International Journal of Education, Vocational and Social Science
https://e-journal.citakonsulindo.or.id/index.php/IJEVSS
E-ISSN : 2963 4954
IJEVSS

Revisiting Policy-Making Processes: A Critical Review of Power, Interests, and Institutions

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Abstract

This study critically reviews the dynamics of policy-making processes by examining the interplay of power, interests, and institutions within contemporary governance systems. Drawing on a wide range of literature, the review challenges rational–linear models of policy formulation by highlighting how political actors, elite interests, and institutional arrangements shape policy outcomes. The analysis underscores that policy-making is not a neutral or technocratic process, but rather a contested arena where competing interests negotiate, dominate, and influence decisions. Furthermore, institutional frameworks are shown to both constrain and enable actors, reinforcing asymmetries of power across different governance levels. The review also explores how informal networks and political bargaining often override formal procedures, particularly in developing contexts. By synthesizing critical perspectives, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of policy complexity and calls for more inclusive, transparent, and accountable governance approaches in addressing contemporary policy challenges.

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Keywords: policy-making process; power relations; political interests; institutions; governance; critical review

INTRODUCTION

Public policy has long been conceptualized as a rational and linear process in which governments identify problems, formulate solutions, and implement decisions in a structured sequence. However, contemporary scholarship increasingly challenges this technocratic view by emphasizing the inherently political nature of policy-making processes. Governance is no longer understood merely as administrative coordination but as a complex arena involving multiple actors, competing interests, and institutional constraints (Peters, 2011; Lynn et al., 2000; Bevir, 2010) . The evolution of governance theory highlights that policy-making is embedded within broader political systems where state, market, and civil society interact dynamically. As such, policy outcomes cannot be separated from the distribution of power and the institutional arrangements that shape decision-making processes (Rhodes, 2007; Pierre & Peters, 2000; Osborne, 2010) .

At the core of this shift is the recognition that power plays a central role in structuring policy processes. Rather than being neutral, policy-making arenas are often dominated by actors who possess varying degrees of influence and resources. Power manifests not only through formal authority but also through informal mechanisms such as agenda-setting, discourse control, and network positioning (Lukes, 1974; Gaventa, 1980; Follett, 1975) . These dynamics create asymmetrical relationships in which certain actors are able to shape policy priorities while others are marginalized. In deliberative governance contexts, power can operate both as “power-over” and “power-with,” reflecting coercive and collaborative dimensions that influence policy outcomes (Lukes, 1974; Gaventa, 1980; Follett, 1975) . Consequently, understanding policy-making requires a critical examination of how power is distributed, exercised, and contested within governance systems.

In addition to power, political interests significantly shape policy formulation and implementation. Policy-making is often driven by the strategic behavior of actors seeking to maximize their preferences, whether these actors are political elites, bureaucrats, interest groups, or external stakeholders. The role of political interests is particularly evident in legislative processes, where institutional arrangements determine the extent to which different actors can influence outcomes (Carey, 2006; Strøm, 1990; Tsebelis, 2002) . For instance, the presence of veto players, opposition parties, and decentralized committee systems can alter the balance of power

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and affect the trajectory of policy decisions. These dynamics underscore that policy-making is not merely a problem-solving exercise but a bargaining process shaped by competing interests and strategic interactions among actors.

Furthermore, institutions provide the structural context within which power and interests are exercised. Institutions—defined as formal rules, norms, and procedures—both constrain and enable the behavior of policy actors. They establish the "rules of the game" that govern interactions, allocate authority, and shape policy outcomes (March & Olsen, 1989; Crawford & Ostrom, 1995; Pierson, 2004) . Institutional design influences who participates in policy processes, how decisions are made, and which interests are prioritized. At the same time, institutions are not static; they evolve over time through processes such as path dependence and critical junctures, which reinforce certain policy trajectories while limiting alternative options (Pierson, 2004; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Peters, 2011) . This dynamic interplay between institutions and actors highlights the need to analyze policy-making as a historically contingent and context-dependent process.

Despite the growing recognition of these complexities, a significant gap remains in integrating the dimensions of power, interests, and institutions into a cohesive analytical framework. Much of the traditional policy literature continues to emphasize technical efficiency and evidence-based decision-making, often overlooking the political dynamics that underpin policy processes. This tendency toward depoliticization has been critiqued for obscuring the role of conflict, negotiation, and contestation in shaping policy outcomes (Fawcett et al., 2017; Flinders & Wood, 2014; Offe, 2013) . Moreover, the separation between policy analysis and political analysis limits our understanding of how governance operates in practice, particularly in contexts characterized by institutional fragility or democratic backsliding (Mounk, 2018; Stoker, 2019; Bauer et al., 2021) .

This study addresses these gaps by conducting a critical literature review of policy-making processes, focusing on the interconnections between power, interests, and institutions. By synthesizing insights from governance theory, political science, and institutional analysis, this review aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how policy decisions are shaped in real-world contexts. It argues that policy-making should be viewed as a complex and contested process in which multiple actors interact within institutional frameworks that both enable and constrain their actions. Furthermore, the review highlights the importance of considering informal practices, political bargaining, and contextual factors that influence policy outcomes beyond formal procedures.

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Ultimately, revisiting policy-making processes through a critical lens contributes to advancing both theoretical and practical debates in public policy. It challenges conventional assumptions about rationality and neutrality, emphasizing instead the centrality of power relations, political interests, and institutional dynamics. By doing so, this study seeks to inform more inclusive, transparent, and accountable approaches to governance that better reflect the realities of contemporary policy-making.

STATE OF THE ART

The study of public policy-making processes has undergone significant development, shifting from a rational-instrumental approach toward a more complex and political perspective. Classical models such as the stages heuristic, which conceptualize policy as a linear process, have increasingly been questioned for their inability to capture the empirical realities characterized by dynamism and conflict. Studies by Sabatier (2007) and Cairney (2012) demonstrate that public policy is more appropriately understood as a non-linear process involving interactions among multiple actors with diverse interests. Furthermore, empirical research in *the Journal of Public Policy* indicates that policy processes are often influenced by external factors such as political crises and global pressures, which can abruptly redirect policy trajectories (Kingdon, 2011; Cairney, 2012; Sabatier, 2007). This marks a paradigm shift in which policy can no longer be explained solely through a technocratic lens but must instead be viewed as a dynamic political arena.

The dimension of power has become a central focus in the development of contemporary policy literature. Research published in *Policy & Politics* shows that the distribution of power among actors determines who gains access to decision-making processes (Fawcett et al., 2017). Lukes (2005) expands the concept of power beyond direct control to include the ability to shape preferences and set policy agendas in subtle and often invisible ways. Empirical studies by Howlett et al. (2017) in *Policy Sciences* further confirm that actors with greater political resources tend to dominate policy processes, particularly during the agenda-setting stage. Consequently, current literature agrees that power is multidimensional and plays a central role in shaping the direction of public policy (Lukes, 2005; Fawcett et al., 2017; Howlett et al., 2017).

Beyond power, political interests serve as a key determinant in the dynamics of public policy. Research suggests that policies are often the result of compromises among competing interests rather than optimal solutions to public problems. A study by Baumgartner et al. (2009) in the *American Political Science Review* finds that policy change occurs when shifts in political

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attention are driven by interest groups and media influence. Moreover, research in *Governance* shows that political actors employ framing strategies to shape public perceptions and strengthen their positions within policy processes (Béland & Cox, 2011). This is further supported by findings in the *Journal of European Public Policy*, which indicate that economic interests frequently dominate policy outcomes over social concerns (Bouwen, 2002; Dür, 2008; Béland & Cox, 2011). Therefore, public policy cannot be separated from the continuous contestation of interests.

The role of institutions in shaping policy processes has also become a major concern in recent literature. The *new institutionalism* approach emphasizes that institutions not only constrain actors' behavior but also shape their preferences and strategies. Research by Hall and Taylor (1996) in *Political Studies* identifies three main strands of institutionalism rational, historical, and sociological each offering distinct perspectives on policy analysis. Further studies in *World Politics* highlight that path dependence makes policies resistant to change even when they are no longer effective (Pierson, 2000). Additionally, Thelen (1999) demonstrates that institutional change often occurs gradually through mechanisms such as layering and drift. These findings underscore the critical role of institutions in determining both the stability and transformation of policy (Hall & Taylor, 1996; Pierson, 2000; Thelen, 1999).

Recent developments in policy studies also emphasize the importance of policy networks and collaborative governance. Research in *Public Administration* indicates that public policy increasingly involves non-state actors such as private sector organizations and civil society (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2016). Empirical findings by Ansell and Gash (2008) in the *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* show that the success of collaboration depends heavily on trust, leadership, and institutional design. Additionally, studies in *Governance* reveal that while policy networks can enhance policy effectiveness, they may also create exclusion for actors lacking access and resources (Klijn et al., 2010; Ansell & Gash, 2008; Klijn & Koppenjan, 2016). This suggests that despite the growing trend toward collaboration, power imbalances persist within policy networks.

Furthermore, critical approaches in policy studies highlight the phenomenon of depoliticization in modern governance. Research by Flinders and Wood (2014) in *Policy & Politics* shows that many policy decisions are delegated to technocratic institutions to avoid political conflict. However, other studies argue that depoliticization does not eliminate politics but merely conceals it in new forms (Wood & Flinders, 2014). Research in *Critical Policy Studies* also emphasizes that policy discourse serves as a tool of power to legitimize specific decisions (Fischer & Gottweis, 2012). Thus, critical literature asserts that public policy remains inherently political,

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even when framed in technocratic terms (Flinders & Wood, 2014; Wood & Flinders, 2014; Fischer & Gottweis, 2012).

In the context of developing countries, the dynamics of power, interests, and institutions become even more complex. Research in *World Development* indicates that weak institutional structures often create opportunities for elite capture in public policy (Bardhan, 2002). Grindle (2012) further argues that policy implementation in developing countries is frequently constrained by limited bureaucratic capacity and political interference. Moreover, studies in *Governance* show that decentralization can enhance participation but may also reinforce the power of local elites (Faguet, 2014; Bardhan, 2002; Grindle, 2012). These findings demonstrate that institutional contexts significantly influence how policies are formulated and implemented.

Overall, the state of the art in public policy studies reveals a shift toward more integrative and critical approaches. Contemporary literature no longer treats power, interests, and institutions as separate dimensions but rather as interconnected elements shaping policy processes. Recent research in *Policy Sciences* emphasizes the importance of interdisciplinary approaches to understanding policy complexity (Howlett et al., 2017). Similarly, studies in the *Annual Review of Political Science* highlight that integrating multiple theoretical perspectives provides a more comprehensive understanding of policy dynamics (Weible et al., 2020; Howlett et al., 2017; Cairney, 2012). Therefore, this study positions itself within these efforts to integrate diverse perspectives in order to produce a more holistic and contextually relevant analysis of public policy.

THEORETICAL INSIGHT

` The theoretical framework in this study is constructed through the integration of three key dimensions in the public policy process: power, interests, and institutions. These three elements do not operate independently; rather, they interact with one another in shaping complex and often non-linear policy dynamics. This approach stems from a critique of rational models that view policy-making as a technocratic process, instead positioning policy as an arena of political contestation influenced by power relations and institutional structures (Sabatier, 2007; Cairney, 2012; Peters, 2011). From this perspective, public policy is understood as the result of interactions among actors with differing interests within a framework of formal and informal rules that both constrain and enable their actions.

The first dimension in this framework is power, which serves as a key factor in determining who holds influence in the policy process. The concept of power extends beyond formal authority

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to include the ability to control agendas, shape preferences, and influence the perceptions of other actors. Lukes (2005) argues that power has three dimensions: visible power in decision-making, power in agenda-setting, and hidden power in shaping preferences. Empirical research in Policy & Politics shows that actors with access to political and economic resources tend to occupy dominant positions in the policy process (Fawcett et al., 2017). Furthermore, Howlett et al. (2017) emphasize that power plays a crucial role in shaping policy design, particularly in the early stages of problem definition. Therefore, power becomes a central variable influencing the distribution of influence in public policy-making.

The second dimension is interests, which represent the goals and preferences of actors within the policy process. From a rational choice perspective, actors are assumed to behave strategically to maximize their interests within existing institutional constraints (Tsebelis, 2002). Studies published in the American Political Science Review indicate that policy change often occurs due to shifts in actors' interests driven by political dynamics and external pressures (Baumgartner et al., 2009). In addition, the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) emphasizes that actors sharing similar beliefs and interests tend to form coalitions to influence policy over the long term (Sabatier, 2007). Research in Governance also highlights that policy framing is used as a strategy to strengthen particular interests in decision-making processes (Béland & Cox, 2011). Thus, interests not only shape actors' behavior but also influence policy narratives and directions.

The third dimension is institutions, which provide the structural framework for interactions between power and interests. Institutions are defined as formal and informal rules that regulate the behavior of actors in the policy process. The new institutionalism approach suggests that institutions not only constrain actors' choices but also shape their preferences and strategies (Hall & Taylor, 1996). Pierson (2000) introduces the concept of path dependence, where past decisions create policy trajectories that are difficult to change due to high switching costs. Moreover, Thelen (1999) demonstrates that institutional change often occurs gradually through complex adaptive mechanisms. Studies in the Policy Studies Journal also show that institutional design influences levels of participation and the distribution of power in policy processes (Ostrom, 2005). Therefore, institutions function both as arenas and structures that shape public policy dynamics.

The interaction between power, interests, and institutions produces policy dynamics that are complex and context-dependent. Within this framework, public policy is viewed as the outcome of negotiation and compromise among actors with varying levels of power and interests within specific institutional constraints. Research in the Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory indicates that such interactions often lead to policies that are not optimal but rather

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reflect a balance of power among actors (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Additionally, studies in Public Administration show that policy networks play a crucial role in connecting actors across sectors and facilitating coordination (Klijn et al., 2010). This highlights that policy processes cannot be understood in isolation from the broader social and political contexts in which they occur.

This framework also incorporates the role of policy networks and collaborative governance as an evolution of traditional government models. In this context, power is no longer centralized within the state but is distributed among interdependent actors. Klijn and Koppenjan (2016) demonstrate that policy networks enable the exchange of resources and information, thereby enhancing policy effectiveness. However, research in Governance also indicates that such networks can create exclusion for actors who lack sufficient access or resources (Klijn et al., 2010). Ansell and Gash (2008) further argue that the success of collaboration depends heavily on trust, leadership, and institutional design. Thus, policy networks enrich the analysis of relationships between power, interests, and institutions.

Furthermore, the critical perspective within this framework highlights the phenomenon of depoliticization in public policy. Flinders and Wood (2014) argue that many policy decisions are delegated to technocratic institutions to reduce political conflict; however, this often conceals underlying power relations. Research in Critical Policy Studies emphasizes that policy discourse is used as a tool to legitimize certain interests and shape public perception (Fischer & Gottweis, 2012). Therefore, depoliticization does not signify the absence of politics but rather its transformation into new forms within public policy. This reinforces the importance of critical analysis in understanding policy dynamics.

Overall, this theoretical framework offers an integrative approach to understanding public policy processes by combining the dimensions of power, interests, and institutions. It emphasizes that public policy is the result of complex interactions among actors within specific structural contexts influenced by historical and social factors. Research in the Annual Review of Political Science suggests that such an integrative approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of policy dynamics compared to single-theory approaches (Weible et al., 2020). Additionally, Howlett et al. (2017) stress that integrating multiple theoretical perspectives is essential for improving the quality of policy analysis. Therefore, this framework is expected to serve as a robust analytical foundation for examining policy processes in a critical and contextual manner.

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DISCUSSION

This discussion highlights that public policy-making cannot be adequately understood as a purely linear and rational process; rather, it constitutes a complex arena shaped by the interaction of power, interests, and institutions. Evidence from prior studies indicates that the dominance of certain actors in policy processes is largely determined by their access to political, economic, and informational resources (Fawcett et al., 2017; Howlett et al., 2017; Lukes, 2005). In this context, power operates not only through formal governmental structures but also through informal mechanisms such as networks, discourse, and agenda control. This reinforces the argument that public policies often reflect the interests of dominant groups rather than the broader public interest.

Furthermore, the dimension of interests reveals that policy outcomes are the result of negotiation and compromise among actors with competing preferences. Previous research suggests that policy actors behave strategically to maximize their interests within existing institutional constraints (Tsebelis, 2002; Baumgartner et al., 2009; Béland & Cox, 2011). In practice, this is evident in the use of strategies such as framing, lobbying, and coalition-building to influence policy directions. As a result, policies are rarely optimal solutions to societal problems; instead, they represent a balance of power among competing actors. This dynamic also explains why public policies frequently experience inconsistency or shifts over time in response to changing political environments.

From an institutional perspective, this discussion emphasizes that institutions play a crucial role in structuring interactions among policy actors. Institutions encompass not only formal rules but also informal norms and practices that shape actor behavior (Hall & Taylor, 1996; Pierson, 2000; Thelen, 1999). The concept of path dependence suggests that past policy decisions constrain future options, creating both stability and rigidity within policy systems. Additionally, institutional design influences the level of participation and the distribution of power in policy processes, ultimately affecting the quality and legitimacy of policy outcomes.

This discussion also underscores the growing importance of policy networks and collaborative governance in modern public administration. The involvement of non-state actors, including private sector entities and civil society organizations, reflects a shift from traditional government to broader governance frameworks (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Klijn et al., 2010; Klijn & Koppenjan, 2016). While collaboration is often associated with improved policy effectiveness, existing studies highlight that power asymmetries remain a significant challenge within policy networks. Actors with greater resources tend to dominate collaborative processes, potentially

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undermining inclusiveness and equity in decision-making.

In addition, the phenomenon of depoliticization emerges as a critical issue in contemporary policy-making. The delegation of policy decisions to technocratic institutions is often justified as a means to enhance efficiency and reduce political conflict. However, research indicates that depoliticization does not eliminate politics; rather, it obscures underlying power relations and reduces public accountability (Flinders & Wood, 2014; Fischer & Gottweis, 2012; Wood & Flinders, 2014). In this sense, policy-making remains inherently political, even when presented in technocratic terms. This highlights the importance of maintaining transparency and public participation to ensure policy legitimacy.

Overall, this discussion demonstrates that understanding public policy-making requires an integrative and critical approach. The interaction between power, interests, and institutions produces complex and context-dependent policy dynamics. Therefore, policy analysis should move beyond technical considerations to incorporate political and social dimensions. Such an approach is essential for generating more inclusive, transparent, and accountable policy outcomes that better reflect the realities of contemporary governance.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that public policy making is best understood as a complex, non-linear process shaped by the dynamic interaction of power, interests, and institutions. Moving beyond traditional rational-instrumental models, the analysis highlights that policy processes are inherently political, involving negotiation, contestation, and compromise among diverse actors. Power emerges as a central element, influencing not only decision-making but also agenda-setting and the construction of policy narratives. At the same time, competing interests drive strategic behavior, resulting in policy outcomes that often reflect a balance of power rather than optimal solutions. Institutions provide the structural context within which these interactions occur, shaping both opportunities and constraints for policy actors. The persistence of path dependence and gradual institutional change further illustrates how historical trajectories influence current policy choices. Additionally, the rise of policy networks and collaborative governance reflects a shift toward more inclusive yet still unequal forms of participation, where power asymmetries remain evident. Overall, this study underscores the importance of adopting an integrative and critical perspective in policy analysis. By recognizing the interplay between power, interests, and institutions, policymakers and scholars can better understand the realities of governance and develop more transparent, inclusive, and accountable policy processes.

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