

Historical and Structural Contexts

The Foundation of the Policy Process

POSC 315: Introduction to Public Policy

Lecture 3.1

Summer 2025

California State University, Fullerton

Why Study Policy Structures?

Why does it take so long to make or change policy?

Why do some big problems stick around for decades? Today we look at the structures that shape—and often slow down—public policy in the U.S.

Institutions: The Rules of the Game

Institutions are the **rules and organizations** that determine who gets to decide, what's allowed, and what's not.

They include laws, agencies, and even unwritten norms that shape our lives.

Rules & Institutions: Examples

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- Constitution
- Laws
- Regulations
- Norms

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Institutions

- Supreme Court
- Congress
- Executive Branch
- Civil Society

Types of Institutions

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- Government Agencies
- Courts
- Schools
- Police
- Corporations

Informal Institutions

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- Courts
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Informal Institutions

- Family
- Religion
- Media
- Traditions
- Social Norms

The Constitution: A Living Document

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Think about it:

Why did the framers make it so flexible?

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- **Elasticity:** allows adaptation over time.
- **Longevity:** still the foundation after 200+ years.

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Key Concept

Separation of Powers divides government into branches to prevent one group from taking too much control.

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What happens when these checks break down? You get gridlock—or sometimes, runaway power.

Branch: Legislative

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- Makes laws
- Controls budget
- Declares war

Branch: Executive

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- Enforces laws
- Commander-in-Chief
- Handles foreign policy

Branch: Judicial

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Judicial

- Interprets laws
- Reviews cases
- Checks constitutionality

Where Policy Gets Made: Key Powers

Article I, Section 8

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- Taxation
- Commerce
- Defense
- Naturalization
- Intellectual Property

Amendments

Necessary & Proper Clause

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Necessary & Proper Clause

Amendments

- 10th: Powers reserved to states
- 14th: Equal protection, due process

Who decides? Sometimes: the courts.

Policy Restraint: Why the System is Slow

The U.S. system is full of **roadblocks**—and that's on purpose. Federalism, separation of powers, bicameralism, judicial review, and the amendment process all slow things down.

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- **Modifications:** Adjusting for new circumstances

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- Crises can sometimes speed things up.

Discussion

Where have you seen policy structures slow down or speed up change?

Can you think of a recent policy change that happened quickly? What made it possible?