



# Public Policymaking in America

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Public policymaking is difficult to describe. The process is obscure, at best, and at its worst it seems underhanded. This is the nature of politics, and politics for many people has negative connotations. You do not have to appreciate politics — perhaps it is even better to be critical or at least wary of it — but you do have to understand it to teach public policy education.

Why learn how public policy is made? Before we can educate people about an issue, we have to know who needs to be educated about a particular issue and whether the time is right. We also need to anticipate resource needs and give ourselves enough time to choose a suitable teaching method. Understanding how public policy is made can give us precious lead time and it can help us decide when not to attempt public policy education.

We can make public policymaking easier to understand by breaking the system into parts small enough to study. By understanding the pieces, it is easier to understand the whole. Another way is to cut out the details and look only at the structure, or the main activity, to see how the system operates; then, we try to add details.

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Modeling is a modern word that describes these methods of gaining analytical power. Policymaking models are simplified descriptions of complex, real-world events that highlight significant features of political life and thus clarify events that might otherwise be obscure or confusing. These models are on the policymaker’s formal agenda. If the preceding sequence of activities has been accomplished, the groundwork for this final stage has been laid, and the chances of a successful outcome for the advocates will have been maximized.

## Activities of the Opponents

This model is unique because it recognizes the important role that opposition forces play in making public policy. Arising at any stage of the

policymaking process, opponents follow a series of steps that parallel those of the policy advocates:

- Emergence of opposition,
- Formulation of a counterproposal,
- Identification of authorities,
- Presentation of counterproposals,
- Expansion of the opposition, and
- Presentation of the proposal.

## Final Stages in the Policymaking Process

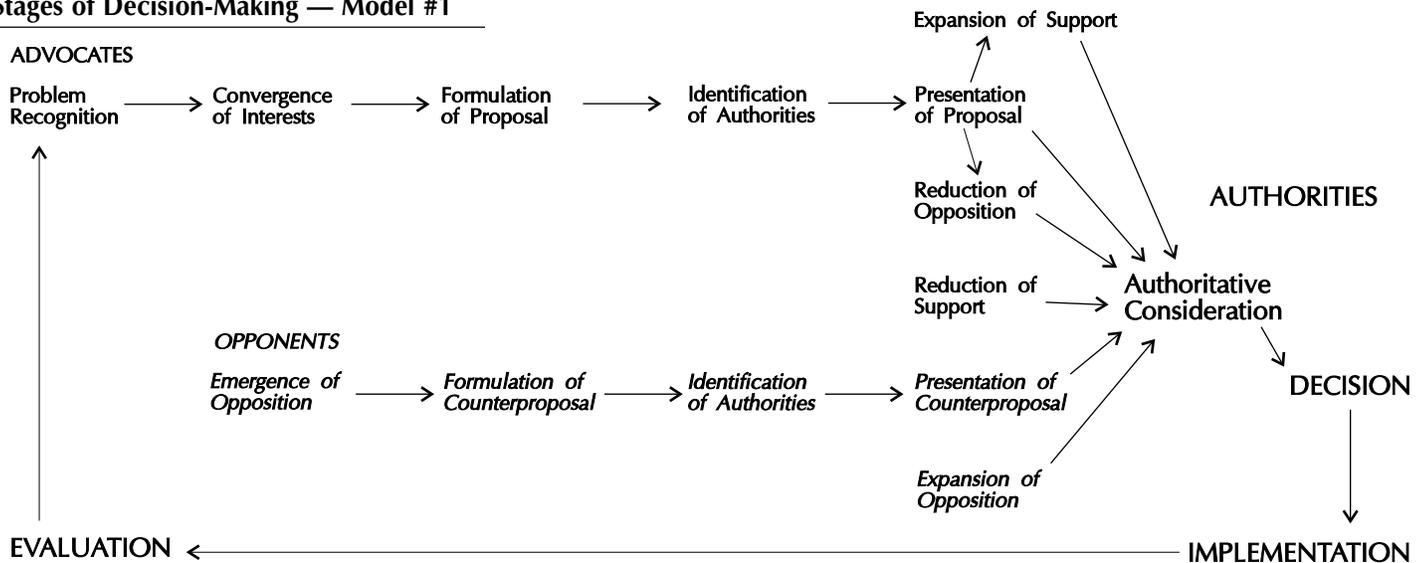
The final stages in the policymaking process are (1) authoritative decision, (2) implementation, and (3) evaluation.

**Authoritative Decision.** Once a public issue (problem) reaches the formal agenda, the relevant government authorities deliberate and then make a final decision. Numerous outcomes are possible: the authorities can adopt the advocates’ proposal, the opponents’ counterproposal, or a compromise; or they can refuse to take action and thereby preserve the status quo.

**Implementation.** After the formal decision has been made, established (or newly created) government entities implement the decision. A new routine may result from the decision; new regulations may be mandated; and enforcement procedures may be developed.

**Evaluation.** After a new policy is implemented, advocates, opponents, or other “interested parties” begin to consider the consequences of the decision and its implementation. At this point, the final stage of the policymaking process has begun. Either through formal means such as data analysis or through informal means such as citizen reaction, evaluating a policy reveals its success, failure, or the need for modification. If a problem is observed in a particular policy, the “stages” begin again.

## Stages of Decision-Making — Model #1



## “Triangle and Clusters” Models of Public Policymaking

According to some observers, American public policy is the result of group interaction. Individuals have little impact on policymaking, it is argued, except as they take action through their membership groups. Furthermore, groups win success for their preferred policy alternative (and political power) on the basis of their size, political effectiveness, and financial resources. Two “group” models of public policymaking are described here.

### The Iron Triangle

Several decades ago, an observer of public policy developed the metaphor of the “Iron Triangle” to describe how agricultural policy was made. According to this model, the three points of power in the agricultural policy triangle are:

- *The Executive* — the secretary of agriculture, administrators of the USDA agencies, and the director of the budget;
- *The Congress* — the chairmen of the congressional agriculture and appropriations committees; and

- *The Farm Lobby* — the leaders of a few key farm organizations and relatively new commodity groups.

According to this perspective, within this triangle of power, the nation’s agricultural policy is debated; the legislative agenda is determined; administrative regulations are announced and implemented; and programs are administered. Over time, this model has proven relevant to other areas of public policymaking, such as housing, medicine, transportation, and the military.

### Power Clusters

More recently, Ogden (1971) used the term “web of power” to describe the increased number of actors playing significant roles in the public policy arena. Expanding on the idea of the “Iron Triangle,” Ogden developed the clusters model to describe the multiple groups that affect policy from formulation through evaluation and revision.

Power clusters exist in every major area of public policy (agriculture, education, and defense are prominent examples). Power clusters come into being as related groups, acting independently or joined together, influence public policy that affects their

interests and concerns at the local, state, and national levels.

### Elements of a Power Cluster

All power clusters contain the same elements:

- Administrative agencies,
- Legislative committees,
- Special-interest groups,
- Professionals,
- Attentive public, and
- Latent public

### Behavior of Power Clusters

Five patterns of behavior characterize the relationships within each power cluster and help shape the policymaking process:

- Close personal and institutional ties — key people communicate frequently.
- Active communication among cluster elements — intense communication characterizes the key actors in the cluster at varying times in the policymaking process.
- Internal conflicts among competing interests — although relationships within clusters are generally friendly, the various members may hold opposing views and frequently be in conflict with one another.
- Internal cluster decision-making — most policy decisions are made within the various clusters.

- Well-developed internal power structure — within a cluster, key leaders are well known and consulted on all major activities that affect their interests.

## Kings and Kingmakers (An Elite Model of Public Policymaking)

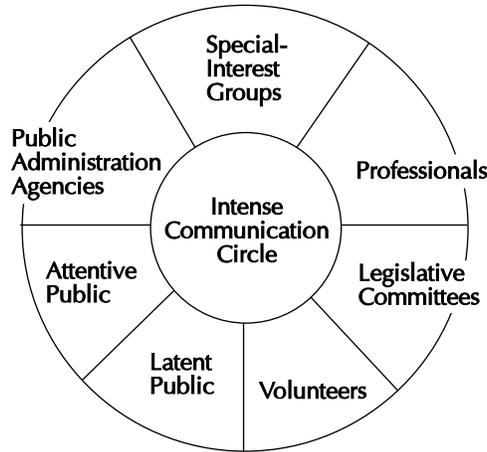
The “Kings and Kingmakers” model of public policymaking depicts power and policy as being organized in every community (or state or the nation) in a pyramid, as illustrated to the right (Flinchbaugh, 1988).

The *Kingmakers* occupy the top level of the public policymaking hierarchy. They have the financial and intellectual resources to influence and even determine public policy. Their power is often “invisible” to the public. Nevertheless, from their position behind the scenes, they may determine who gets elected, which items appear on the public policy agenda, and which die a sudden death.

The *Kings*, or clearly visible policymakers, are next in the hierarchy. Kings are the elected and appointed leaders in government and organizations and they have a strong and direct interest in public policy. The Kings are elected or appointed, with the blessing of the Kingmakers, and work in close consultation with them.

The *Actives* are the “joiners,” or

## Power Clusters — Model #3



civic-minded members of a community, state, or nation, who are immediately below the Kings in the policymaking hierarchy. This group includes the active members and leaders in service clubs, special-interest groups, and national organizations, like the League of Women Voters and the Farm Bureau.

Below the Actives are the *Interested Citizens*, who are fairly well informed on community, state, and national issues. But, unlike the Actives, the Interested Citizens are neither vocal nor frequent participants in the policymaking process.

The *Apathetic Citizens* are the largest group (at the bottom of the hierarchy). This level represents the “don’t-give-a-darn bunch.” Only under unusual circumstances does a public issue develop that arouses their interest or provokes them to become more active and involved.

how public policy is made. It is primarily concerned with who has power to make decisions and shape policy. As with other elite models, it does not show that all policy will be against the masses or contrary to public opinion, but that responsibility for the general welfare rests with a few influential persons in the community. Mass opinion is influenced by the powerful elites; communication flows downward; and the public thus has only an indirect influence on public policy.

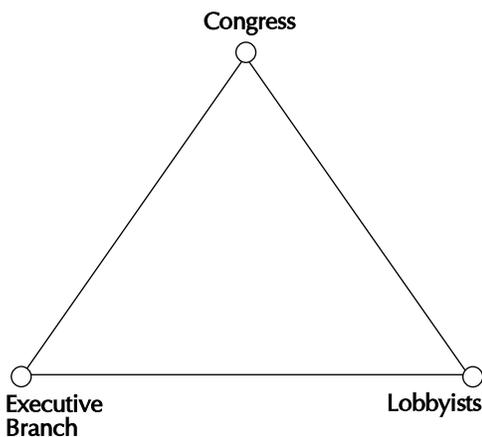
## Comparing Public Policymaking Models

Models of public policymaking are useful tools to help clarify our thinking about politics and public policy. These models also help us:

- Identify important aspects of policy problems;
- Focus on significant features of political life;
- Differentiate between important and unimportant events in the policymaking process; and
- Suggest explanations for public policy and predict its consequences.

Policy educators will find it useful to be familiar with these four models of policymaking because each model offers a different perspective on how public policy is made. Some educators are likely to prefer one model over

## The Iron Triangle — Model #2

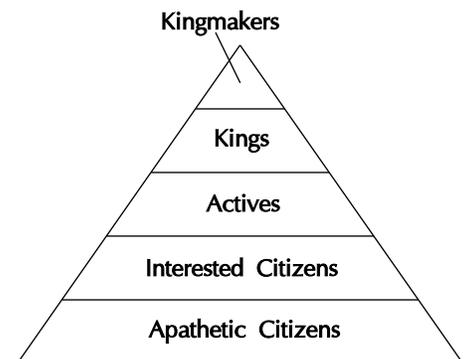


## Focus of the Kings and Kingmakers Model

According to the Kings and Kingmakers model, the public policy agenda is set by the Kingmakers and determined by the Kings and Actives. Public policy education will be most successful when targeted toward the Kings, who will, in turn, impart the educational message to the Kingmakers (above) and the Active Citizens (below).

This model focuses on a select few in society to understand and explain

## Kings and Kingmakers — Model #4



## Key characteristics to consider in selecting a public policymaking model.

Model	Focus	Use	Limitations
Kings and Kingmakers	Who has the power? (Elites)	Describes the role of leaders; reveals hidden power-brokers who influence public policy.	May overstate the role of elites; may understate the role of groups and the multidimensional nature of policymaking; can be hard to identify the elites over time.
Triangle and Power Clusters	Who has the power? (Groups)	Describes the central role of groups; allows for incrementalism	May overstate the group role and understate the role of public officials and institutions; may overlook environmental factors.
Stages of Decision-making	What are the regularly occurring stages in the decision-making process?	Describes the process or system; multiple decision points, fragmentation of power.	May overlook changes in the social or political environment; content of the process may be overlooked.

another, but no one model says it all. In focusing on certain aspects of the policy process, of necessity, other aspects are omitted.

By comparing the characteristics of each model, the focus, use, and limitations of each become more apparent. You can use such comparisons before designing public policy programs to help accomplish the above and to inform the participants about the public policy process itself.

Any one of these models can give you increased analytical power, as well as improved ability to understand and communicate about the public policy situation.

The other publications available in this series are:

*IP-18 Introduction to Public Policy Education*

*IP-20 Public Policy: Facts, Myths, and Values*

*IP-21 Directions for Public Policy Programming*

### References

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