

Discovering The Human Behind the Policy: Why Is Policy Design the Way It Is?

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When we consider the implications that policy and policymaking have on governance and political functioning, a study of human behaviour and ideology is essential in situating policy design in the larger framework of policy making, which comes before policy aims are identified, consequences are anticipated and courses of action are discussed. A major tenet that has conflicting influence on the outcomes of these processes is the elite versus group models of thought.

Here, on the one hand where it is believed that the ruling elite has a solitary expressed interest, the other attributes the product of policy formulation to a collective group struggle. Though both theories are primarily based in the pluralistic form of society that is in most places prevalent, we notice an oscillating incidence of these two effects on current society. Here, while elite theory may generally be more prominent, a socialist, or perhaps idealist, perspective professes the need for a more diverse, public-oriented viewpoint in public policy. When this effect emerges amidst pluralism, is where we notice the surfacing of social classes.

ANALYSING THE INCENTIVES OF POLITICAL ENTITIES

A skeptic of the elite theory can be found in the economics of public choice, which de-romanticizes the aspirations placed on the government and state, essentially humanizing it to a “human community” (Max Weber, 1918) rather than an institutional shrine for public interest. The theory extracts its conclusions of collective economic decision-making essentially as a study of human behaviour, especially emphasizing the individualistic and natural affinity of incentive-driven behaviour and self-interest exhibited by independents within the larger context of the state.

We can relate the government or state to the elite class or ‘ruling party’, where it is “less numerous, performs all political functions, monopolizes power and enjoys the advantages that power brings”, with “a manner that is now more or less legal, now more or less arbitrary and violent,” (Gaetano Mosca, 1939).

The incentive of a politician in the current social context is predominantly that of power and to get re-elected, rather than higher values and concern for the public which is accepted as the preferred belief, or those of nationalism and nation-building that were prevalent say, at the time of the Independence movement. We receive, as a result, policies that appeal to the larger sentiment, the morality question quite out of the picture.

We can understand the relationship between political leaders and utilization of public economic resources for policy making with Milton Friedman's theory, where he compares how resources would be economized depending on who they belong to, and on whom they are being spent.

In the case of policy implementation, government individuals would be spending money that neither belongs to them, nor has any benefit on their economic condition. Thus, this money would only serve to seek private incentives and, in most cases, not the larger interest.

		On Whom Money is Spent	
		Yourself	Someone Else
Whose Money is Spent	Yours	Economize and Seek Highest Value	Economize, but Don't Seek Highest Value
	Someone Else's	Don't Economize, but Seek Highest Value	Don't Economize and Don't Seek Highest Value

THE CITIZENS' POINT OF VIEW

Another issue can be seen on the flip side of contributors to policy making, that is the public, or the majority group. Since it must be true that not all groups within this majority have an equal contribution, opportunity, or voice in this process, the interest of a specific influential community or group would be best expressed as compared to others, with the assumption of natural self-interest, ofcourse.

The purpose of a perfect pluralistic society where all diverse interests are expressed is thus not fulfilled in real practice, and culminates in an eternal struggle of classes.

A further analysis of this phenomenon can be done through the principles of asymmetric information distribution. Akerlof illustrated the theory with reference to an imbalance of information possessed by buyers and sellers of a particular commodity, which ultimately leads to “market failure”. Here, the information of whether the quality of that product is good or bad is irrelevant to its market price, and stays with the seller. The consumer will thus neither be able to, according to him, extract the true value of the product nor the expected value.

We can relate this concept within the public as well, where distribution of information and resources available to attain this information, that is general awareness and policy education, across different communities of people is askew. This is generally the case with most capitalist societies, especially with India, where the impact of education, news and awareness is largely unequal. What we see is the birth of groups within a public that would not perhaps have much interest in the policy making process at all, becoming instead merely a voting bloc to fuel the incentives of politicians that were talked about earlier.

This can even occur with the richer levels of society, who become special interest groups that may fund political parties for personal monetary profit of politicians or otherwise, and as a result their interests are favoured over others.

A similar scenario can be identified within the larger bureaucratic economy, where policymakers and government officials hold more knowledge of policies and issues than the average citizen who will, in the long run, not derive any benefits.

An interesting analysis of the behaviour of individuals towards policy issues can lead us to believe that the public will not really hold much of an opinion or contribution to the actual process of policy design, not only because politicians are driven by private incentives, but through a simple cost-benefit analysis.

Statistically, it is virtually impossible for a single person’s opinions or ideas to be reflected in national policies, of course except in some cases like that of lobbyists or extremely influential people. Thus, the interests of an individual are unlikely to be reflected in policies, not even when they would have perfect information about the particular issue at hand, the plan of action as well as its political background. The cost of obtaining this enormous amount of information is much greater than the benefits that one would receive from this effort, as the individual’s concerns will most likely not even be expressed at a further stage.

This leads the average citizen into a state of rational ignorance, where they would not derive any benefit from first educating themselves of the issue, and then attempting to be an active part of the policy making process, because the final outcome would unlikely be altered by this solitary effort. The average citizen, therefore, does not particularly have any incentive to participate in this policy-making process, even if it was possible for each individual to contribute.

This could be different in the case of communities of groups, however, who have a defined political goal and are adamant to achieve these. We notice that, in these cases, even if every member is not in the state of perfect information, but these common interests are present across a very large number of people, then they are likely to contribute and participate in the policy process. Their ideas and concerns will likely dominate, perhaps due to the polarisation of ideas in this case where there are a phenomenally large number of individuals.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER EVALUATION

The main ideas or conclusions that we can derive from the above analysis of inclinations of different groups towards public policy and the policy-making process can be summarized as follows:

- The primary incentive of politicians is the natural tendency of self-interest, where election to a position is the motivation for introduction of policies, rather than policy ideation being the objective of election to that particular position.
- The average citizen would neither contribute nor be an active part of the policymaking process unless possibly they are part of an organized group struggle about which they are passionate.

These conclusions lead to a confusing collection of forces that come into force, acting as the motivation behind the type of policies that eventually become effective in any state. There are thus conflicting ideas in the field of welfare economics as to how incentives should be aligned while public policies are being formulated in order to bring about economic and social prosperity.

A probable way of doing this could be to introduce a more participative democracy where there is a more diverse set of representatives at the centre such that there is more motive for the public to be involved in political processes. A more integrated government could perhaps dissolve the separation between the two groups where the government is not an elite-controlled or out of reach entity. This could even be achieved to some extent by remodelling voting systems. There is no perfect model or strategy but the “proportional voting system” comes quite close to the above ideals, where there is a range of relatively diverse elected representatives as compared to other voting systems; there is much less concentration of power too. A more fair and unbiased dissemination of political education could further aid this cause.

Aligning politicians’ interests with higher values apart from private incentives such as those of collective socio-economic growth or national reformation could lead to more socially-oriented policies with more holistic coverage, which do not only cater to majority public sentiment but also looks at a broader, more far-reaching perspective. This solution, although ideal, is possibly almost impossible to implement in reality, an area where economists and social scientists have yet to figure out a way where there is a balance of government and public interests that benefit the state as a whole. One where the motive of self-interest is, not abolished (that would be quite unfeasible), but diluted so that the bigger picture of social welfare can be painted.

In some ways this has been achieved, where the government uses its power of taxes, subsidies and regulations to monitor the country’s welfare. In other ways however, this power has, more often than not, been misused for the achievement of personal intentions.

The need of the hour, hence, before any policy can be designed, is to not only aim for public actions to be directed towards social well-being, but to also consciously evaluate where the motives of policymakers are administered.

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