

## CHAPTER 1

# *Introducing the Policy Process*

### OVERVIEW

This book is about how public policy is made in the United States. As a book on a particular field of the social sciences, it goes beyond simple description to introduce you to theories and ways of thinking about the policy process. This is not to deny the value of understanding the substance of the many policies themselves. I am sure that you, your family, and friends have often puzzled over why the government does some of the things it does, particularly when those things are contradictory. Why does, for example, the government provide support for tobacco farming and discourage people from smoking? Why does the government give people tax breaks for buying houses? Why don't renters get similar tax breaks? Or landlords, who could pass the savings on to renters? Why doesn't the United States have a single-payer, comprehensive health insurance system like many other countries? Why was the idea of creating such a system so passionately resisted? Why is the federal government so deeply involved in crime and education policy when our constitutional system places the primary responsibility for these programs in the state and local governments? Is regulation of consumer product safety better for public safety, or would greater reliance on the market and better information for consumers work better to promote public safety? These are questions that motivate many people of all ideological and political persuasions to understand public problems and find solutions to them.

### CHAPTER AT A GLANCE

- Overview
- Politics and the Policy Process
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- What Makes Public Policy Public?
- Why Do We Study Public Policy?
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One of the most interesting reasons to study public policy is that public policy making is about problem-solving. People participate in policy making because they perceive that there are problems for which government, at some level, can provide solutions. Others participate, in turn, because they believe that those problems are best handled by markets, or by families, or by nonprofit organizations, or churches, or any number of other means.

But studies of the contents of public policy—the laws and regulations themselves—is important, but it's not enough to understand the social scientific aspects of the policy process. Many scholars have developed theories of how the public policy process works: that is, theories about how public problems are discovered and how policies are created to address those problems.

This book introduces theories, frameworks, and models of the policy process. This focus on theory sets this book apart from many other textbooks on public policy. Many such textbooks contain a thin treatment of theories of public policy—and the relation of these theories to broader social scientific questions—and then provide a series of case studies on “environmental policy” or “energy policy” or “national security policy.” There are many good books about all manner of policy issues, and I hope you find them in the subjects that are the most interesting to you. This book focuses on the process by which policies are made. Other public policy textbooks approach policy making from an economic perspective—as a form of policy analysis, which can be different from analysis based in politics (I take this topic up in Chapter 8). Many of these books develop new theories of the policy process, but often those theories are unique to these textbooks, and are unfamiliar to those of us who study policy making as a political activity.

*An Introduction to the Policy Process* describes how policy is shaped by social, institutional, political, economic, and other contexts by drawing on existing theories of the policy process. Much of this description is orthodox in political science; the discussion of the branches of government, of the Constitution, of the various groups and institutions, and the like, is similar to that found in introductory American politics textbooks. The difference between this book and an introductory American politics textbook is that I am interested in how groups, institutions, and structures work to solve problems through making public policies. And, in keeping with the interdisciplinary nature of policy studies, this book owes a debt to sociology, history, economics, public administration, and other disciplines, but with a firm grounding in studies of American politics. Readers from other countries will likely find the theories

described in this book useful in their countries, but will also notice important differences between the American and other contexts.

## **POLITICS AND THE POLICY PROCESS**

This book is about a particular way in which social scientists study public policy: by studying the public policy *process*. But the study of public policy is an important aspect of political science, so it's useful to start by asking, "What is politics?" One way to conceive of politics is as a process by which societies help figure out how to organize and regulate themselves; that is, how to govern themselves. What makes this "political" is its location in the public sphere, where decisions are made by the public to address issues that affect people in communities; all manner of other decisions are made in corporations, in families, and in other organizations that we do not consider to be part of the public sphere; sociologists tend to study these private organizations and the interactions among their members, although the line between "public" and "private" is quite blurry, which is why sociologists and political scientists often address similar questions (Kumar 2014).

The public sphere can be as small as an apartment complex, or a small village, or as large as a whole nation, or even the world. Whatever the scale, public policies address problems that are public, or, more importantly, that some number of people think *should* be public instead of private. Indeed, a key feature of politics and political decision-making is the very definition of what problems are public and which are private (Rocheftort and Cobb 1994).

While these questions may, at the outset, seem simple, they are in fact very complex. People have been trying to figure out how to work together in political communities for thousands of years. Philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle sought to understand how one can behave in a political context to help people make decisions within human societies, while reducing the possibility of political conflict turning destructive or violent (McCool 1995). "Modern" political theory begins in the fifteenth century when Niccolò Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* for his patron, an Italian nobleman, to provide him with practical political advice. Machiavelli argued that if we understand and plan the political actions we take in pursuit of our goals, we are better prepared to seize the political opportunities that arise in the normal course of political life. *The Prince* depended on postulates—statements about how we think the political world works—and then argues that we should compare these

**Enlightenment**

Term used to describe a philosophic movement of the early eighteenth century, in which numerous theorists and philosophers developed new political and social philosophies based on reason and on insights from the natural sciences. The Enlightenment developed the thinking that spurred the American and French Revolutions, among other changes.

postulates to the conduct of “real-world” politics. Developing and testing postulates about how the political world works is consistent with the way people thought of the human and natural world during the Enlightenment, when thinkers turned toward modern methods of scientific inquiry in hopes of better understanding all manner of phenomena—including physics, medicine, law, and politics (Gay 1996). During this era of great scientific, political, and social foment, a host of brilliant thinkers turned their focus to understanding the use of power—a basic element of politics—in social settings.

In continuing one’s exploration of political philosophy, one might read Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau on the nature of social and political interactions under what we call “the social contract.” In the American context, the French nobleman Charles-Louis de Secondat, more commonly known as Montesquieu, greatly influenced the most influential thinkers in America at the time of the American Revolution and the ratification of the Constitution; his work is best known for the idea of the separation of powers into the legislative, executive, and judicial branches (Montesquieu 1989).

These ideas are reflected in *The Federalist*, a collection of essays written by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay to persuade New Yorkers to ratify the U.S. Constitution. Federalist #47 is the essay most closely associated with the separation of powers, but the entire collection of *The Federalist* is still studied to gain insights into the meaning of the Constitution and the thoughts of its framers.<sup>1</sup> To this foundation in American political thought we can also count the writings of, among others, George Washington, Samuel Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Woodrow Wilson. All of these statesmen sought to explain, to themselves and their countrymen, how our nation came to be, and how, in their minds, it was the best equipped to preserve individual rights and harness the creative power that ultimately made the United States one of the richest and most powerful countries in the world.

European thinkers such as Karl Marx and Max Weber sought to understand how people organize their societies, and how the socially and politically strong can, by accident or design, ignore the desires of the politically weak. From there, we can move to modern theorists and philosophers such as John Dewey, who studied the question of knowledge and learning in social life, and John Rawls, whose major work, *A Theory of Justice* (1999), sought to understand fundamental questions of fairness. Postmodern philosophers such as Michel Foucault offer powerful challenges to social contract theory and

explain how people come to be dominated by power structures beyond their control. These theorists have all contributed to our understanding of politics and social interactions. Their ideas help us to understand the historic and modern ways of thinking about the relationships between our governments and ourselves.

All this thinking still doesn't provide a concise definition of "politics," because such a definition is difficult to produce. Harold Lasswell (1958) defines politics as "who gets what, when, and how." This definition is simple, but we can discern on its own terms three essential aspects of politics: competition to gain certain resources, sometimes at others' expense; the need to cooperate to make decisions; and the nature of political power.

Let's look at the ways the word **politics** is defined in Merriam-Webster's online dictionary. Here are two that I find particularly interesting: "the art or science of government" and "political activities characterized by artful and often dishonest practices."

Because this dictionary defines *artful* as "skillful or wily," this definition reflects how many people focus on the devious behavior of politicians or political actors, and on the seemingly dishonest aspects of politics. They accuse people of "playing politics," as if they engage in the process simply to gain personal or group advantages and not for any particular policy goals that would broadly benefit society. The negative sense of the term is reflected in a Google News search I did while writing this section to make my point. Using the search term "playing politics with," I found the following headlines:

- Playing Politics with the Supreme Court Over ObamaCare
- Playing Politics with Chicago's Murder Epidemic
- How Democrats Are Playing Politics with Ebola
- Stop Playing Politics with Women's Rights
- Republicans Playing Politics with Secret Service Mistakes

In this definition of "politics," we can see that the term "playing politics with" is very negative, and suggests that politics, in this sense, is about scoring points and making partisan claims, not about solving problems. Indeed, the process does seem to be tawdry to many people. Clearly, there are great concerns about the motivations and honesty of politicians and lobbyists. The influence of interest group money, including very active "superPACs" that raise large sums of money, is a point of considerable concern. The legislative

**politics** In this book, I define politics the same way that Harold Lasswell does: the process by which society determines who gets what, when they get it, and how they get it.

process often seems arcane and designed to be opaque so that ordinary people cannot understand or participate in politics.

But the problem with claims of “playing politics” reduces the word to something with a negative connotation, which is not the most fruitful way to think about politics. After all, most people and organizations that make policy arguments claim that their ideas, if implemented, would serve the public interest. One of the most fundamental questions we must confront, then, as students of politics and public policy in a “democracy,” broadly defined, is whether policy making does indeed serve the public interest, and whether the public is really engaged in making it. As students of the policy process, we need to carefully and systematically understand *why* it is that money is so important in politics, why legislative processes can seem so confusing and slow, and whether and to what extent politics as currently practiced—with competing claims, expensive elections, and political partisanship—really works as a way of organizing our society. But while we can question our system and recognize that our representative democracy, as practiced in the United States and in other world democracies, may not be perfect, it also has significant advantages over autocracy and dictatorship, which is why Winston Churchill once defined democracy as “the worst form of government except for all the others.”

With this in mind it remains useful to consider politics as, in the dictionary’s terms, “the art or science of government.” Politics is therefore a profession unto itself and an object of study. As such, it is “the total complex of relations between people living in a society,” as defined by Merriam-Webster.com. What does this have to do with public policy? The study of public policy is the study of how we translate what the proponents of particular actions believe to be the popular will into practice. Of course, this is a simplification—the nature of the popular will is itself highly debatable—but it’s a good general way of considering what we study, while keeping in mind that, while a single definition of “the public will” or “the public interest” may never be available, we know that proponents of policy change will make appeals to it in an effort to promote change.

## WHAT IS PUBLIC POLICY?

While the study of politics has a long history, the systematic study of public policy as we understand it is a fairly recent discipline. Daniel McCool argues

that modern policy studies began in 1922, when political scientist Charles Merriam sought to connect the theory and practice of politics to understanding the actual activities of government. But McCool also notes “the study of public policy did not suddenly spring into existence in the 1950s and 1960s” (1995: 1). The classic literature that founded policy studies—including much that is discussed in this book—is only about 60 years old, beginning with Harold Lasswell’s call for the development of a distinctive policy science (Lasswell 1958; McCool 1995). Because the field of policy studies is so new, many of the fundamentals of the policy sciences have only begun to be well understood in the last 30 years or so. Considerable debate remains over whether there is one coherent set of principles that can govern the study and understanding of what we call the public policy process (see, for example, Howlett, Ramesh and Perl 2009, Chapter 1).

As in every field of endeavor, the definition of key terms and ideas is often very important, but it also can lead to considerable contention. There are many possible ways to define public policy. In academic studies of public policy, we offer definitions of public policy to understand the shape of the field we seek to study. For many people, defining public policy helps them define their own role in policy making, as well as that of the organization they work for. As I was writing this chapter for the first edition of this book, a member of the policy analysis office of a New York State agency called me. The agency was engaging in a strategic planning initiative; to do so, it needed to establish its mission—its very reason for existence. Because this agency influences taxation, spending, and government performance assessment—that is, public policy in the broad sense—the caller was particularly interested in defining the term *public policy*, so that her agency could know better how public policy relates to its work. The analyst ran through a list of the classic public policy texts, and asked if these were good sources of a definition of public policy.

There are many good sources for such a definition, and I urged her to look at these sources because of scholars’ lack of a consensus definition of public policy. And, after all, her question was very practical. She was asking for a definition of “public policy” so that her agency could more readily distinguish what is and what is not public policy, so as to focus its efforts on its *public* policy functions. I shared with her my agreement with Thomas Dye, who argues that this search for a definition of public policy can degenerate into a word game that, eventually, adds little more understanding. It may be fruitless to look for one particular definition of public policy, and it is certainly

not useful to continue to develop more definitions. I suggested to the caller that she review the texts and adopt a definition that the agency felt made the most sense in its particular context. Table 1.1 provides some examples of the definitions of public policy that the caller could draw from, and some strengths and weaknesses of these definitions.

No single definition may ever be developed, but we can discern key attributes of public policy:

- Policy is made in response to some sort of problem that requires attention.
- Policy is made on the “public’s” behalf.
- Policy is oriented toward a goal or desired state, such as the solution of a problem.
- Policy is ultimately made by governments, even if the ideas come from outside government or through the interaction of government and nongovernmental actors.
- Policy is interpreted and implemented by public and private actors who have different interpretations of problems, solutions, and their own motivations.
- Policy is what the government chooses to do or *not* to do.

**TABLE 1.1** Defining “Public Policy”

<i>Definition</i>	<i>Author</i>
“The term public policy always refers to the actions of government and the intentions that determine those actions.”	Clarke E. Cochran et al. <sup>a</sup>
“Public policy is the outcome of the struggle in government over who gets what.”	Clarke E. Cochran et al.
“Whatever governments choose to do or not to do.”	Thomas Dye <sup>b</sup>
“Public policy consists of political decisions for implementing programs to achieve societal goals.”	Charles L. Cochran and Eloise F. Malone <sup>c</sup>
“Stated most simply, public policy is the sum of government activities, whether acting directly or through agents, as it has an influence on the life of citizens.”	B. Guy Peters <sup>d</sup>

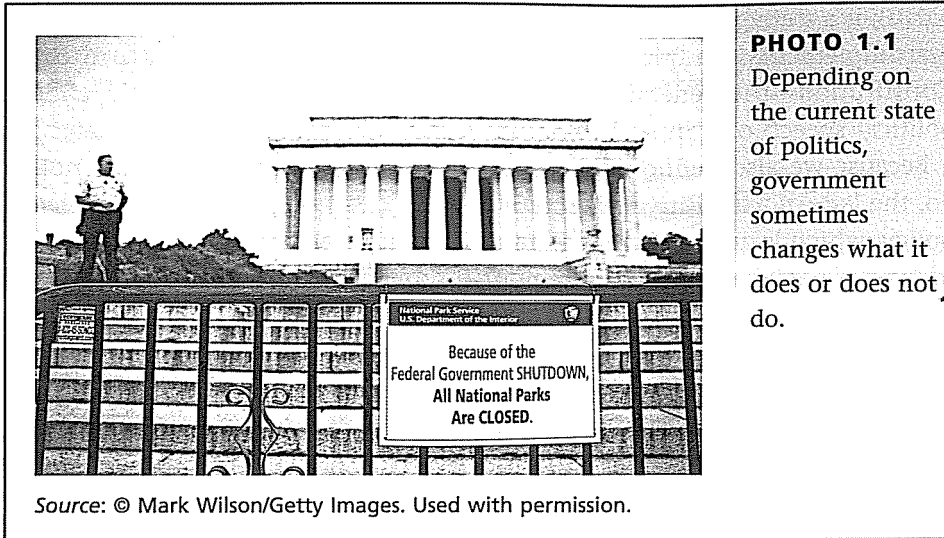
a. Clarke E. Cochran et al., *American Public Policy: An Introduction*. 10th ed. Boston, MA: Cengage Wadsworth, 2010.

b. Thomas R. Dye, *Understanding Public Policy*. 14th ed. Boston, MA: Pearson, 2013.

c. Charles L. Cochran and Eloise F. Malone, *Public Policy: Perspectives and Choices*. 4th ed. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2010.

d. B. Guy Peters, *American Public Policy: Promise and Performance*. 8th ed. Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2010.





While reaching a consensus on one *definition* of public policy has proved impossible, all the variants of the definition suggest that public policy making is *public*—it affects a greater variety of people and interests than do private decisions. This is why government and the policies made by government are sometimes so controversial, frustrating, and at the same time very important. But because the public is the source of political authority—that is, the authority to act on the public’s behalf—it is clear that government is at the center of efforts to make public policy.

I define a **policy** as a statement by government—at whatever level, in whatever form—of what it intends to do about a public problem. Such statements can be found in the Constitution, statutes, regulation, case law (that is, court decisions), agency or leadership decisions, or even in changes in the behavior of government officials at all levels. For example, a law that says that those caught driving while intoxicated will go to jail for up to one year is a statement of governmental policy to punish drunk drivers. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) is a statement of government policy toward the environment. The First Amendment specifies that Congress cannot abridge religious, speech, or press freedoms, by stating “Congress shall make no law . . .” Judicial decisions are also statements of policy: the Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954), is a statement of policy that governments cannot racially segregate schools; the Court’s decision in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, 558 U.S. 310

**policy** A statement by government of what it intends to do, such as a law, regulation, ruling, decision, order, or a combination of these. The lack of such statements may also be an implicit statement of policy.

(2010), is a statement of policy that, as a matter of policy—specifically, policy that implements the free speech provisions of the First Amendment to the Constitution—the federal government cannot regulate the independent political speech of nonprofit organizations.

Because we also define public policy as what government chooses not to do, the lack of a definitive statement of policy may be evidence of an *implicit* policy, which is quite different from a clear and explicit statement of policy—or even a vague and broad statement of policy. The government has never declared—and our system has never enshrined in the Constitution—a right to education, or healthcare, or a living wage; therefore, we can assume that the implicit policy is that there is *no* right to these things, while some other nations do express these as rights. By not making them rights, our government puts these sorts of government or private services in a different category than, for example, the right to workshop or to have a jury trial. While we might pass policies to address the problems that arise when dealing with these policy matters, we generally do not treat them as matters of right. In the United States, one cannot claim that the failure of the federal government to provide education, healthcare, or many other things violates a right stated or implied by the Constitution.

Explicit statements of policies take many different forms. A policy might be a law, or a regulation, or the set of all the laws and regulations that govern a particular issue area or problem. This would be a sound but incomplete explanation. Anne Schneider and Helen Ingram provide a more extensive definition of policy: “Policies are revealed through texts, practices, symbols, and discourses that define and deliver values including goods and services as well as regulations, income, status, and other positively or negatively valued attributes” (1997: 2). This definition means that policies are not just contained in laws and regulations; once a law or rule is made, policies continue to be made as the people who implement policy—that is, those who put policies into effect—make decisions about who will benefit from policies and who will shoulder burdens as a result. In studying policy, then, we look at the broader sweep of politics, not simply the written laws and rules themselves.

Policy change can be detected at levels ranging from constitutional change, which is clearly very visible to most members of a political system, all the way to subtle changes in the behavior of “street-level bureaucrats” (Lipsky 2010), whose vigilance or other behaviors may be hiding by the most recent event. A good example of this is the behavior of airport screeners in the days immediately after the September 11 terrorist attacks. These screeners became

much more thorough and careful in their searches for dangers or prohibited items in passenger luggage, even before the laws changed to make airport screening stricter.

## IDEAS AND PROBLEMS IN THE POLICY PROCESS

Now that we know how we can think of public policy, and how we might find out what policies are, it is useful to think about *why* policies are made and why they change. One way to explain the dynamism of public policy is by understanding the relationship between ideas and problems. According to Merriam-Webster, a **problem** is “a source of perplexity, distress, or vexation.” Given this definition, I am sure you can think of a lot of problems in the world that are vexing. Big problems that people are worried about as I write this are the continued health of the economy, particularly after the deep recession that began in 2008 and its uneven recovery, continuing terrorism in the Middle East (and, in particular, the group known as “Islamic State”), the uncertain outcome of the so-called “ObamaCare” health reforms, the costs of doing something about—or ignoring—global climate change, and the threats posed by infectious diseases such as Ebola or variants of influenza. Each of these things is—or is not—vexing to some number of people. Public policy is largely driven by arguments about whether something is a solvable problem, what the potential solutions are, what the costs of those solutions are, and whether the solutions will be wholly or—more likely—partially effective. There are a lot of people who work to promote an understanding of a problem, and, in framing the problem a particular way, they promote the likely set of solutions, as we will see in greater detail in Chapters 6 and 8.

**problem** A usually undesirable situation that, according to people or interest groups, can be alleviated by government action.

**classical liberalism**  
In political theory, the ideological system that emphasizes individual liberty and the ownership and acquisition of private property as a means to improve overall wealth and happiness and discourage social strife. Liberalism is the political ideology on which the American political system is based.

## WHAT MAKES PUBLIC POLICY PUBLIC?

The dominant ideological foundation of our constitutional system (and that of other countries that were once part of the British Empire, such as Canada, Australia, and Great Britain itself) is known as **classical liberalism**. This ideology is very clearly expressed in John Locke’s *Second Treatise of Civil Government* (1690). Among the many beliefs of liberalism is that power derives from the consent of the governed—that is, the people themselves. The people, and not royalty or the state, are therefore sovereign. Thus, when policy

advocates seek to induce the government to make policy (by taking an action or refusing to do so), or when government actively engages in actions these advocates support, one can make a claim that the government does so in the public interest. Indeed, many states have groups called Public Interest Research Groups, or PIRGs, which promote their interpretation of the public interest.

For example, agencies that regulate public utilities, such as electric companies, claim to regulate in the public interest by limiting rates or assuring service. Some policy advocates claim that laws that relieve tax burdens on the rich are in the public interest because they create overall public wealth, which leads to job creation, the creation of wealth, and, therefore, a more prosperous society overall (Viard 2007). Those who argue that the rich should be taxed at a higher rate than the poor claim that taxation based on ability to pay is more in the spirit of the public interest. Of course, many people will argue that making certain policies would harm the public interest. For example, Google is under considerable scrutiny in Europe for its alleged anti-competitive behavior, and the European Parliament, in a largely symbolic vote, called for Google's services, such as search and online advertising, to be broken into separate companies to promote competition, thereby serving the public interest. But Google and its defenders argue that the service, as it exists without this regulation, is in the public interest because it gives people what they want. Here's where precisely *what* the public interest is comes into the debate.

Public policy is related to the **public interest** because the sum total of all policies affect all of us in some way. But we are not all affected by the same policies in exactly the same way, nor is one's intensity of feeling about an issue necessarily equal to that of others. And many of us don't have any particular issue that would cause us to mobilize with others to demand policy change. Most of us do not care too much about the day-to-day workings of government because we are busy with the day-to-day workings of our lives and because the activities of government seem removed from our daily interests and needs, or even because some political actors would rather we not participate in such decisions. Still, the government, particularly the U.S. federal government, plays an important role in every aspect of our lives, from the nutrition labeling on our breakfast cereal to the standards for fire-retardant kids' clothing. And state and local governments tax us, can restrict how we use our land through land use planning and zoning, define what the schools can and cannot teach, and make rules about everything from the operation of the state fairgrounds to where and when we can own and carry firearms. Big states, such as California, are so influential that their standards are

### **public interest**

The assumed broader desires and needs of the public, in whose name policy is made. The public interest is hard to define, but is something to which all policy advocates appeal.

adopted by other states or in federal law. Not everyone likes rules like these, of course. But as oppressive as government is claimed to be by some interests, there are many government activities that most people ignore or support because they seem either benign or beneficial to most people, so we tend not to dwell on those policies until something goes wrong. And, as is often true in democracies, policies ultimately gain broad support so their repeal is unlikely, as with the social security program or income tax deductions for children or for mortgage interest.

You may be interested in public policy because you care intensely about particular public problems and the policies intended to address them, such as those dealing with the environment, civil rights, economic freedom, or the promotion of personal morality. But even the most intensely interested participants in the policy process are not concerned with *every* issue. There is a considerable division of labor in democratic politics; in the formal institutions of government, different people have different constitutional responsibilities, and the vast array of issues that government handles on our behalf require that even members of legislatures need to be specialists in fairly narrow fields.

In the United States, as in many democracies, people tacitly delegate policy-making responsibilities to government and to specialists because everyone cannot concern themselves with the day-to-day panoply of issues that government must address. But in delegating these responsibilities, we do not abandon our interest in what the government does or how it does it (and sometimes the procedures the government uses are at least as important as the goals to be achieved), or our right to promote our own ideas of what constitutes the public interest when we are sufficiently motivated. But we do need to ask whether, by delegating much of the policy making power to other experts or other policy proponents, we are losing our voice in policy debates. This is both a normative question—about what a good democracy should look like—and a positive question, in which we can ask, as social scientists, “Who participates in making public policy?”

## WHY DO WE STUDY PUBLIC POLICY?

While the concept of the public interest varies from person to person, and one person’s individual interests are likely to differ in some ways from his or her neighbors’ interests, most people are concerned about the impact of

policies on their lives, such as how many services they receive or how much they have to pay in taxes. That said, why do you want to study the process that leads to the decisions to make these policies? Since you are reading this book, you probably already have an idea of why you are studying or working in public policy. Perhaps you have been interested in policy and politics since you were young; many people develop their interest in politics and policy at home. You may have been exposed to policy making when an interest in which you or your family believed was threatened, or if you perceived it was threatened. For example, you or your parents may have mobilized around plans to build a shopping mall, a power plant, a jail, or a polluting industrial facility near your home. Or perhaps you mobilized around a more abstract idea, such as civil rights for women, or gay and lesbian people, or for gun rights, or for environmental protection in the entire nation.

These are all practical reasons to study public policy, and many people study books, articles, and reports on public policy to learn how to be a more effective participant in public policy making, so that their and their friends' and neighbors' voices are heard in public policy debates.

But for many people, politics and policy making are inherently fascinating regardless of the specific policy content of the debate, and regardless of actual outcome. Some people study the policy process simply because it's interesting in its own right, as a way of conceiving of politics and problem-solving in a democratic society. One might compare the pursuit of knowledge to "pure" science and the practitioner orientation to "applied" science. The practical and applied study of public policy takes its cues from theory, but seeks more actively to apply those theoretical insights to actual cases of public policy formation, thereby helping theorists improve their theories. In a course on public policy, theory may be applied to particular cases or policy areas, as often seen in the later chapters of introductory public policy texts. As knowledge filters from the more abstract to the more applied, insights from the theoretical world are employed, knowingly or not, by practitioners. Conversely, students of public policy derive theory by observing the collective activity of the practitioners of public policy. This book considers theory more extensively in Chapter 11; for now, we should consider that people do also learn about theories of the world, including politics, for *both* theoretical and applied reasons—scientific knowledge is often greatly enhanced when both motivations are present (Stokes 1997).

Some of you will become very active participants in the policy process. Some will become elected officials, appointed officials, or agency managers

and staff. Others will lead interest groups, work in the news media, or provide scientific and technical information for others. Many of you, never thinking you're involved in the process, will go on to successful careers in business, the arts, or other endeavors. But some day, when you least expect it, you may get involved in policy making. Perhaps you will become active when you and your neighbors oppose the construction of a new shopping mall in your neighborhood. For some people, this is the sort of problem that public policy is intended to address. But for others, a mall is an opportunity for economic growth or an added convenience, and the problem isn't the mall, it's the opposition to the mall. Perhaps your employer will ask you to participate in a public relations campaign to support or oppose a new policy. In short, chances are very good that you will become interested in the policy process at some point in your life, and I venture to guess that you will become involved in some way, given that you are reading this book! I hope that *An Introduction to the Policy Process* will help you become a more thoughtful and effective participant.

## THE PLACE OF POLICY STUDIES IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Because of the focus on politics in this chapter, one might conclude that policy studies are or should be the sole province of political scientists and closely related scholars, such as those who study policy analysis or public administration. But this interpretation only holds true if we focus narrowly on the policy process. There are many ways to study policy making, as Peter May shows in his "public policy morphology" (Table 1.2).

Many programs in political science, sociology, economics, public administration, law, and other disciplines allow students to specialize in the study of policy and the policy process as they work toward their bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees. Dozens of universities now offer master's degrees in public policy (MPP degrees), and others offer bachelor's or doctoral degrees in public policy that draw from multiple disciplines to provide training in policy studies (see, for example, the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration website: [www.naspaa.org](http://www.naspaa.org)). Most of these programs are interdisciplinary and draw their faculties from across the social, behavioral, and natural science disciplines. This interdisciplinary nature is both a strength and a weakness that has perennially faced policy studies. It is a strength

**TABLE 1.2** A Public Policy Morphology

Public policy education and research has four fairly distinct variants. This book focuses on the first approach, and can serve as a foundation for further study in other areas of policy study.

- **Public Policy Processes**—This consists of research on the formulation and implementation of public policy usually limited to the American context emphasizing national, domestic policy. Using perspectives of American politics, individuals studying public policy processes address such topics as issue emergence and policy agendas, the cultural definition of policy problems, policy formulation, political feasibility, and policy implementation.

The policy process literature can be distinguished from other flavors of public policy as follows: Unlike policy analysis, it does not emphasize the craft aspects of constructing and analyzing policies. Unlike policy research, it does not emphasize problem-solving (rather, it is the study of how *others* define and seek to solve problems). And unlike comparative public policy, it tends to be limited to American settings although good comparative work is appropriate.

The other variants of public policy are:

- **Comparative Public Policy**—In principle, comparative public policy applies the logic of comparative analysis to the substance of different policy problems. Current writing and analysis tends to emphasize cross-national comparisons. There is also a newly emerging literature of comparative policy work among the American states. Much of this work is descriptive, rather than theoretical.
- **Public Policy Analysis**—A logic of analysis and mix of techniques in support of public policy decision-making. This tradition borrows heavily from economics. The logic of “rational” analysis contains a central focus on problem specification, generation of alternative policies, and assessment of policies in support of public policy decision-making. The techniques include quantitative methods, economic analysis, welfare economics, and qualitative assessments. Most of this type of training takes place within public policy programs offering professional two-year masters degrees. Weimer and Vining’s policy analysis text and Eugene Bardach’s short volume on policy analysis are leading works in this field.
- **Public Policy Research**—This consists of applied social science research aimed at documenting policy problems and evaluating interventions. The distinctive element of policy research is that it is problem driven. As such, the appropriate approaches and range of disciplinary relevance are in principle quite broad.

Typically, policy research training includes development of expertise in the substance of one or more policy areas (e.g., health, energy, and environment). This type of training takes place across a range of programs as reflected in the diversity of substantive public policy offerings in the social, natural, and behavioral sciences.

*Source:* Based on work by Peter J. May at the University of Washington.

because the **discipline** draws upon the best insights from the natural sciences, **social sciences**, and humanities. To some people, however, it is a weakness because policy scientists do not share a language that transcends disciplinary boundaries. Our challenge as students of public policy is to understand and profitably use the insights offered by the many disciplines that study, in various ways, public policy (Table 1.3).

**discipline** A field of academic research or study. Sociology, political science, and economics are social science disciplines; electrical, civil, and mechanical engineering are engineering disciplines. Disciplines approach similar problems in different ways.

**social science** The branch of the sciences that studies the actions and behavior of people, groups, and institutions. Political science, sociology, anthropology, and economics are social sciences. History is sometimes considered a social science.



**TABLE 1.3** Selected Disciplines That Study Public Policy

<i>Discipline</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Relationship to public policy</i>	<i>Some important journals</i>
Political science	The study of political relationships; that is, the study of the processes by which societies seek to allocate political power and the benefits of such power.	The political process is the process through which policies are made and enforced.	<i>American Political Science Review, American Journal of Political Science, Journal of Politics, Polity, Political Research Quarterly, Public Opinion Quarterly</i>
Sociology	"Sociology is the study of social life, social change, and the social causes and consequences of human behavior. Sociologists investigate the structure of groups, organizations, and societies, and how people interact within these contexts."*	Community and group activities are an important part of policy making, because groups of people often form to make demands.	<i>American Sociological Review, Contemporary Sociology, American Journal of Sociology</i>
Economics	The study of the allocation of resources in a community, however defined. Economists study markets and exchanges. Welfare economists seek to understand the extent to which an overall community's welfare can be maximized.	There are many economic factors that influence public policy, such as economic growth, productivity, employment, and the like. The tools of economics are often used to promote policies or to explain why policies succeed or fail.	<i>American Economic Review, Econometrica, Journal of Applied Economics, Journal of Political Economy</i>
Public administration (PA)	The study of the management of government and nonprofit organizations, including the management of information, money, and personnel in order to achieve goals developed through the democratic process.	The management of public programs is an integral part of the policy process. PA scholars study the motivation of program implementers and targets, and help research innovations to improve service delivery.	<i>Public Administration Review, Journal of Public Administration Research and Teaching</i>
Public policy	The study of what governments choose to do or not to do, including studies of the policy process, policy implementation and impact, and evaluation.	We give this label to the highly interdisciplinary study of the public policy process. Policy scholars develop theories about how the policy process works, and develop tools and methods to analyze how policy is made and implemented.	<i>Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, Journal of Policy History, Journal of Public Policy, Policy Studies Journal, Policy Studies Review</i>

\* American Sociological Association, [www.asanet.org/employment/careers21st\\_whatissociology.cfm](http://www.asanet.org/employment/careers21st_whatissociology.cfm).

This book follows in the policy process tradition, which is more grounded in traditional political science. Students of the policy process view rational, scientific, and often quantitative policy analysis as part of the raw material of policy making that participants use to advocate for their preferred policies. The interplay of this evidence, the values and belief systems of the participants in the process, the structure of the process itself, and the distribution of power within the structure all have an important influence on public policy.

## **EVIDENCE AND ARGUMENT IN THE POLICY PROCESS**

For years, political scientists have known that government is neither monolithic—that is, one single-minded body that speaks with one voice and works toward one set of goals—nor a neutral referee that dispassionately judges between policy alternatives by weighing their costs and benefits. The participants in the policy process—whether they are considered policy entrepreneurs, brokers, analysts, interest groups, or association leaders—are not all or even primarily neutral participants in the policy process. Thus, as Giandomenico Majone (1989) and Deborah Stone (1989, 2012) note, analysis is often undertaken in the name of advocacy, and is but one part of the rhetorical tools used in political debate. In the policy process, the results of “scientific” policy analysis are often abandoned when other rhetorical tools seem to work better. Indeed, as discussed later in this book, the act of identifying a problem is as much a normative judgment as it is an objective statement of fact; thus, if analysis proceeds from the identification of a problem, and the problem is defined normatively, then one cannot say that any subsequent analysis is strictly neutral.

As I wrote this chapter for the first edition, my introductory public policy course was giving its group presentations on issues related to the apparent outbreak of school violence incidents in places such as Springfield, Oregon, and Littleton, Colorado, in the late 1990s. Sadly, such concerns have continued after incidents in colleges and schools, including Virginal Tech and the Sandy Hook elementary school in Connecticut. One of the groups chose to focus on pending federal legislation, alternative policy choices, and the group’s analysis of the desirability of alternative solutions to the school violence problem. The group argued that armed guards, cameras in classrooms, metal detectors, and other measures seemed too severe. These security techniques would make schools seem like prisons and thereby damage the educational environment, in turn reducing academic performance.

During a question-and-answer period, I asked the students whether they had any information that showed a link between these stern security measures and a poorer educational environment. They answered that they did not. I then asked, “Does it matter that you have no evidence?” After some discussion, we concluded that evidence is useful in policy debate, but it is not always necessary. Sometimes, the *stories* we tell about problems and policies—including the imagery and symbolism one associates with a policy—can matter more than the “facts” behind the policy. For example, arguing that a set of policies will create a school that looks and feels like a jail may be sufficient to win an argument against the most intensive security measures. While one can gather considerable information on the relationship between school security and the educational environment, one need not necessarily have all the evidence at hand if one’s argument strikes a chord with the public and decision-makers. This means, more bluntly, that relatively little evidence is needed to make an argument if it is possible to appeal to popular prejudices and common misconceptions, or to common values or interests that are not too far outside the mainstream of current thought. This sounds cynical, but there are abundant examples in American history and world history of emotion overcoming rationality in policy making, such as the imposition of Jim Crow laws on black Americans based on a scientifically unfounded belief that blacks are genetically inferior to whites in some way. But emotion and appeals to justice and fairness also played a major role in overturning those very laws. Because neither facts nor emotions are solely decisive, evidence *and* emotion play important roles in policy making, and sometimes emotion gains the upper hand.

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### **CASE STUDY: DOES THE DARE PROGRAM WORK?**

Let’s consider the adoption of public policy where there is little social science evidence to suggest the policy meets its goals, but it continues to be an important policy. You may be familiar with the DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) program, either by reputation or personal experience.<sup>2</sup> The reason for the creation of DARE, or any anti-drug program, is simple: drug abuse—including the abuse of legal drugs, alcohol, and tobacco as well as illegal drugs—is associated with poor academic achievement, crime, and significant health problems for drug abusers. The federal, state, and local governments have created drug use regulations and educated the public about drugs for decades. DARE was an innovative program that linked schools with law enforcement in a way that would, its designers believed, be more effective than existing programs in preventing school-aged children from using (or “experimenting with”) illegal drugs, tobacco, and alcohol.

The program was founded in 1983 by the police and schools in Los Angeles to address local problems with drugs and gangs. It has since been implemented internationally. At its peak, DARE served 43 countries and 75 percent of school districts in the United States. Originally designed for older elementary school students, DARE programs evolved to address drug abuse, gangs, and violence with students in kindergarten through twelfth grade. The national DARE organization claims that the program helps students make good decisions and “humanizes” the police: that is, young people can begin to relate to officers as people”; through the DARE program, students may think of police officers as friends and helpers in the community. DARE designers felt that the inclusion of police officers as instructors would increase the credibility of the instructors and the program, a result that at least one study corroborated (Hammond et al. 2008).

While the DARE organization referred to itself as the “preeminent substance abuse education program”—a reasonable claim given the number of schools that use it—scientific evidence of its effectiveness is scant. The basic question is whether using the fundamental anti-drug DARE programs reduces drug use in that population of students compared with students who did not go through DARE. In a 2001 review of drug abuse prevention programs, the U.S. Surgeon General placed DARE in the “Does Not Work” category of these programs (Office of the Surgeon General et al. 2001). A 2003 Government Accountability Office study reviewed the existing body of literature on DARE effectiveness and reported that the existing research found no significant difference in drug use between students who had completed DARE and students who had not. Research by the National Institutes of Health, Department of Education, and Department of Justice corroborated these findings. Perhaps most damaging to DARE was a study published in the *American Journal of Public Health*, which conducted an overview (a meta-analysis) of the most scientifically rigorous studies the researchers could find. They discovered that, overall, studies proved no effect from the DARE curriculum; in simple terms, the studies concluded that DARE did not have a measurable influence on drug use among school-aged children, especially when measured over time. As a result of the many studies that showed DARE’s ineffectiveness, federal money supporting DARE programs was cut, and some school districts have dropped the DARE program (Weiss, Murphy-Graham, and Birkeland 2005). Many organizations continued the DARE program through local fundraising and taxation.

Several responses to the negative research findings followed. First, DARE advocates argued that the outcomes of drug prevention education are difficult to quantify, that the studies cited by researchers were flawed, and that DARE’s satisfaction surveys revealed positive outcomes, including high levels of parent, student, and community satisfaction. Advocates also maintain that positive experiences with law enforcement officers are significant, though difficult to measure. However, none of these claims or objections provides an answer to the fundamental research question about DARE’s effectiveness.

The second response was more subtle, but more revealing. DARE, facing the loss of federal funding and its own credibility, revised its curriculum in response to several studies. In an undated document on its website, DARE suggests that the “new DARE” reflects changes in curriculum design and delivery, and incorporates more effective instructional methods based on better science. The creation of the “new DARE” was likely motivated by the urging of DARE’s proponents to avoid losing federal funding and a desire to embrace science. The new program—which emphasizes teaching middle school children—was to be evaluated by a \$13.7 million study funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation—a highly respected institution devoted to health issues—to track the effectiveness of the program. However, the evaluators have not yet published results of their research on the fundamental question of DARE’s effectiveness. Furthermore, DARE’s mission shifted, as do many organizations’ missions when their fundamental rationale is questioned. A review of the DARE website reveals that the organization has broadened its programs to anti-gang and anti-bullying efforts as well.

Why, then, was DARE so popular as an anti-drug program? There are several potential reasons, and the remainder of this book will help you to understand the logic behind the continued adoption of a program that “doesn’t work.” The first reason DARE remained popular is because people believe it works, because they draw on anecdotal evidence—that is, personal experience—to draw conclusions about its effectiveness. DARE supporters often raise the issue of DARE’s creation of good relationships between police officers and students. In one case, a county sheriff in Ohio noted that “There are studies out there that said that it didn’t work, that kids still used drugs. What it doesn’t measure is the relationships that are built between the kids and those officers” (Wilson 2009). A parent in Texas, reacting to the impending cut of DARE from her children’s school, said, “I asked my kids, ‘Do you think that program is worth it?’ and they said, ‘Yes.’ They would never smoke—they never realized how many chemicals are in (a cigarette)—and it turned them off to drugs, too” (Meyers 2009). In another instance, a school superintendent in Suffolk County, New York, expressed his disappointment with the decision to drop DARE:

It has had a tremendous impact on the students and has become part of our school culture. I’m concerned that when the responsibility for teaching the curriculum falls on the shoulders of the teachers, who already have a full curriculum, that it won’t have the same effectiveness that it did when the police officers came to visit.

(Saslow 2007)

From the schools’ perspective, the DARE program fills important needs. As one police department notes:

Having a DARE program in the local school lifts the burden off teachers and administrators to provide drug education, and gives them additional time to do

something else. It is popular with parents and the media because it conveys the idea that something is being done to combat the menace of drug abuse by children.

(Lafayette (Indiana) Police Department 2008)

This idea of “doing something” is important in politics and public policy. In the DARE case, an expert on adolescent substance abuse noted the powerful reasons why DARE persists in so many schools:

This evidence, of course, is not popular with parents, police officers and others since many of them believe DARE works. And kids do say the “right” things after participating. But, research shows there are no long-term effects. A perfect formula for a belief-versus-science polarization. So, why the interest and support for “needing” more DARE programs . . . despite overwhelming evidence they don’t work? Well, it’s mostly about the comfort parents, school staff, police officers, and other adults receive when a program is delivered that is visible and, in their beliefs, helpful. It feels good to know that at least something is being done.

(Rockholz 2010)

Often, policy makers feel a great deal of pressure to “do something” about public problems, even when all the information is not available; indeed, as we will learn, information is often hard to come by. Furthermore, once a program is in place, many stakeholders—in this case, parents, teachers, the police, school boards, and local community leaders—have so much money, time, and personal belief invested in a program that it is difficult, even in the face of scientific evidence, to change the program.

Another way to understand the persistence of DARE is by reframing the essential research question: Does DARE work? One can ask, “What does ‘work’ mean?” As originally defined by DARE’s developers, the program was supposed to keep kids from trying or using drugs. The scientific evidence suggests that this does not happen. But are there other benefits to DARE? What about the oft-cited relationships between police and children? Is this a positive benefit? How would one measure this? Do police officers benefit from meeting and interacting with the students in their communities? What about the use of police as instructors? Does this benefit teachers who may not feel comfortable teaching students about drug use and abuse? What benefits, if any, might accrue to a community as a whole for identifying, as so many signs do, particularly in small-town America, that “We are a DARE community?” Did the range of those benefits increase when DARE broadened its mission beyond drug prevention? Could a more scientifically sound program provide these benefits? Or is the drug problem so intractable—that is, hard to solve—that no program is likely to work?

The DARE case illustrates how powerful rhetoric, symbolism, and storytelling that relies on anecdotes can promote a policy even when the evidence of its effectiveness is scant.

Despite mounting evidence that the old DARE was ineffective, and the lack of evidence that the new program is effective, the curriculum continues to be used in many schools around the nation. It is very difficult to remove DARE from some schools because of the popularity of the idea of working with the police combined with the valued goal of preventing or reducing youth drug use and violence. Are there other policies that continue to be used even if they fail to achieve their goals? Are policies enacted that are unlikely to achieve the goals that their proponents claim? Why would people propose policies that they may know won't work well? How do we measure whether a policy is "good" or not? Consider these questions—and the logic behind these questions—as you read this book.

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## SUMMARY

This chapter has provided an overview of the endeavor on which you are about to embark: the study of public policy. We learned that the study of public policy is rooted in the study of politics, which is an ancient field of study. But we also learned that the study of public policy, as we generally define it, is a recent innovation. I hope that this introductory chapter has motivated you to study the public policy process both to satisfy your own personal curiosity about how things work, and to motivate you to understand and perhaps play a more active role in the decisions that affect you, your family, and your community.

This book is organized in three broad sections. This chapter and Chapters 2 and 3 are overviews of the policy process and of the environment in which policy is made. Chapter 3 introduces the stages model of the policy process, which serves to organize the various parts of the process so that we can analyze them. Chapters 4 and 5 are about the actors in the policy process. Chapters 6 through 10 cover the outputs and processes of public policy. Chapter 11 brings all this together by considering modern, better theories of the policy process that improve upon the stages model and develop better grounded theories.

As you read this book, I hope you will think of current ideas and events in the political world, and your own ideas about how public policy can alleviate the problems you find most concerning. As you do so, think about what you are learning from this book and how it can be applied to these problems, whether such problems are new or are perennial.

### KEY TERMS

classical liberalism	politics
discipline	problem
Enlightenment	public interest
policy	social science

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION, REFLECTION, AND RESEARCH

- How is public policy grounded in the study of politics? What do you think the term “politics” means in this context? Do you think it would be possible to make public policy without politics?
- Is there a real difference between “playing politics” and just the general political process of argument, negotiation, and compromise? Why do people think so negatively of politics given that this is the process by which we address public problems?
- Discuss the study of public policy. Are there other disciplines that aren’t mentioned here that contribute to the study of public policy? In what way might those disciplines contribute to policy making? (Think broadly. How do scientists and engineers help make public policy? Doctors? Social workers? Other professions?)
- Ask your friends, neighbors, or family members what comes to mind when they hear the word “politics.” Then, ask what they think when they hear the term “public policy.” How are their responses similar to and different from the ideas discussed in this chapter?
- Find an article on a public policy issue in a newspaper. Consider carefully whether the people making arguments for or against a particular policy are making *normative* or *positive* arguments. Are they using anecdotes or evidence? How can you tell the difference? Whose arguments do you consider most persuasive? Why?



## ADDITIONAL READING

In this chapter, I argue in favor of evidence-based policy advocacy. The making of public policy based on scientifically gathered evidence (by which I mean evidence from the natural sciences, social sciences, and engineering) is not a new idea; indeed, this sort of evidence is at the heart of Lasswell's call for a distinctive policy science. On this conception of policy science, see Harold D. Lasswell, *A Pre-View of Policy Sciences* (New York: American Elsevier, 1971); and Daniel Lerner and Harold D. Lasswell, *The Policy Sciences: Recent Developments in Scope and Method* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1951). The journal *Policy Sciences* publishes research that follows Lasswell's ideas about the policy sciences. This subject is taken up in greater detail in Chapter 8.

But the role of rhetoric and argument, combined with evidence and scientific inquiry, is as important as technical argument about the substance of policy, and is a theme taken up by Giandomenico Majone in *Evidence, Argument and Persuasion in the Policy Process* (1989). A similar work is Deborah Stone's *Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making*, 3rd edition (2012), a work that has been very influential in my thinking about policy.

There are many popular treatments of how Americans engage with the political system, and why people are often so frustrated by it. A classic in this genre is E.J. Dionne, *Why Americans Hate Politics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991). The book is over 20 years old, but its central premise remains relevant: that describing public problems and solutions as "conservative" or "liberal" ignores problem definitions and solutions that could be said to be centrist, not leaning to either ideological pole. Because I tend to believe that, in many cases, governmental institutions and the political process can identify and solve problems, I particularly like Paul Light's book, *Government's Greatest Achievements: From Civil Rights to Homeland Security* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2002), which reminds us that not all government activity is futile or wasteful.

## NOTES

- 1 Yale University's law school provides the entire Federalist Papers at [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/subject\\_menus/fed.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/subject_menus/fed.asp), and many fine annotated editions are available as books.
- 2 Unless otherwise noted, all claims about DARE's history, structure, and effectiveness come from the organization's website, [www.dare.com](http://www.dare.com).

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