Foundations of American Policy

by

John Lande

One of the general assumptions of our political system is that individuals in society act based on self interest. However, this assumption does not capture the entire range of human behavior. People have interests that are more complicated and that range beyond the self. The other dimension is an individual's "public interest," or the interest of the entire community. Public policy fills the space between these two sets of interests. Individuals may not want to pay to finance a particular service, like garbage collection for an entire town, but he or she still benefits from having it available.

Public policy attempts to satisfy two distinct sets of interests: self-interest and public interests. Policy is made in the basic conflict between the two. To understand these statements we have to ask two simple questions**.** The first important question is; where does the conflict in policy debate come from? The second is; where is the power for policy change located? Answering these questions will help explain how policy is created by examining the circumstances surrounding policy creation. They also explain the source of conflict in policy making, and how representatives of different interests wield power to accomplish their aims in the creation of policy initiatives.

Understanding that policy is a result of this fundamental conflict in American government, it becomes important to understand who has the power to cause change and affect the way the gap of interests is bridged. The public, referring to all of the individuals who operate within a society, ultimately creates the bridge between public and self interests. The public fulfills this role because it is capable of not only formulating the consensus necessary to define a public interest, but it also has the resources to implement policy.

To understand the policy making process it is first necessary to understand the market model of social organization.[1] This model is frequently relied on to describe our society. It holds the basis for decision making will be derived from the rational pursuit of self interest by individuals within society. Individuals will take whatever action produces the most benefit. A good illustration of this principle at work, and how it regulates the market, is a typical bazaar, or open air market. Here buyers and sellers haggle with each other trying to maximize their benefit compared to cost. Buyers want products for the lowest possible price, while sellers want to maximize their profits. However, sellers recognize that if their prices are too high, then they risk losing customers to other sellers willing to sell the same or similar product at a lower price. At the same time, while buyers are searching for the lowest price possible, they also recognize that if they demand a price too low, then someone else may buy the product before they do because of the willingness to pay more. This interplay is what creates a fair, or equilibrium price. This model, where individuals rationally pursue their own self interest, is called market theory. It states that individuals will pursue their self interest and in doing so will create a fair outcome for everyone.[2]

But there is another element to this model that should be considered. We need to consider society not just in terms of the market, but rather as the "polis".[3] Polis refers to the particular society or community that is being analyzing. The polis exemplifies what we will later refer to as "the public interest".[4] The public interest is the interest of society

[1] Stone, 8
[2] Stone, 8
[3] Stone, 20
[4] Stone, 20

at large. This is a necessary element of any model used to analyze policy, because individuals will always have a vested interest in their particular community.[5]

To illustrate this idea of "public interest" let us return to our example of the bazaar. In the bazaar everyone pursues their self interest, buying and selling goods. Each individual's interest will vary, since every individual has his own set of concerns. However, the one interest that every person in the bazaar shares is the existence of the bazaar. Both buyers and sellers need the bazaar because it serves as a central location for buyers and sellers to meet and exchange goods and services. This is a service that every individual agrees is necessary for the community, because without the bazaar people would not come and no profit would be made. In our example, it is easy to see what the public interest is, or the aggregate interest of all members of the community. The public interest is in the preservation of bazaar, since its existence is necessary for people to pursue their self interest, buying and selling goods.

The public interest is difficult to define because it is the result of a consensus within the community. Defining consensus can be difficult. Individuals have a concept of it, but it is difficult to articulate, especially when individuals in society or the market can influence others to change their conduct even though it may not be in one's interest to do so. Nevertheless there is always the persistent notion of public interest or some broader understanding of what is best for society as a whole. Public interest works in conjunction with self interest. Stone explains, "[We] want good schools and clean air, perhaps, but also lower taxes and the right to burn [our] trash."[6] This difference between public interest and self interest is what creates the special problem of creating policy in the polis,

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[5] Stone, 20-21
[6] Stone, 21

or community. If individuals desire two opposite ends, then these problems become "commons" problems. These commons problems emerge when private interest must be sacrificed for public interest, or the "greater good." To use our simple example again, while everyone wants the bazaar to exist, individuals may be reluctant to pay for the space to rent it out because they will gain little added personal value for the expense. This is the central point of the quotation from Stone, that individuals have two different sets of interests.

To better illustrate this point of a problem of the commons, imagine a pasture of grass used to graze cattle. Also imagine that the particular pasture is capable of supporting only 100 cattle. An individual herdsman has an interest in grazing 100 cattle on the pasture. Any more than that and the cattle will trample the grass which will prevent it from growing back for the next year; any fewer than 100 and the herdsman will not be taking full advantage of the pasture. Now imagine that there are two herdsmen, both with cattle herds. In each individual case the herdsman has an interest in grazing 100 cattle on the pasture since that is the maximum return possible. That is the self interest of the herdsman. However, if both pursue that strategy, then the pasture will be completely destroyed.

The herdsmen have a public interest in the preservation of the pasture. So the herdsmen agree to graze only 50 cattle each in order to preserve the pasture. However, the first herdsman decides to graze one more cow than the other, bringing his total to 51. He adds one cow because he thinks, "What damage can one more cow really do?" The other herdsman, now one cow down, decides to add another cow to his herd to stay competitive. Both continue to add cattle to maximize their advantage until the pasture is

entirely depleted. If either herdsman is asked why he did not adhere to the agreement he will simply say, "I could not trust the other herdsman to not add cattle and deplete the pasture, so I might as well take advantage of it while I still can."

This is called the tragedy of the commons;[7] in the case of the herdsmen, the self interest and the public interest conflict. The self interest of the herdsmen is to graze more cattle than the competition. The public interest is in the preservation of the pasture, but unless there is some mechanism to enforce the agreement between the two herdsmen then there is no way of preserving this interest because of the self interest of the herdsman. It is very difficult to build in mechanisms that bridge the gap between self interest and public interest. This is why the way the problem of self interest and public interest is defined will shape its eventual solution.[8] It is necessary to look at how the public and private interests are defined in the public realm to gain a better understanding of ways to bridge the divide between the two sets of interests.

In America, there are certain policy institutions that seem to change very little over time. These institutions are under the control of a few powerful policy elites, who seem to exercise complete control over a particular policy domain. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) illustrates this point very well. The regulation of airlines involves a complex and technical set of issues. Few Americans can even approach having the knowledge necessary to understand the complexities involved. As a result, regulation falls to certain experts within the airline industry. However, these experts frequently have ties to particular airline companies or manufacturers. In a sense, these experts are the

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[7] Stone, 22

[8] Stone, 33 Stone explains that in the polis policy is a result of individuals arguing over interests. As a result, the group that is eventually able to make its argument either the loudest or most compelling will win the day.

elites of the airline industry because their authority is nearly complete. Based on this model, policy regarding airlines would seem to be solely in the hands of a particular elite set of officials.

But this model is not the complete picture. There are "policy elites," or individuals who have complete control over a particular policy area like airline regulation, but their control is neither complete nor indefinite.[9] In fact to assume that there are policy elites in control misses some important foundations of the policy process in America.[10] These policy elites are not created out of thin air. Instead they are created as the result of powerful ideas or movements within society. It is the public that creates these policy elites, such as the earlier example of the FAA, and gives them their "policy monopoly."[11]

When one of these monopolies is created, it is a form of policy "equilibrium," because in some sense the issue has been settled. This monopoly will exert control over the particular area with which it has been entrusted. But even when one of these monopolies is created, it does not last forever. It is necessary to also look at the "decay" of a particular policy monopoly.[12] While a monopoly may be complete, and have complete control in a particular field, it cannot remain that way in an open society. Over time, the control over the policy will fade as the public begins to pay more and more attention to the monopoly. This rise in public attention will gradually cause a re-evaluation of a particular policy monopoly.[13] This relates back to one of the fundamental

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[9] Baumgartner and Jones, 3-4
[10] Baumgartner and Jones, 3-4
[11] Baumgartner and Jones, 4 Baumgartner and Jones use the term "policy monopoly" to refer to the idea of elite controlled policy that I referred to above. This terms means that there is a set group of individuals or interests that exercise complete control over a particular policy issue
[12] Baumgartner and Jones, 3-4
[13] Baumgartner and Jones, 4

questions in public policy, "Who actually controls public policy?" Baumgartner and Jones argue that that power resides with the public and that in a way policy elites merely tend to the status quo, allowing for incremental change, without dramatically changing the policy landscape.

It is possible to use an empirical method to evaluate the rise and fall of three distinct policy monopolies: the nuclear industry, the pesticide industry, and the tobacco industry.[14] It is important to first understand that certain conditions will not always trigger a policy response. For example, simply because one citizen thinks there should be a stop sign at a particular corner does not mean that the city will immediately install it. But when one citizen bands together with a thousand other citizens of a particular town, then they may have the power to either convince existing city council members or elect new ones who agree with them. In their seminal policy text, Baumgartner and Jones explain that "social conditions do no automatically generate policy actions. Arguments must be made and accepted that a given problem can be solved by government before a social actions becomes a public policy problem."[15] Until the citizen who wants the stop sign can convince enough people that a stop sign is necessary, nothing is likely to happen because one person does not have the authority or resources to put up the sign.

Of course this simple example misses one key element of policy making. In addition to the public taking notice, the government must also have the ability to solve a particular social problem.[16] People must know that government actually has the power to implement a particular solution. When we are considering a stop sign, the answer is easy; when we consider an earthquake it becomes more complex. Clearly there is no way for

[14] Baumgartner and Jones, 4
[15] Baumgartner and Jones, 27
[16] Baumgartner and Jones, 27

the government to prevent the earthquake, but to what extent are delays of relief aid the fault of government, and how drastic can the effects of a delay be on those affected by a natural disaster? The point that Baumgartner and Jones make is that not every social issue ultimately becomes a policy question for government. Instead we need to ask why some social movements become public policy questions and why some do not. In other words, where does the power for change in the policy arena come from?[17]

One way of looking at it is that only those social problems that are linked to a solution that can be implemented by government are capable of reaching the level of public policy.[18] This is where the earlier idea of public interest becomes important. Only when there is a public consensus can a particular problem be addressed. Prior to that, an individual's interest in a matter simply is not enough to cause a change.

This process is not a mechanical or simple one. Instead, it is subject to differing views about what is and is not the right solution for a problem. Policy issues that reach this level of importance are subject to redefinition and argumentation as different groups vie for control over a particular policy issue.[19] Issues that make it to the public level of attention are then subjected to criticism and debate.

Studying the rise of nuclear power illustrates this point very well. When nuclear power was first discovered it was extremely popular. It was seen as "modern" and a means for dealing with energy shortages. People thought that it was going to be the answer for the energy demands of the next century, by making energy "too cheap to meter."[20] During this wave of good-will during the late 1940s and early 1950s, private

[17] Baumgartner and Jones, 29
[18] Baumgartner and Jones, 29
[19] Baumgartner and Jones, 29
[20] Baumgartner and Jones, 61-64

power interests were able to gain access to the information to build nuclear reactors. This information had previously been under the complete control of the federal government.

As years passed, the energy industry was able to build an increased variety of nuclear plants, with little government oversight due to the demands of the public, and the positive image that nuclear power had. This initially positive image is what allowed the nuclear industry to create a strong policy monopoly over the regulation and construction of nuclear plants. After this burst of public interest, public concern over nuclear reactors began to wane through most of the 1960s.[21]

In the early 1970s, this sentiment began to change. Articles were published that indicated nuclear power was not safe. Furthermore, even though many Americans valued nuclear energy, they were still leery of living next to it and unsure about what the reactors were actually doing.

During the 1970s, public attention was once again focused on the nuclear industry, but this time it was in a more negative light. Regulation of the industry began to increase, and soon the regulatory landscape changed. Regulators went to Congress and got increased authority as public apprehension continued to grow over these reactors.[22] At the same time that the public again became concerned with nuclear power, Congress also began to take notice. Baumgartner and Jones note a correlation between the increase in negative public opinion toward nuclear power with the increase in not only the hearings in Congress on nuclear power, but the negative tone of those hearings.[23] Once hearings and public opinion shifted, the old policy monopoly of industry insiders was

[21] Baumgartner and Jones, 60-64
[22] Baumgartner and Jones, 71-72
[23] Baumgartner and Jones, 65, 75

destroyed. Regulation went from a small group of industry insiders to a much larger group of government officials with more oversight.

After the initial burst of interest in nuclear power, the industry faded from the public eye; this allowed a few policy elites to take control of the industry's regulation.[24] This status quo remained the same with only incremental changes from the late 1950s to the early 1970s. In the 1970s, there was another burst of interest, as opponents of nuclear power were able to gain enough support to trigger a broader movement in favor of public regulation of nuclear power.

This example illustrates the second of the two key questions in policy analysis; where does the power for change come from? Baumgartner and Jones argue that the power for change is in the hands of the public. While policy elites may have control over a particular policy monopoly, control is based on the institutions that the public created during its last burst of interest. Only when an interest reaches a critical mass of public involvement will people be motivated enough to want to cause a change. It is at that point that policy makers will take notice and reorganize the policy monopoly. Existing policy elites will try to fight that change, but in the end they will ultimately lose and either be incorporated into the new policy domain, or be removed entirely. Either public interest can build up over time, as more people take notice of a problem, or it can happen all at once during a "trigger event."[25] In either case, the power for change resides in the public sectors, specifically the unelected individuals that make up our society.

We can find evidence of this process in Rachel Carson's book Silent Spring, which provides a case study for understanding the policy discussion. The 1950s and

[24] Baumgartner and Jones, 75
[25] Baumgartner and Jones, 137 A trigger event is a particular event that is so compelling that it causes public awareness to rise almost immediately.

1960s saw an explosion in agricultural production in the United States. The use of advanced pesticides, fertilizers, and herbicides allowed for a "green revolution." Agricultural yields increased dramatically because losses due to weeds and insects were dramatically reduced; between 1940 and 1970 alone average yields increased three-fold.[26] Increased production of grain allowed for more livestock, which would help meet the food demands of the post-World War II world.

For many, the advances in agriculture were a great success. Chemicals such as DDT, an extremely potent pesticide, were used in large quantities to eradicate pests that had once decimated crops.[27] When DDT was discovered, it was heralded as a miracle, and its creator was given a Nobel Prize. The chemical was sprayed on everything from soldiers, in an effort to combat lice, to farm fields to deal with pests. No one suspected that the chemical would have harmful, long term effects.

Misconception continued until unusual effects began to surface. A number of warning signs existed that there was something wrong with the natural ecosystems in the United States.[28] One of the most compelling examples began in the northeastern United States when large numbers of robins began to die. Their fate, it turned out, was related to the fate of the Dutch elm tree.

Large elm trees grew throughout the northeastern natural forests. In and around many cities, elms were planted in clusters. Elms in nature are rarely in clusters, and when

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[26] "Pesticide Regulation, 1971 Legislative Chronology." CQ Electronic Library, CQ Congress Collection, catn69-0008167712. Originally published in *Congress and the Nation, 1969-1972*, vol. 3 (Washington: CQ Press, 1973). http://library.cqpress.com/congress/catn69-0008167712 (accessed November 9, 2007).
[27] Rachel Carson, Silent Spring, (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962), 20 DDT stands for dichloro-diphenyl-trichloro-ethane and is an extraordinarily stable compound that is very deadly when mixed with an oil and then applied in a spraying process; which is how it was frequently applied.
[28] Carson, 105

they are there are great distances between each clump. Such clustering would not have been a problem, however, had it not been for Dutch elm disease.

This disease, which is actually a fungus, attacks the elm tree and eventually kills it. The fungus is transported from tree to tree by elm bark beetles. These beetles burrow into the bark of dead elm trees and become contaminated with the spores of the fungus, which the beetles transport to healthy elm trees. This method of spreading, in natural environments, would not have posed a threat to elm trees since they are spread out over great distances, and an infection in one tree would not likely spread to another. But when the trees were clumped, as they were in cities and towns around the northeastern United States, the fungus spread quickly and easily.[29] In response, city councils throughout the region began spraying large quantities of DDT, as much as 23 pounds per acre,[30] on the elms to stamp out the elm bark beetle.[31]

While the chemical effectively killed off the beetle and prevented the spread of Dutch elm disease, the chemical application of DDT also coated the leaves and bark of the trees. This film could not be washed away with water, so when the leaves fell off the trees in autumn, the chemical decomposed with the leaves into the topsoil.[32]

It was not readily apparent to anyone that this presented a problem until a professor at Michigan State University noticed a change in the robin population. During the spring and summer of 1954, dead robins began to appear throughout Michigan State's campus. The mechanisms behind the death of the robins soon became apparent. When the

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[29] Carson, 105
[30] Twenty-three pounds per acre of pesticide is an enormous amount. To give perspective, a typical agricultural use of pesticide will involve quantities on the scale of one to two ounces per acre. Source: M.J. Renz, "#5 Calculating Pesticide Amounts for Broadcast Applications" Extension Pesticide Applicator Training Series A-614 (Winter 2006):1-2 http://cahe.nmsu.edu/pubs/_a/A-614.pdf
[31] Carson, 107
[32] Carson, 108

leaves coated with DDT decomposed, they became the principle source of food for earthworms. As the worms fed on the contaminated leaves, they gradually built up a stock of DDT in their bodies. When the robins returned, they fed on earthworms and absorbed the DDT into their own bodies gradually killing themselves as they fed.[33]

But the chemical did more than just kill the robins. Those that survived were often sterilized. Throughout the campus, there were many robins that had built nests but not laid eggs. Those that laid eggs never saw them hatch. One particular robin waited 21 days atop her nest when the normal incubation period is 13 days.[34] The link between DDT and robin deaths became clear. Despite spraying massive quantities of DDT over all of its trees, the campus still lost 86% of its elms to the fungus. This was one of the first examples of the harmful and not readily apparent effects of DDT.

But what was worse than the destruction of the robin population was the disruption of the ecological equilibrium in nature. The use of pesticides kills off particular insect species. What was often ignored with the application of these chemicals was that certain insects served as a population check on other species. In the national parks in the United States, spraying was conducted to reduce the number of pests that harmed the trees. However, what no one realized was that many of the "pests" were predators of the spider mite, which feeds on plants. When the spraying killed off most of the mite's natural predators, the mite was free to thrive in the good rich environment of our national parks. The mite dispersed throughout Yellowstone and caused many of the trees to turn yellow, then brown, and then lose their leaves all together.[35]

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[33] Carson, 108
[34] Carson, 108
[35] Carson, 253

The most dangerous of all of Carson's findings, however, was that pesticides had found their way into drinking water. She points to a particular study done by the United States Fish and Wildlife service. The study found that warm blooded mammals (i.e. humans) store any harmful DDT in tissue. This means the human body, instead of ridding itself of a deadly poison stores it in tissue that makes up our organs and muscles.[36] There was also a great risk of pesticides traveling beyond their application site into unconnected ecosystems. In the same study researchers looked at spraying of a forest with DDT near a stream in Idaho. The stream and fish tested positive for the chemical. Even more disturbing was the presence of the chemical upstream of the initial test location. Not only was the chemical found upstream, but the second test site was separated by a high waterfall. The presence of the chemical there was likely due to transportation of groundwater, meaning DDT could be present in almost everyone's drinking water.

Carson uses examples like these, and others, to illustrate the link between man-made chemicals and natural harm. She explains that the ecological systems are complex, and that seemingly unrelated systems can really be linked together through an intricate web of life. This was a concept that was unknown to people prior to the 1960s and 1970s. It just did not occur to people that their self interest in using pesticides to get rid of irritating insects conflicted with their public interest of having clean drinking water or natural wildlife.

Silent Spring established a causal link between man-made substances and harmful effects both in nature and in humans. Many people did not understand the complexity of natural systems, and therefore it was difficult to see how the application of pesticides on such a large scale could be harmful. This book brought not only the issue of pesticide use

[36] Carson, 255

to the forefront, but also environmental issues in general. It was the beginning of a broader movement to change the way that humans interact with the environment. Carson explains that it is in an individual's self interest to change the way pesticides are used. She connected the idea of environmental harm to people's calculation of self interest by showing the ways that pesticide use can harm both nature and us. Her book helped bridge the gap between an individual's self interest and their public interest. By establishing the connection between pesticide use, people began to understand why pesticides could not be used without limits.

With this theoretical framework in mind we return to the initial questions posed in this paper: "What is the fundamental conflict that creates policy problems," and, "Who has the power to cause change in the way that conflict between interests is resolved?" Public policy is an effort to solve the problems created by self interest and public interest.[37] With this conflict in mind, to understand how policy is made we need to look at which individuals have the power to affect change. These individuals or groups should be the focus because they can shape the circumstances in which policy is created.

Silent Spring provides the case study for analyzing the principles discussed earlier. Our first task is to determine the source of conflict in Silent Spring. Since conflict comes down to self interest competing against what we have termed the public interest, it is necessary to identify the interests at work. Carson wrote Silent Spring to convey to the public the problems that were being caused by the indiscriminate spraying of pesticides on agricultural land throughout the country. The book was an effort to create a causal link between human actions and environmental degradation so that people could identify what was going wrong. The book, then, was focused on the conflict between the competing

[37] Stone, 5

interests of those spraying the pesticides and those who felt the harmful effects of the pesticides.

Pesticide use, at its basic level, represents an individual maximizing his self interest in the short term. If we return to our example of the commons and cattle for a moment we can better illustrate the point. Instead of cattle, imagine a commons that is capable of supporting 100 bushels of wheat. Any more than 100 bushels and the wheat will be so densely packed that aphids will thrive and consume all of the wheat. Any less, and the farmer will not be maximizing his profit. Now imagine that the farmer of that particular commons decides to apply an insecticide to control the aphid population so he can plant more than 100 bushels of wheat. By applying the insecticide he is expanding his ability to raise 100 bushels of wheat to 125 or even 150. Since the aphids will be virtually wiped out by the insecticide, he has eliminated the biggest threat to his wheat production.

This example portrays the individual's interest very well. The farmer has an interest in maximizing his profit by planting more bushels of wheat. But eventually he runs into a limitation based on the size of the land and the density of his wheat crop. Acting based on what is best for him, he uses a pesticide to increase the amount of wheat he can plant in a limited field.

In this scenario there is also an element of public interest. Imagine that the farmer's field is upstream of a town's reservoir, so that all the water drainage from his field ends up in the stream and then in the reservoir. When he applies the pesticide to his wheat, he must do it in a large enough quantity to make sure all of the aphids are killed. In doing so, he inevitably applies more than is necessary. This excess pesticide then drains off of his field into the water supply that flows downstream. He has thus

contaminated his and the town's water supply. He shares the public interest in having clean water, an interest shared by all the inhabitants of his town. The farmer, when pursuing his self interest, has harmed the public interest in having clean water. It is easy to see how a town would share an interest in having a clean water supply.

This simple scenario illustrates the central conflict in Silent Spring. Even though the book does not discuss the commons problems directly, based on the analysis from Stone, Baumgartner, and Jones, the central issue is this conflict between public and self interest. Individual farmers have an interest in maximizing yields, yet they also have an interest in clean drinking water and functioning ecosystems. Carson's book draws the connection between the actions of the self interested and the problems caused to the public interest.

Even in our simple example of the commons, with one farmer and one town, there is an additional level of complexity beyond the conflict between self and public interest. While the town and the farmer have an interest in clean drinking water, and the farmer has an interest in growing the maximum amount of wheat, the town also has an interest in enough food being produced to feed everyone. Imagine the town has a large enough population that 100 bushels of wheat simply will not feed it. At this point there is a problem if the farmer does not use pesticides. If he does not use pesticides, then there will not be enough food to feed the town, but if he does then he will contaminate the drinking water. In this case there is now a self interest for the farmer, a public interest in clean water, and a public interest in having enough food. The last two of the public interests, however, conflict with one another. Therefore, not only is there conflict between the self interest and the public interest, but there is also conflict between the public interests.

It is within the context of these competing interests that individuals must craft policy to address the relevant interests. Public policy results from whatever group is capable of most effectively rallying support to its view. As discussed earlier, this can happen when a "trigger event" occurs that spurs people to act. However, policy questions are often not as easily framed as in the above example. In this case the public interest is easy to identify, but in many cases it is not as clear. Is the public interest best served by having good schools, or in low taxes that will spur economic development? Whichever group is able to elevate its issue to the level of public awareness will most likely be the group that is capable of accomplishing its policy aims.[38]

The change in a particular area of policy comes when the public as a whole takes notice. It is clear that there is another element to this – the question that was just mentioned – "How does a particular issue become a public interest?" An issue must reach a critical mass of interest which means that a broad range of people must be aware that a problem exists. One such example of public interest definition being elevated to the level of public awareness can be seen in the tobacco industry. As more and more negative articles were published about tobacco use,[39] public interest in the potential risks for tobacco grew. As a result, the regulatory environment began to change. Congress held more hearings and more regulations were passed to control how tobacco was marketed.[40]

Public interest in a particular topic will surge as more and more information becomes available about it.[41] Then, one of two things will happen. Public interest will drop because there is no readily apparent government solution, or the government will be

[38] Baumgartner and Jones, 87
[39] Baumgartner and Jones, 87-88
[40] Baumgartner and Jones, 114
[41] Baumgartner and Jones, 75

able to implement a solution and public interest will remain at a high level.[42] From an intuitive standpoint this analysis makes sense, if there is no solution readily available then even a striking event can fade from people's memories. The slow accumulation of information can lead to change if government solutions are readily available. Of course this does not mean that every time the public takes notice to a policy problem and there is a solution readily available that change will happen. It is important to understand that even when an issue is defined and the public reaches a consensus on a solution, it may still take a long time for change to occur. The environmental debate that Silent Spring began in 1962 really did not change policy until the early 1970's. The reasons behind this lag time, or failure, of policy implementation are complex. Issues, for a variety of reasons, may never reach it to the public attention, while at the same time some that do will not stay visible long enough for real change to happen. Regardless, it is important to understand the underlying conflict behind this debate, because it explains the context of policy debate.

Individuals, serving as the orator of a particular issue, can define how that issue is talked about in the public realm.[43] Because this argument centers on the conflict between self interest and public interest, the methods for change must necessarily come from different groups working within society.[44] Because the public interest is a nebulous idea, lacking any real tangible form or definition, it must be articulated by a certain individual or group. This is because "No 'general will' of a community has ever manifested itself without a human being (or group of human beings) who claims to express it…"[45] Stone

[42] Baumgartner and Jones, 88
[43] Stone, 214
[44] Stone, 32
[45] Stone, 214

explains that even though individuals may be able to perceive a public interest, without a particular group or individual to express it, the idea will never take shape and become a policy goal of individuals. While a consensus may be shared by an entire community (such as safe streets after dark), people may have differing opinions on the way to implement this goal. Unless there is a voice that defines the particular issue then it will never take shape. Without a uniting voice, then some of the citizens will try to make streets safe by creating a neighborhood watch, others will advocate the purchase of more street lights, while others will demand more police officers. A government is not likely to have enough resources to implement all of the plans, so they have to pick one.

However, if one individual or group is explaining, or giving voice to a particular issue, who is to say that the way that individual or group is articulating it is correct? The fact is that those who express the particular view have the greatest opportunity to define it precisely how he or she sees fit. This power over issue definition is another way that policy making is complicated. One group or individual may have a vested interest in defining a policy one way while another group has an interest in defining a problem or policy area in another way. This is where the power to cause change in the policy process comes. Whichever group is most successful at creating an image of a particular issue will be the group that will likely prevail. When they have succeeded in creating the image they desire, then the group will be able to motivate public support in favor of a particular solution. Baumgartner and Jones provide examples of this kind of change occurring. When the nuclear power industry was first created, it had a positive image, shaped largely by industry insiders who had an interest in creating this image for nuclear power. With a

positive image, it would be easy to persuade people to buy homes powered by nuclear energy.[46]

To further illustrate this point, let us return to the example of the farmer applying pesticide to his field, and recall the two disparate public interests; clean water and food production. By looking at this example again, it is possible to illustrate the principle of issue definition more clearly. One group, representing the farmers, would pose the issue to community members saying "yes, you need clean water, but we can build a purification plant to solve that, we cannot build a factory to produce more food, surely you do not want your children to starve?" On the other side, an interest group representing ecologists and other community members may say, "But supporting the use of pesticides is supporting putting poison in the water." In both cases the interest groups attempted to define the issue in the most favorable way possible. Surely no one would oppose feeding children? But at the same time, who wants poison in their water? In both cases, the interest groups use highly charged rhetoric as a means of defining a problem. Whichever group is able to persuade more townspeople and create a majority, it is that group which will be able to cause a change in a particular area of policy.

This simple example illustrates all of the main points necessary to understand the problem of the policy process. We see the central conflict in policy making, the tension between the individual self interest and the public interest. In this case it is the interest of the farmer to maximize his profits by applying pesticides. At the same time there is a public interest (interest of the entire community) to have clean water while maintaining sufficient food production. This creates the conflict that was mentioned before, the tension between the public and the private interest. We then see the answer to the second

[46] Baumgartner and Jones, 66

question posed at the beginning, 'Where does the power for change come from?' The farmer by himself is not likely to change since he will be fed and able to buy bottled water no matter what. But when the townspeople are motivated by an interest group or individual, they have the power to affect policy change. But as we can also see, issue definition then becomes difficult.

This problem of issue definition is one of the greatest challenges for those trying to cause change in policy. While the power for change in policy may be apparent it is often difficult to access.[47] The power to change policy resides in the public. But motivating the public to take notice of an issue is very difficult. This issue is compounded when the goal is not only to have the public take interest but take a side. In some cases, a group may succeed in getting the public to take notice, but ultimately fail in getting the public to cause change. That is why Baumgartner and Jones point out that an issue must not only be made aware to the public, but it must also have a solution that government can implement.

In the realm of environmental policy the seminal work, Silent Spring, was an effort by groups to get individuals to take notice of a particularly large problem and offer solutions that were possible for government to implement. The book was an event that triggered a great deal of public attention. Whether the book is viewed as a "trigger event" in itself or just another link in the chain of information on environmental degradation, it is impossible to discount the importance of the book in bringing environmental issues to public attention. Baumgartner and Jones point to Silent Spring as the beginning of an upswing in public attention to the environment.[48]

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[47] Baumgartner and Jones, 66
[48] Baumgartner and Jones, 94 -95

This is not to say that environmental policy is the sole example of the policy process at work. In reality, there are a variety of policy domains ranging from healthcare to immigration that encompass a broad range of goals and conflicts. Even though environmental policy has its own unique set of circumstances that shape the way that it is formed, it is still a good case study for how the policy process works in a general sense. It is still important to recognize that policy is created as a result of the ongoing conflict between an individual's self interest and that individual's public interest, or goals for the particular community that he resides in. These are not always easily defined interests. In fact they can be clouded between what would be the public and self interest.

People may have a number of conflicting interests. Stone uses the example of a mother who owns her own business. She explains that as a mother, she has an interest in paid leave for those with children, but she also has an interest against such a program from the perspective of a small business owner.[49] It is easy to see how, even in this example of a single person, self interest can be difficult to define and explain, leaving aside the more complex issue of public interest. The interplay of what people consider to be public interest is very important for understanding the policy process because different groups will try to take hold of particular issues in an effort to define them and use them in the most favorable way possible.

At its core, public policy is a study of competing interests and the powers that are capable of changing the way that policy is made. In society there is a balance between how individuals act to preserve their self interest and what issues they desire from public actions.[50] We have seen how the self interest and the public interest of a particular person

[49] Stone, 215
[50] Stone, 4

can conflict, and also how public interest can be further complicated by different, competing, public interests in a particular issue. Policy making is never a black and white decision. It is characterized by a variety of competing interests. What may seem like a straightforward concept, such as the regulation of pesticides, is characterized by different interest groups all vying for control of the issue. Understanding that this is the source of conflict in the policy domain explains how policy is made, because different actors in the community attempt to define the public interest, and motivate people to support their view. While this explanation may make it seem like power over policy is given to an elite few capable of issue definition, it is not that simple. While certain groups may have greater ability to define an issue than others, they still are subject to the competing interests between public and self interest. This is why some issues with broad public support and apparent government solution may still fail because there is a competing interest at work.

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