**Public Policy**

Public policy describes the actions of government. Usually created in response to issues brought before decision makers, these policies come in the form of laws and regulations. They may be created by any governing body. The goal of public policy cannot entirely be separated from its source. Both government and public policy help meet basic societal needs and obligations; decide how communities, states or nations manage resources; and keep general order in society.

**The Policy-Making Process**

The policy-making process is ongoing, messy and generally without a definitive beginning or end, political science scholar Susan J. Buck [explains](http://www.nrem.iastate.edu/class/assets/nrem385/Buck-Policy-Process.pdf). However, those involved in the process do tend to follow a general procedure, broken down into six phases.

Phase 1: Agenda Setting

As the first phase in the cycle, agenda setting helps policy makers decide which problems to address. Topics for discussion go through several types of agendas before these individuals may move them forward. Types of agendas might include:

* **Systemic agendas**. Systemic agendas comprise all issues policy makers deem both worthy of note and in their realm of authority to address.
* **Institutional agendas**. These agendas are formed from the content of systemic agendas. Here, policy makers analyze problems and their proposed solutions in a strict amount of time.
* **Discretionary agendas**. These agendas address problems chosen by legislators that have not necessarily made it into the agendas mentioned above.
* **Decision agendas**. Decision agendas are the finalized list of issues to be moved to the next phase of the policy-making cycle.

Phase 2: Policy Formation

In policy formation, solutions to problems are shaped and argued. This phase is characterized by intense negotiation between parties. Leaders, bureaus and other factions must fight for their own needs and desires, often in opposition to one another. Concerns might include budgetary issues, personal or political constraints, or the protection of certain existing programs. Public policies are therefore formed far more by the act of bargaining than by any other means. Policy formation continues even after initial legislation is passed, arising whenever amendments are suggested or the original legislation is reauthorized.

Phase 3: Policy Legitimation

“Legitimacy” means that the public considers the government’s actions to be legal and authoritative. To gain legitimacy in the United States, a policy must be moved through the legislative process. Once this happens, it is considered the law of the land and can be implemented as such. It must be mentioned that the legitimacy of a policy is only as good as the willingness of citizens to accept it. Therefore, it is possible for people to reject policy if they view the policy makers’ behavior or the legislation itself as unacceptable in some way.

Phase 4: Policy Implementation

This phase puts policies into action. Responsibility passes from policy makers to policy implementers, and the policies themselves may again develop further while this happens. Whether a policy succeeds can often be traced back to this phase; a well-written policy with a poor implementation can end in failure.

Phase 5: Policy Evaluation

Policy makers conduct evaluations to determine if the policies they create are effective in achieving their goals. When determining this, they must consider:

* How to evaluate outcomes effectively
* How to measure the outcomes
* How to navigate between the efficiency of a policy and its effectiveness (the former is often easier to measure than the latter)

Evaluation may occur either during implementation or after the policy in question is finished.

Phase 6: Policy Maintenance, Succession or Termination

Once implemented, policies are periodically gauged for their relevancy and use. This may result in their continuation, amendment or termination. These incidents often occur due to policy makers’ shifting goals, values, beliefs or priorities.

When new issues arise, the policy-making cycle begins again, helping governing bodies successfully address new and important challenges.