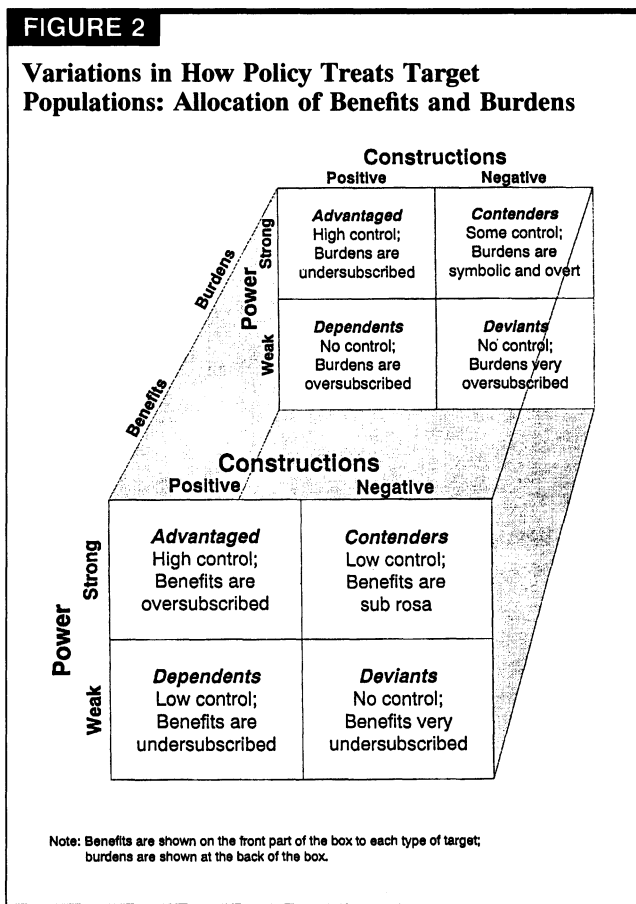
Some social constructions may remain constant over a long period of time, as have the prevailing constructions of criminals or communists; but others are subject to continual debate and manipulation. For instance, persons with AIDS are constructed by some as deviants, little better than criminals who are being punished through disease for their sins. The identification of children, hemophiliacs, heterosexuals, and Magic Johnson as victims, however, has made possible a different construction. Public officials realize that target groups can be identified and described so as to influence the social construction. Hence, a great deal of the political maneuvering in the establishment of policy agendas and in the design of policy pertains to the specification of the target populations and the type of image that can be created for them.

Social constructions may become so widely shared that they are extremely difficult to refute even by the small number of persons who might disagree with them. Other constructions, however, are in contention. Officials develop maps of target populations based on both the stereotypes they themselves hold and those they believe to prevail among that segment of the public likely to become important to them. Competing officials champion different constructions of the same groups. Some view minorities as oppressed populations and argue for policies appropriate to dependent people, whereas others portray minorities as powerful special interests and not deserving of government aid. Political debates may lead elected officials to make finer and finer distinctions, thereby subdividing a particular group into those who are deserving and those who are not. Immigration policy, for example, distinguishes among illegal aliens, refugees, migrant workers, those seeking asylum, and highly skilled workers who receive waivers. There has been no research on the social constructions of target populations from the perspective of elected officials; thus, there is no way to speculate on how Figure 1 actually should be drawn and how much agreement there would be about the placement of various groups.

Public officials are sensitive not only to power and social construction but also to pressure from the public and from professionals to produce effective public policies (Arnold 1990; Kelman 1987; Quade 1982). Public officials must explain and justify their policy positions to the electorate by articulating a vision of the public interest and then showing how a proposed policy is logically connected to these widely shared public values (Arnold 1990; Habermas 1975; Offe 1985). They need to have a believable causal logic connecting the various aspects of the policy design to desired outcomes.

Social constructions of target populations become important in the policy effectiveness calculus because elected officials have to pay attention to the logical connection between the target groups and the goals that might be achieved. Elected officials may emphasize some goals rather than others because target populations that they wish to benefit or burden have credible linkages to the goals (Edelman 1988; Kingdon 1984). On the other hand, elected officials are able to construct several different policy logics for almost any problem they wish to solve. For example, most would agree that reduction in the infant mortality rate in the United States is a worthy goal. However, to achieve this, the United States could provide direct health care benefits to high-risk pregnant women, it could mandate reductions in carcinogens that presumably increase risk, or it could criminalize drug and alcohol use by pregnant women. All of these could be justified as contributing to a reduced infant mortality rate; but they have very different implications for target populations, especially pregnant women who could either be the beneficiary of the policy or could bear exceptional costs because of it. Economic vitality is another example of a widely shared public goal for which a credible case could be made for policies that serve

FIGURE 2

Variations in How Policy Treats Target Populations: Allocation of Benefits and Burdens

Note: Benefits are shown on the front part of the box to each type of target; burdens are shown at the back of the box.

widely divergent interests. Some policy options would give direct benefits to jobless or low-income persons, whereas other options would redistribute wealth to the poor, thereby increasing demand for products. Others would offer tax breaks, loans, or outright grants to the owners of businesses to increase their competitive position or to entice them to move into a location (or to retain those who are threatening to leave). In almost any policy area there are multiple logics that involve different target populations and/or different roles for target groups. Thus, even when public officials are pursuing widely held public interest goals, they are commonly able to provide benefits to powerful, positively constructed groups and burdens to less powerful, negatively constructed ones.

Benefits, Burdens, and Target Populations

The dynamic interaction of power and social constructions leads to a distinctive pattern in the allocation of benefits and burdens to the different types of target groups (Figure 2). The front of the box shows how benefits are allocated, and the back shows the allocation of burdens. Benefits are expected to become oversubscribed to advantaged populations (i.e., these groups will receive more beneficial policy than is warranted either in terms of policy effectiveness or representativeness), whereas dependents and devi-

ants will receive too little beneficial policy. Burdens will become oversubscribed especially to deviants and undersubscribed to the advantaged groups. For public officials to realize their ambitions of reelection and the development of effective, public-oriented policy, they have to take into account not only the power and social constructions of target populations but also the logical connection of the potential target groups to the goals. Most of the time, public officials try to bring these three factors into congruence. It is important to notice that congruence is possible only in two segments of the policy box shown in Figure 2. One is to provide beneficial policy to powerful, positively viewed groups who are logically connected to an important public purpose. The second area of congruence is found at the back of the box: to provide punishment policies to negatively constructed, powerless groups, who are linked logically to a broader public purpose. All other areas produce noncongruence of some type.

Powerful segments of the population who also have relatively consensual positive social constructions (the advantaged groups) have considerable control and will find it easy to get their issues on legislative agendas. They will be the recipient of much beneficial policy. Advantaged groups have the resources and capacity to shape their own constructions and to combat attempts that would portray them negatively. The easiest problems for elected officials to address will be those for which advantaged segments of the population are the logical recipients of beneficial policy. These groups will receive beneficial policy, however, even if the causal linkages to some ostensible common or public purpose lack credibility or are entirely absent. The advantaged groups will often be chosen as first-order (proximate) targets even when others would be more logical or efficient. Direct government subsidies to large corporations, for example, have been granted by governments for the ostensible purpose of increasing the number of jobs in the community, although such funds may have created more jobs if directed toward public-sector agencies with lower management salaries and overhead. Beneficial policy for the advantaged groups will be oversubscribed in the sense that there will be more positive rules and more expenditures in this area than can be justified either on technical grounds of policy effectiveness or on representational grounds of policy responsiveness that is proportional to the group's size and other political resources.

The attractiveness of policy directed toward powerless people with negative images (the deviants) is surprisingly similar except that the deviants are punished and have almost no control over the agenda or the designs. Policies will be high on the legislative agenda, especially during election campaigns. Negatively constructed powerless groups will usually be proximate targets of punishment policy, and the extent of burdens will be greater (oversubscribed) than is needed to achieve effective results. The negative social constructions make it likely that these

groups will often receive burdens even when it is illogical from the perspective of policy effectiveness. The highly predictable popularity of tough criminal justice statutes over which deviants have no control, such as the 1991 federal crime bill, are vivid illustrations of the political attractiveness of punishment directed at powerless, negatively viewed groups.

Important public issues do not always permit elected officials to find congruence among social constructions, power, and logical connections to goals; and problems cannot always be solved so straightforwardly. Many officials care about outcomes and fear widespread public reaction against ineffective policy, lack of attention to important problems, and too much favoritism to special interests. They may confront these contradictions through strenuous efforts to keep such issues off the agenda, or they may manipulate the image of target groups in an effort to change their social construction. In some instances, they simply bear the political costs of inflicting burdens on positively viewed groups or granting benefits to those who are negatively viewed. Not uncommonly, public officials engage in private politics or outright deception.

The case of powerful but negatively viewed groups (the contenders) presents numerous problems. Public officials will prefer policy that grants benefits noticed only by members of the target groups and largely hidden from everyone else. They will prefer policies that the public and media believe inflict burdens on powerful, negative groups but that actually have few, if any, negative effects. Contenders have sufficient control to blunt the imposition of burdens but not enough power to gain much in terms of visible benefits. Statutes directed toward these contending groups will be complex and vague. It may be difficult to discern from the statute who the policy favors or hinders because discretion and responsibility will often be passed on to lower-level agencies and governments. Context will become especially important. For example, policy characteristics for contending groups may depend on the extent of media and public attention, as well as variation in the cohesiveness and activity of the target group. During times of low public attention and high levels of group activity, policy will tend to be beneficial, although relatively low in visibility and still undersubscribed in terms of what might be needed to actually solve particular problems. When public attention increases (as it is likely to do when an unpopular group is cohesive and active), then policy may shift more toward the burdensome side.

For the dependent groups, such as children or mothers, officials want to appear to be aligned with their interests; but their lack of political power makes it difficult to direct resources toward them. Symbolic policies permit elected leaders to show great concern but relieve them of the need to allocate resources. Policies in this area tend to be left to lower levels of government or to the private sector. The benefits dependents receive are passed down by other agents, and dependents have little control over the design of the policies. In the United States, women and children have dominated this category, with women moving more toward a position of power (and less positively viewed) as they have become more organized and more active in the economic sector; and people in these groups have been viewed as the responsibility of families, churches, and the private sector. Feminist writers, in fact, view the artificial separation of the public and private spheres as one of the key problems faced by women in advanced industrial democracies (Jagger 1983).

Another type of noncongruence occurs when legislators are attempting to inflict regulations or costs on powerful, popular groups. These situations also will be undersubscribed and highly contentious. For example, it is difficult to generate support for burdensome regulations of positively viewed businesses because the proximate target groups will oppose the policies vigorously and argue that the chain of effects is not likely to produce the desired results anyway; or they may argue that other groups are more logical targets and would have a greater impact and if chosen. The secondary or remote target groups that will presumably benefit from the regulations may not provide as much support as expected, because of the uncertainty that the cause-and-effect logic within the policy is correct (Arnold 1990). In a similar way, it is difficult for elected leaders to provide beneficial policy to the powerless, negatively viewed groups (such as providing rehabilitation programs for criminals), despite the fact that these policies may be more effective than those that involve punishment or may be less costly than the death penalty, given the extensive appeals that ensue. The electoral costs are extensive, as it is a simple matter to accuse a public official of being "soft on crime." Much of the beneficial policy achieved by the powerless, negatively constructed target groups has been through court actions and court mandates to ensure their rights.

Social Constructions and Policy Tools

The emerging literature on policy design emphasizes that the attributes of statutes, guidelines, implementation structures, and direct service delivery processes are important to an understanding of the policy process. There is considerable interest in why some designs are chosen, rather than others, and what differences these choices make in policy impacts on target populations (Dryzek 1990; Ingram and Schneider 1991; Linder and Peters 1985; Lipsky and Smith 1989; Salamon and Lun 1989; Schneider and Ingram 1990a; Smith and Stone 1988). The theory advanced here contends that some elements of design (especially the policy tools and the policy rationales) will differ depending on the social construction and political power of the target population.

Policy tools refer to the aspects of policy intended to motivate the target populations to comply with policy or to utilize policy opportunities (Schneider and Ingram 1990b). For groups that are constructed as deserving, intelligent, and public-spirited (as we

expect the powerful, positively viewed groups to be), the policy tools will emphasize capacity building, inducements, and techniques that enable the target population to learn about the results of its behavior and take appropriate action on a voluntary basis. When delivering beneficial policy to the advantaged groups, certain types of capacity-building tools are expected to be commonly used, especially direct provision of such resources as entitlements or non-income-tested subsidies, and also of free information, training, and technical assistance. The political pay-offs for providing beneficial policy to these groups is such that outreach programs will be common: the agencies will seek out all eligible persons and encourage them to utilize the policy opportunities that have been made available (Ingram and Schneider 1991).

When burdens, rather than benefits, are directed at the advantaged groups, the tools will be less predictable and more likely to change; but self-regulation that entrusts the group to learn from its own behavior and voluntarily take actions to achieve policy goals will be preferred, along with positive inducements. When these are not effective in inducing the desired behavior, policies may shift toward "standards and charges," which do not stigmatize the organization for its activities but simply attempt to discourage certain actions (such as pollution) by charging for it. Sanctions and force are not likely to be used in connection with powerful, positively viewed groups.

Policy tools for dependent groups (such as mothers or children) are expected to be somewhat different. Subsidies will be given, but eligibility requirements often involve labeling and stigmatizing recipients. Subsidies to farmers do not require income tests, for example; but college students must prove that they are needy and without resources. Outreach programs will be less common, and many programs will require clients to present themselves to the agency in order to receive benefits. Welfare programs even for persons perceived as deserving, such as college students, the disabled, or the unemployed, usually do not seek out eligible persons but rely on those who are eligible to make their case to the agency itself.

Symbolic and hortatory tools will commonly be used for dependent groups even when the pervasiveness of the problem would suggest that more direct intervention is needed. Groups in the dependent category will not usually be encouraged or given support to devise their own solutions to problems but will have to rely on agencies to help them. For example, battered women still must rely mainly on the police for assistance, rather than having self-help organizations that are eligible as direct recipients for government grants.

Another policy tool, the use of authority (defined as statements that grant permission, prohibit action, or require action) will be more common than with the powerful, positively viewed groups, because dependents are not considered as self-reliant. The so-called gag rule imposed by the Bush administration that prohibited family planning clinic personnel from providing information about abortion even when asked

directly was an example of the more paternalistic attributes of policy directed at dependent populations. Information tools are likely to be used, even when direct resources are needed (as in AIDS prevention programs). Public officials simply do not like to spend money on powerless groups and will use other tools whenever possible.

The dominant tools for deviants (the target populations whose constructions place them in the powerless, negatively viewed part of the matrix) are expected to be more coercive and often involve sanctions, force, and even death. In contrast with the kinds of regulations used when advantaged populations are burdened, groups constructed as deviants will be, at worst, incarcerated or executed. At best, they will be left free but denied information, discouraged from organizing, and subjected to the authority of others—including experts—rather than helped to form their own self-regulatory organizations. For example, gangs are more likely to be punished for congregating than encouraged to direct their energy toward constructive activities.

When beneficial policies are directed at deviant groups, such as rehabilitation programs, they ordinarily attempt to change the person through authoritarian means, rather than attack the structural problems that are the basis of the problem itself. Drug diversion programs, for example, will usually require attendance and drug testing, and threaten participants with heavy penalties for failure to comply with the rules.

Social Constructions and Policy Rationales

Rationales are important elements of policy design because they serve to legitimate policy goals, the choice of target populations, and policy tools. As Habermas and Offe have noted, modern governments have a legitimation crisis and must explain why democracies concentrate wealth and power in the hands of the few rather than the many (Habermas 1975; Offe 1985). Governments attempt to resolve this crisis through legitimation rationales that explain how policies serve common rather than special interests (in spite of appearances). Rationales justify the agenda, policy goals, selection of target populations, and the tools chosen. The kinds of rationales differ depending upon the social construction of the target population and can be used either to perpetuate or to change social constructions.

For powerful, positively viewed groups, the rationales will commonly feature the group's instrumental links to the achievement of important public purposes, currently conceptualized in terms of national defense and economic competitiveness. Justice-oriented rationales (e.g., equality, equity, need, and rights) will be less common for this group. Efficiency as a means for achieving the instrumental goals of policy will be emphasized as the reason for the selection of particular target groups and particular tools. For example, federal science and technology policy, which distributes more than $75 billion annu-

ally to large corporations and universities, is justified on the grounds of national defense and/or economic competitiveness. The groups chosen are said to be an efficient mechanism for ensuring the United States maintains its technological edge vis-à-vis other countries.

Similar rationales are used even when burdens are being distributed. The close association of the welfare of these groups with the public interest is not challenged. Instead, groups may be told that they are not being made relatively worse off, compared with their competitors and that all will gain in the long run. Policies to control common-pool resource problems, such as water and air, usually claim that it will protect the resource for everyone and that the regulations will prevent a single firm within their group from gaining advantages and depleting the resource. In those cases where it is impossible to construe a burden as a benefit, then the rationale may claim that it is technically unavoidable if the common-interest goals (e.g., national defense) are to be served. The burden impinges on everyone, and it is not practical to make an exception for the advantaged groups. The advantaged are not being singled out, and they are sacrificing for the public good.

For contending groups (those that are powerful but have negative constructions), the rationale is sharply different, depending on whether they are receiving benefits or burdens. When they are receiving costs, the public rationale will overstate the magnitude of the burden and will construe it as a correction for their greed or excessive power. On the other hand, private communications may suggest that the burden is not excessive or will have little impact. In situations where the burden is real, the group may be led to believe that they did not have enough power or made errors in their strategies. They may be told that the policy was inevitable once public attention was directed to their privileged, powerful position. When contending groups receive benefits, the rationales will understate the magnitude of the gain, which is made easier because the gains often are cloaked as procedures that enable the group to have privileged access to lower-level agencies or governments where the elected officials will not be held accountable for the groups' gains. When the benefits are obvious and can credibly be linked to instrumental goals, such as national defense, arguments will be made that it would not be possible to achieve the goal without also benefiting the group.

Rationales for providing beneficial policy to powerless groups seem to emphasize justice-oriented legitimations, rather than instrumental ones. During the past two decades, the interests of dependent populations have seldom been associated with important national purposes. The association of justice-oriented rationales to dependent populations seems to hold even when a case can be made linking the policy to national goals such as economic development or national defense. Education is a good example. In spite of strenuous efforts by educators to claim that education is the fundamental basis for economic

competitiveness (and in spite of the logic of this position), political leaders in the 1980s tended to ignore this connection. Public education has been justified in terms of equal opportunities—a rationale that currently does not carry the same status as instrumental ones. The values of American society simply seem to favor instrumental goals over justice-oriented goals. It may be the case that instrumental goals are given primacy mainly because this permits policy to continue distributing benefits to those who are more powerful. Similarly, elected officials may not want to use instrumental justifications for policies that benefit less powerful people, even when it would be perfectly logical to do so, as this would then require larger expenditures on such groups. Benefits conferred on negatively viewed powerless groups, such as criminals, are frequently argued as unavoidable in order to protect important constitutional principles that confer rights on everyone. Sometimes claims will be made, however, that beneficial policies (e.g., rehabilitation for criminals) are efficient mechanisms for achieving public safety. This argument is difficult to sustain, however, because the public believes that these people deserve to be punished and that rehabilitation policies will not work to reduce crime. Part of the social construction of these groups is that they respond mainly to punishment.

Burdens for powerless groups who are positively constructed, such as children, may be justified as an efficient mechanism to protect the individual from harm or to achieve public purposes. For powerful groups, choices are limited only when there is no other way to achieve certain goals. Persons in the powerful groups are constructed as intelligent and able to make good choices. Powerless groups are not usually constructed this way but are viewed as needing direction. "For her own good" is a common reason given for incarcerating girls who have run away from home or who are living with a boyfriend. Child labor laws that removed choices from children and their families were done to protect the children.

Messages, Orientations, and Participation

The agenda, tools, and rationales of policy impart messages to target populations that inform them of their status as citizens and how they and people like themselves are likely to be treated by government. Such information becomes internalized into a conception of the meaning of citizenship that influences their orientations toward government and their participation. Policy teaches lessons about the type of groups people belong to, what they deserve from government, and what is expected of them. The messages indicate whether the problems of the target population are legitimate ones for government attention, what kind of game politics is (public-spirited or the pursuit of private interests), and who usually wins.

Citizens encounter and internalize the messages not only through observation of politics and media coverage but also through their direct, personal ex-

TABLE 1				
Policy Design Impacts on Different Target Populations				
	TYPES OF TARGET POPULATIONS			
TYPES OF IMPACTS	ADVANTAGED	CONTENDERS	DEPENDENTS	DEVIANTS
Messages				
Personal	good, intelligent	controversial	helpless, needy	bad
"Your" problems are	important public problems	in conflict with others' interests	the responsibility of the private sector	your own personal responsibility
Government should treat you	with respect	with fear or caution	with pity	with disrespect or hate
Orientations				
Toward government	supportive	suspicious, vigilant	disinterested passive	angry, oppressed
Toward own interests	coincide with the public interest	conflictive with others	private responsibility	personal responsibility
Toward other's claims on government	not legitimate	competitive rivals	more important	simply privileges
Toward political game	open, fair, winnable	involving raw use of power and crooked	hierarchical and elitist	abusive of power and fixed
Participation				
Mobilization potential				
for conventional forms (voting, interest groups)	high	moderate	low	low
for disruptive forms (strikes, riots)	low	moderate	low	moderate
for private provisions of services	high	moderate	low	low
Citizen–agency interaction	agency outreach	targets subvert implementation	client-initiated contacts	avoidance

periences with public policy. These experiences tell them whether they are viewed as "clients" by government and bureaucracies or whether they are treated as objects. Experience with policy tells people whether they are atomized individuals who must deal directly with government and bureaucracy to press their own claims or participants in a cooperative process joining with others to solve problems collectively for the common good. Citizen orientations toward government impinge on their participation patterns.

The personal messages for the positively viewed, powerful segments of society are that they are good, intelligent people (Table 1). When they receive benefits from government, it is not a special favor or because of their need but because they are contributing to public welfare. For these groups, reliance on government is not a signal that they cannot solve their own problems. Government appears responsive to them, and a clear message is sent through the tools and rationales that their interest coincide with the public interest. Policies often involve outreach and seldom require needs tests; thus the advantaged do not see themselves as claimants or as dependent on government. Instead, they are a crucial part of the effort to achieve national goals, such as national defense or economic vitality. When they are regulated, they examine rationales closely to see whether

burdens are equitably allocated and whether their sacrifice is truly necessary for a public purpose. When other groups are singled out for benefits, especially those who are less powerful or negatively constructed, they tend to believe that the government is on the wrong track. Advantaged groups are quick to sense favoritism whenever groups other than themselves receive benefits.

Advantaged groups are positively oriented toward policy and politics, so long as government continues to be favorable toward them (which becomes difficult in a troubled economy). Experiences with policy teach them that government is important, politics is usually fair, government can be held responsible for producing beneficial policy, there are payoffs from mobilizing and supporting government officials. The game can be won within the rules. The powerful, popular groups are active participants in traditional ways, such as voting, interest group activity, campaign contributions and so forth. When policies are ineffective, especially when there are sustained periods of economic problems, they blame government rather than themselves and they mobilize for change. When government no longer benefits them, these groups are likely to organize and devise private alternatives to public services, such as private schools, security systems, mental health services, and so on. And, they object even more strenuously to

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government regulation or to government providing benefits to others. As they increasingly provide services for themselves, they withdraw support for government provision of such services to others, thereby contributing to an ever-widening gulf in the quality of life experienced by the haves and have-nots in modern American society.

Contenders receive different messages. Policy tells them that they are powerful, but they will be treated with suspicion rather than respect. Their power is meaningful only when accompanied by a strategy that will hide the true effects from public view. Politics is highly contentious; no one will take care of them except themselves. Thus, they must use power to pursue their own interests. Contenders realize that conflict is common. They must be constantly vigilant and calculating to insure that government serves their ends. They believe that government is not really interested in solving problems but in wielding power. The difference between the public and private messages that government sends to these groups teaches them that government is not to be trusted. Private power is more important than public interests and rationales are simply subterfuge rather than valid arguments justifying the distribution of benefits and costs. Politics is a corrupt game; winners have successfully used power and may have not stayed within the rules of the game. Participation patterns tend toward the use of informal means, such as the use of influential connections and campaign contributions. Participation may disregard the rules or laws; manipulation and subterfuge are common.

The messages to dependents are that they are powerless, helpless, and needy. Their problems are their own, but they are unable to solve them by themselves. Policy teaches them that it is not in the public's interest to solve their problems, and they get attention only through the generosity of others. To be forced to depend upon a safety net means one is not much of a player. The tools and rationales imply that government is responsive to them only when they subject themselves to government and relinquish power over their own choices. Income testing and the typical requirement that they must apply to the agency for benefits (rather than being sought out through outreach programs) require them to admit their dependency status. Even when beneficial policy is provided, it is accompanied by labeling and stigma. Policy sometimes attempts to overcome negative stereotyping by replacing one label with another, such as using *disabled* instead of *handicapped*, which, itself, was used as a replacement for *crippled*. Unfortunately, stigma often catches up with the new label. Information programs that rely on propaganda and stereotypes for effectiveness primarily reinforce the prevailing social constructions. Efforts to reduce the spread of HIV by appealing to young black males through sport figures such as Magic Johnson may reinforce the image of young blacks as sexually promiscuous.

The messages result in orientations toward government characterized by disinterest and passivity. In contrast with the advantaged groups, the powerless (even when positively constructed) do not see their interests as coinciding with an important public goal and, instead, tend to buy into the idea that their problems are individual and should be dealt with through the private sector. They may view the claims of others, especially the powerful advantaged groups, as being more legitimate than their own. The game of politics is a bureaucratic game where they wait in line and eventually get what others want them to have. Participation is low and conventional, but their primary form of interaction with government is as applicants or claimants who are applying for services to a bureaucracy.

Persons who are both powerless and negatively constructed will have mainly negative experiences with government, but differences in the tools and rules will lead to different messages from those received by other groups. The dominant messages are that they are bad people whose behavior constitutes a problem for others. They can expect to be punished unless they change their behavior or avoid contact with the government. Accordingly, these people often fail to claim government benefits for which they are eligible. On the other hand, government often is unable to catch them for their misdeeds and commonly fails to punish even when individuals are apprehended. Thus, government appears to be arbitrary and unpredictable. The rule of law and justice have no meaning. Orientations will be those of angry and oppressed people who have no faith in government's fairness or effectiveness. They see themselves as alone and as individual players who have no chance of winning in a game that they view as essentially corrupt. Conventional forms of participation such as voting, running for office, and interest group activity will be viewed as irrelevant (even if they are eligible) because government belongs to someone else. Participation, when it occurs, is likely to be more disruptive and individualized, such as riots and protests. As with the contenders, the deviants are more inclined to break the rules of participation.

The Dynamics of Social Constructions

Social constructions are manipulated and used by public officials, the media, and the groups themselves. New target groups are created, and images are developed for them; old groups are reconfigured or new images created. One of the most interesting questions is whether inherent contradictions within the policy process itself will lead to cyclical patterns of corrections in the over- and undersubscription to different target groups.

One possibility is that beneficial policy becomes increasingly oversubscribed to the advantaged groups, with a corresponding decline in resources available for policy that actually will be effective in achieving public purposes. Government can be expected to continue putting forth justifications claim-

ing that providing benefits to advantaged groups serves broader public interests, but the credibility of these explanations will decline for several reasons. First, personal experiences of ordinary citizens will lead many to realize that policy is ineffective in solving problems, or important problems are not even being addressed, or that the designs of policies are illogical and not actually intended to serve the stated goals. Personal observation and experience will also verify that the democratic image of equality is too far at odds with the actual distribution of benefits, influence, power, and the like. It becomes difficult to continue constructing groups that are overly advantaged in a positive light; similarly, it becomes difficult to continue pretending that the most important goals of society exclude benefits to the growing numbers of seriously disadvantaged groups, particularly when ordinary citizens encounter these people, such as the unemployed, in their daily routines.

In addition to personal experiences, another impetus for doubting the prevailing rationales may be forthcoming from the images portrayed by the media, movies, literature, music, and other carriers of social constructions. These respond to many stimuli, including the creative imaginations and critical skills of artists, writers, journalists, academics, and others. Carriers of social constructions may begin to portray the advantaged segments as greedy, rather than deserving. Dramatic events will often serve as catalysts for changes in social constructions. When powerful, positively viewed groups become construed negatively, the dynamics of policy change dramatically. Some of the previously advantaged groups are displaced into a negatively constructed group that will not be able to garner as much beneficial policy. Other groups that were previously negatively constructed or who had not previously exercised power proportionate to their size (because of the social constructions) may move into the positively viewed, powerful segment. If so, understandings of the public interest may shift to those closer to the interests of previously disadvantaged persons.

The political advantages for inflicting punishment upon powerless, negatively viewed groups are so great that this area also will become oversubscribed and extended to ever-larger segments of the population. It is likely that certain kinds of behavior, such as the use of alcohol or other drugs, will be proscribed simply because the groups who are heavy users are negatively constructed and lack sufficient power to oppose the policies. As these prohibited behaviors spread to more powerful and more positively constructed groups, however, they will eventually reach a number of people whose experiences will not permit them to buy into the messages that they are bad and undeserving people. When common behaviors of large numbers of ordinary people become subject to negative stereotyping and punishment is threatened, the expected acquiescence is unlikely. Instead, these groups may refuse to accept the neg-

ative social constructions, mobilize, and engage in widespread political participation, including conventional forms, as well as disruptive behavior such as demonstrations or riots. The cycles of disruptive politics in the United States such as occurred in the 1930s and 1960s may be explained by this dynamic process.

In a relatively open, democratic society, these phenomena might produce pendulumlike cycles of policy that distribute benefits and burdens to differing segments of the population, so that the advantages enjoyed by the powerful, positively viewed groups do not escalate in a linear fashion but are occasionally pulled back. Similarly, the oppressiveness of policy to deviant groups may not continually escalate but may reverse direction toward more benign postures.

On the other hand, there may be no inherent dynamic that produces a cyclical pattern. Changes may be unrelated to the prevailing distribution of advantages and, instead, depend upon opportunities, unexpected dramatic events, and the skills of those who manipulate images and constructions. Still a third possibility is that the advantaged continue to gain at the expense of others and that more and more groups are constructed as deviants and subject to punishment. This process is not self-correcting, because social constructions become increasingly important and difficult to refute (Edelman 1988). Thus, they are manipulated and used to build support for the increasingly uneven allocation of benefits and burdens by government.

IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATIONS

An understanding of social constructions makes important contributions to many different issues in political science, three of which will be discussed here: Who benefits and who loses from government action? Who participates? and What is the effect of policy on democracy?

Beneficiaries and Losers

The framework makes an important contribution to the issue of which groups will benefit from policy—why powerful groups do not always win—and offers a compelling explanation for the prominent role played by punishment in the United States political process. A great deal of research by political scientists has verified that policy often reflects the interests of powerful constituent groups. Theories of self-interested behavior by the groups combined with reelection motivations by elected officials offer possible explanations. As a number of authors have pointed out, however, policy often serves public interests (more commonly than is usually acknowledged by political science), which is far more difficult to explain (Arnold 1990; Kelman 1987). Arnold's theory is that public officials develop strategies based on expectations of how the public will react and that they believe that their opponents and the media can easily

arouse the inattentive publics by focusing on policy failures or other errors in judgment. Thus, policy directed solely to the benefit of powerful groups could become a major campaign liability. Arnold anticipates the importance of social constructions of target populations when he notes that politically repellent options "also include programs for which citizens have little sympathy for the affected groups" (1990, 80). Kelman simply asserts that public spiritedness is as important a motivation for behavior as self-interest. Thus, elected officials are motivated sometimes by self-interest, producing policies benefiting powerful groups in the constituency but sometimes by public spiritness, producing good public policy that serves general interests (Kelman 1987).

Social constructions make an important contribution to these explanations. Social constructions of target populations help explain the kinds of issues that opponents and media can exploit, namely, any policy that confers benefits on negatively constructed groups (as is illustrated in the Willy Horton ads) or policies that confer burdens on positively constructed groups. The tensions created by noncongruity among social constructions, power, and logical relationships create many situations in which elected leaders will distribute benefits and burdens outside the dictates of power. Furthermore, social constructions are essential to an explanation of the politics of punishment, which wins no votes among the recipients of punishment and appears to accomplish few, if any, positive purposes.

Who Participates?

One of the enduring issues in political science is why participation is so low and uneven. Many have pointed out that the groups who stand to gain the most from political action, such as the poor and minorities, often fail to mobilize and, in fact, have the lowest rates of participation. Some theorists have examined the importance of structural impediments, such as voting registration rules; others have emphasized that the typical political agenda may be irrelevant to the disadvantaged groups or that the disadvantaged may find it difficult to recognize their own interests as being sufficiently distinct to warrant active participation (Gaventa 1980; Piven and Cloward 1988). Some critical theorists have suggested that the wants and desires of disadvantaged groups are manipulated by the powerful through appeals to symbols, thereby leading to quiescence (Gaventa 1980; Luke 1989). Others have advanced the theory that politics becomes increasingly technical and that government offers complex, technical explanations for policy designs that are beyond the comprehension of everyone except the experts (Fischer 1990; Habermas 1975; Hawkeswork 1988). The result is a depoliticization of society and a withdrawal of citizens from political discourse and activity.

The concept of social construction of target populations helps explain how and why these linkages

occur. Policy is an important variable that shapes citizen orientations and perpetuates certain views of citizenship that are in turn linked to differential participation among groups. Groups portrayed as dependents or deviants frequently fail to mobilize or to object to the distribution of benefits and burdens because they have been stigmatized and labeled by the policy process itself. They buy into the ideas that their problems are not public problems, that the goals that would be most important for them are not the most important for the public interest, and that government and policy are not remedies for them. They do not see themselves as legitimate or effective in the public arena, hence their passive styles of participation. In contrast, the advantaged groups are reinforced in pursuing their self-interests and in believing that what is good for them is good for the country. They can marshal their resources and use them to gain benefits for themselves, all the while portraying themselves as public-spirited. Others do not object, and in fact, support such policies, because they accept the goals that benefit the advantaged groups and believe these groups are deserving of what they get. Social constructions enhance their power, whereas it detracts from the power of the disadvantaged groups.

Policy and Democracy

Social constructions of target populations are crucial variables in understanding the complex relationship between public policy and democratic governance. The theory presented here is an extension of the work of Lowi, Wilson, and others who are interested in how policy affects democracy. It offers explanations for some of the incorrect predictions from Lowi and Wilson's typologies and implies different prescriptions about what is needed for policy to serve democratic roles in society (Barber 1984; Lowi 1964, 1972, 1985; Wilson 1973, 1986).

Lowi popularized the idea that "policy creates politics," turning political science away from its almost exclusive attention to how "politics creates policy." His concern was to identify the attributes of policy that encourage affected people (or groups) to mobilize, to make their preferences clear, and to ensure that policy reflects compromises among competing interests rather than the influence of a small number of elites. Lowi's typology was based on two dimensions: whether the probability of coercion is low (benefits distributed) or high (costs distributed) and whether the policy identifies specific targets or consists of general rules that impinge on the environment of the target groups. These two dimensions produce four types of policy—*distributive, regulatory, redistributive,* and *constituent*—of which only one, regulatory, produces political activities resembling an open, competitive model of pluralist democracy. All of the others, he argued, encourage some type of elitism. Wilson's typology also was developed to explain how and why different kinds of policies

produce different kinds of politics. His typology accounted for four types of politics: *majoritarian, pluralist, elitist,* and *client,* depending on whether the benefits and costs are concentrated or dispersed (Wilson 1986).

Social constructions add to both these theories in several ways. Lowi was especially opposed to distributive policy arenas, which are characterized by distribution of beneficial policy directly to constituent groups, because these tend to produce a pattern of mutual noninterference and sub rosa decision making in which only the few participate and only the few are served (Lowi 1979). Social constructions add to this by explaining why some groups are regularly singled out for distributive policy, whereas others are not. It is not simply a matter of power, assessed in traditional ways such as size, wealth, cohesion, and the like. Nor is it simply a matter of concentrated benefits and dispersed costs, as Wilson's typology suggests. Distributive policy is most likely to be directed at target populations that are both powerful and positively constructed. When unpopular groups, including those that are powerful, are targeted for distributive policy, Lowi's predictions of low conflict and mutual noninterference are usually incorrect. Instead, opposition emerges, so that the policy arena resembles the one Lowi characterized as redistributive or regulatory. When groups that lack power but have positive constructions are targeted for distributive policy, opposition also will emerge. In addition, some regulatory policy does not produce opposition (as Lowi's theory suggested) but is met instead with general approval. Lowi's typology clustered social regulation (e.g., crime policy) with business regulation because both inflict coercion on general categories of people. Yet, punishment-oriented crime policies are almost never met with the type of pluralist opposition that characterizes business regulatory policy.

Social constructions also help explain anomalies in predictions from Wilson's theory. For example, welfare policies are characterized by concentrated benefits and dispersed costs—the type of policy that Wilson contended will continually expand, because those who benefit will mobilize, whereas those who pay (the taxpayers) will not. Thus, elected officials who are motivated by reelection will be unable to cut or reduce these kinds of policies. Social constructions help explain why (and when) elected officials will find it easy to cut welfare policies, as has happened in many states during the past decade when the poor were constructed as lazy or shiftless and were often believed to be minorities who were responsible for their own plight.

For Lowi, policies that serve broad public purposes contain a clear rule of law applicable to broad categories of people and contain clear and consistent directives are most likely to produce an environment in which democracy can flourish. Yet as Ginsberg and Sanders point out, such laws dignify and empower only the individuals who know what the law is and

can effectively challenge arbitrary and unjust treatment (1990, 564–65). Powerful, positively constructed groups continue under such policies to be reinforced in the belief in their own deservedness and association of their self-interest with the general interest. Groups negatively socially constructed will continue to see government as a source of problems, rather than solutions, and participation as an irrelevant activity. True empowerment and equality would occur only if all target populations had social constructions that were positive and only if all have power relatively equal to their numbers in society.

A theory of the social constructions of target populations is also relevant to an understanding of policy failure in the technical sense of policy that is not effective or efficient. Policy scientists have typically blamed policy failures on illogical linkages in the policy design and have blamed these illogical connections on elected officials who pay too much attention to powerful interest groups and not enough attention to experts (Brewer and deLeon 1983; Quade 1982). A theory of the social construction of target populations makes it clear that policies are not technically illogical simply because of political power considerations. Social constructions are crucial to understanding which policies are most likely to be illogical. Social constructions impinge on all aspects of design, including selection of goals, targets, tools, and implementation strategies. Experts do not escape social constructions, either; and the constructions they hold color which goals they think are important and which targets they believe are the most logically connected to the goals. The tools that experts think will motivate the targets rest on assumptions about behavior that are influenced by social constructions. The rationales that the experts believe will make the policy palatable to affected groups imply particular social constructions of those groups. Thus, social constructions (as well as power) influence the logic of policy, and expertise does not negate the influence of constructions on policy design even in highly nonpolitical contexts.

One of our fundamental contentions is that policies that fail to solve problems or represent interests and that confuse, deceive, or disempower citizens do not serve democracy. Policy designs that serve democracy, then, need to have logical connections to important public problems; represent interests of all impinged-on groups; and enlighten, educate, and empower citizens. Policy should raise the level of discourse. Given the electoral dynamics described here, however, it is not likely that policy will be designed to achieve all three of its democratic roles unless the power of target populations is made more equal and social constructions become less relevant or more positive. In other words, the only groups in the policy typology for which policy is likely to serve democratic roles are the powerful, positively constructed groups. Until all groups are so situated, policy will continue to fail in its democratic mission.

CONCLUSION

Political scientists should include the social construction of target populations among the political phenomena to which they devote their research. Social constructions are political in the sense that they are related to public discourse and are manipulated through hortatory and symbolic language generally regarded as political. Further, while not discussed in detail here, social constructions are measurable through familiar survey methods, as well as historical and textual analysis.

Social constructions of target populations help provide better answers to Lasswell's (1936) enduring question, Who get what, when, and how? Conventional political science hypotheses about the characteristics that determine groups' influence in setting policy agendas and influencing policy content become significantly more robust when augmented by assessments of social constructions. Further, understanding social construction of target populations helps to explain how elected officials behave and why, in some circumstances, officials will support policy provisions that distribute benefits at odds with their apparent self-interest, as determined by their assessment of interest group and constituency opinion. The concept facilitates a much more sophisticated assessment than has so far taken place concerning the extent to which public officials are motivated to solve substantive problems, as well as build and maintain political support.

The inclusion of social constructions of target populations resolves some of the differences among theories that relate characteristics of policies to patterns of policymaking, including those of Lowi and Wilson. Social constructions of targets help us to understand the dynamics of policy change, even in policy arenas such as the distributive one (which previous theory predicts will be stable).

Concern with social constructions of target populations amplifies the justification for political scientists to study policies and strengthens their credentials as policy analysts. Social construction of targets contributes to an increasingly rich elaboration of the characteristics or elements of policy and their effects, which go beyond earlier preoccupation with costs and benefits to include messages about citizenship and government. The impact of policies upon target populations' perceptions of democracy, inclination toward participation, and willingness to comply with policy directives is clearly an appropriate subject for political science analysis. The boundaries of the political science field, which are fluid and constantly changing, must be redrawn to include this promising political concept.

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