PhD research in Political Systems

Manos Papazoglou

Associate Professor in Political Systems

Department of Politics and International Relations

University of the Peloponnese

The foundations: Political Science and the study of Politics

description and analysis of political and governmental institutions and processes

theory and practice of politics

analysis of political systems and political behavior.

discover principles that explain public affairs and government functions

Tip! Politics is not about political celebrities, but mostly about the modus operandi of political institutions and the way they constrain or enable the actions of politicians

Concepts: Power, authority and legitimacy

Power is the ability to have others do something, whether they like it or not (comes in different sorts e.g. force, persuasion, authority, coercion, manipulation).

Authority is the legitimate use of power (i.e. the right to exercise the power and influence of a particular position that comes with that position).

Legitimate Authority (Weber): Charismatic (leader's personality), Traditional (customs, conventions), Rational legal authority (legality) = this the main foundation of modern government's authority

Legitimacy mainly derives from respect of procedural rules and policy results ('output legitimacy')

The classic approach to political systems by Easton

Easton, D. 1971 [1953]. The Political System. An Inquiry into the State of Political Science, 2nd edn. New York: Alfred A Knopf.
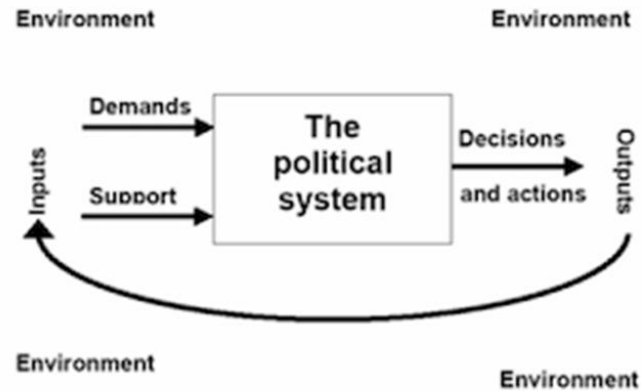
Functioning conditions of a political system

A functioning political system transforms inputs (demands and support) through complex procedures involving many different actors of varying institutional and societal impact into outputs of government activities.

Tips!

Feedback loops: outputs generate new inputs

Political systems exposed to endogenous and exogenous conditions, mostly beyond control (e.g. economic crises, national safety, climate change, natural disasters)

The equilibrium in a political system

Effectively transforming inputs to outputs: managing conflict of interests, effective planning and execution, delivering policy results

Sustainability of the state: securing state resources (financial, institutional, administration, public interest) in the mid-term

Resilience of democratic institutions: rule of law, party competition by parliamentary rules and inclusive representation, tackling social inequalities, vigilance over threats posed by anti-systemic parties and other undemocratic social phenomena

understanding the political system as a computer device: hardware and software aspects

The best way to conceive of the political system is with reference to the functioning of a computer system: divide between the specs of hardware (institutions) and software (public policies)

The hardware: institutions matter!

Stability of institutions upholds stability of the democratic polity and the state apparatus

The polity features: political systems' varying properties

Economist Democracy Index: full democracies, flawed democracies, hybrid regimes, authoritarian regimes

Continuous democracies (e.g. UK), discontinuous democracies (e.g. Germany), new democracies (e.g. ex communist European countries)

Institutional checks-and-balances upon the government

Path dependency: the way past institutional settings shape following preferences

But institutions are subject to amendments, especially "critical junctures" and overwhelming conditions

Tips: study different approaches to institutionalism (historical, rational choice, neo-institutionalism)

Institutions reflect normative principles

Democratic society as a "a fair system of cooperation" Rawls (1993:16, 2001:5-6), aiming at a 'well-ordered' society, Rawls, 1993:35 και 2001:9)

Principal democratic preconditions (Dahl 1998:37–38, πλαίσιο 1.1): rule of law, free and fair elections, inclusiveness, democratic control, freedom of speech and information

Threat of "guardianship" and domination

need for dispersal of powers and effective, means of contestation and vigilance

Deliberation and "reasonable disagreement"

Ex post facto evaluation of governments through elections

Government: the locus of power

Schumpeter famously pointed out that democracy is about the competition for the selection of government, that is of those who will take decisions

Legitimacy is the cornerstone of government: rational in Weberian terms, procedural (compliance with legal rules, societal (broader approval).

High-end criteria for measuring political trust: integrity, responsiveness, openness, credibility, individual and collective identities, customs and societal preferences, policy effectiveness

e.g. OECD (2022), Building Trust to Reinforce Democracy: Main Findings from the 2021 OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions, OECD Publishing

Tips: how trust in political institutions collapsed in modern democracies (e.g. Italy following political corruption in the 1990s, Greece due to economic crisis, UK following Brexit referendum)

Government inextricably linked to the state and leadership

Government leadership broadly understood as "steering" and "rowing" of the "vessel" (the state), to navigate through "open waters"

Machiavelli's smart remark about fortuna and virtù

Leaders constantly engaged in power struggles (e.g. depicted in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, the "ides of March").

Leadership and followership: mobilization of human, institutional, administrative, material even psychological resources, combining interests and motives with political aims

Leadership and party competition: voters' de-alignment, low political interest, lower influence of mainstream parties and ideologies, volatility in party systems, anti-systemic claims

From government to governance

Governments still the main actors, but parts of broader governance systems that enable their capacity

Realistic understanding of problems beyond the reach of individual governments, thus need for collaboration schemes

Transfer or sharing of competences with non-state domestic and international actors for pursuing policy tasks

e.g. "regulatory governance", "good governance", "integrity of governance", "network governance"

Hence, government concerned more about "steering" different agencies and actors towards the pursuit of common policy tasks

Criticism: "hollowing-out" of the state, transparency, fusion of responsibility,

The EU: policy-coordination between political systems

The most prominent example is the EU, a multi-level system of governance with the allocation of different kinds of competences (exclusive, shared, supportive) between EU bodies, national governments, sub-national authorities. The EU offers substantive contribution to strengthening member states' sustainable development and resilience to common challenges they face in a globalized world.

Tips! Study how the EU has gone through consecutive crises (Eurozone crisis, Brexit, pandemic, recession and inflation) by providing a framework of policy coordination, financial and technocratic resources and maintaining governments' and peoples' adherence to its values and scope.

The "software" component of the political system

While hardware refers to the 'technical'/institutional capacity of the system, software refers to its operational mode: how effectively it delivers policy results and their assessment by the electorate

Governments' motivation to deliver policy results in order to be re-elected

Lasswell points out that politics is about "who get what, when, how". Hence, the way the government manages demands, plans and executes policies matters.

shortcomings in policy-making

However, policy-making is far from an ideal process given the many factors involved:

Conflict of interests and veto players

Scarcity of financial resources

State capacity (e.g. infrastructure) and supportive public administration
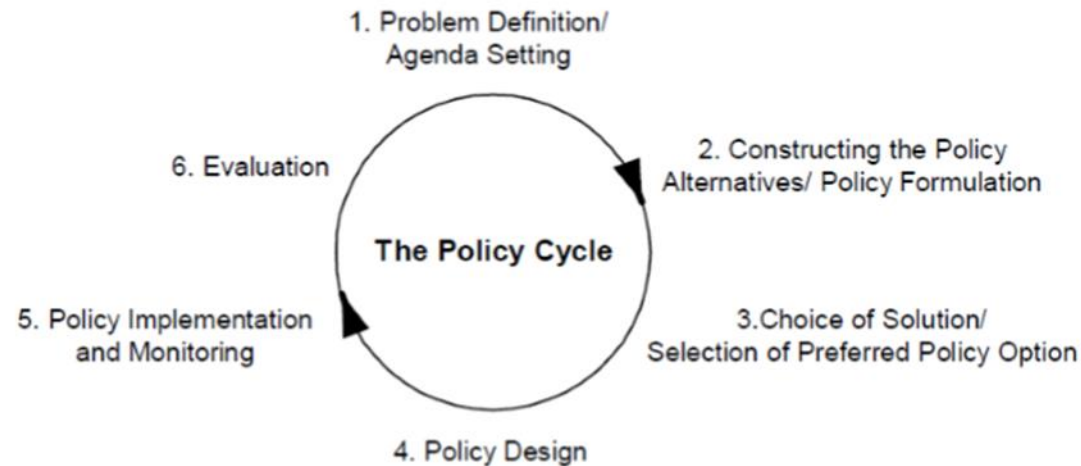
Party competition and stability of government

Skilled government staff

Constraints to diagnosing mid-term threats and opportunities and unforeseen global developments (e.g. security, economic crisis, energy safety, natural disasters)

Moral hazard problems

the policy-making cycle

A useful way to track and analyze policy-making is with reference to the standard stages approach

1. Problem Definition/
Agenda Setting

6. Evaluation

The Policy Cycle

2. Constructing the Policy
Alternatives/ Policy Formulation

5. Policy Implementation
and Monitoring

3.Choice of Solution/
Selection of Preferred Policy Option

4. Policy Design

How to untangle policy issues

Identify a specific policy issue (e.g. pension system) and understand how it connects to the broader policy sector (e.g. welfare policy), gather data, legislation, policy papers from national and EU sources.

Map out the political context: political parties (in government and in opposition, their policy positions, their respective power in terms of parliamentary seats, election results or polls), involvement and tactics of other actors (e.g interest groups).

Illustrate problems regarding the implementation at different sites: the government, parliament, judiciary, administration, stakeholders, resources.

Assess policy results with regard to the nature of the problem, the aims initially set, the opportunities and constraints in the process and credible data.

Tips! Best way to assess policy results and governments' respective capacity is through the comparative data provided by the Eurostat on very specific policy issues. In most policy areas you may find out that "europeanization" has an impact on policy aims and making.

Last remarks

The study of government, governance and policy-making includes a vast set of issues. Reference to the political systems, identifying the 'hardware' and 'software' aspects of policy-making make your analysis more intelligible and focused on specific items of research.

Last tip!

Employ SWOT analysis on the political system of your research

This is your primary approach in order to grasp the main themes and directions of your research. Identify topics (government, policy, parties, institutions, electorate and elections etc) and set out the kinds of research tools and material that better match your case or academic formation.

Recommended reading

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