

The Societal Sources of Public Policy: A Review of Concepts and Their Applications**

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Abstract

This paper delineates societal sources of public policy. Primarily, conflicts among individuals and groups make public policy necessary to handle such conflicts. Certain social conflicts involve the environment, signaling the need for public policy. Groups compete to actualize the policies of their desires. Public policy is also needed to deal with social stratification and inequalities as a consequence of social stratification systems. Social problems are also significant in configuring public policy. Yet, they are subtle and changeable as well as perceived differently among the public. Problem and issue definitions are instrumentally used in the pursuit of certain policy directions over others. Values and ideas lie within the perceptions of social problems. Some values and ideas dominate the definition of social problems and determine the direction and content of public policy. Lastly, while public opinion and the public interest can be distinguished from each other, they both exert influences on public policy.

Keywords: Public policy, conflict, social problems, group competition, public opinion, the public interest

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ที่มาทางสังคมของนโยบายสาธารณะ: บทสำรวจแนวความคิดและการประยุกต์ใช้**

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้อภิปรายปัจจัยทางสังคมที่มีผลต่อนโยบายสาธารณะ ในเบื้องแรก ความขัดแย้งระหว่างปัจจัยทางสังคมและกลุ่มหลากหลายเป็นเหตุปัจจัยของนโยบายสาธารณะที่ช่วยจัดการความขัดแย้งนั้น และความขัดแย้งบางอย่างในสังคมมีความเกี่ยวข้องกับสิ่งแวดล้อมด้วย ซึ่งส่งสัญญาณความจำเป็นของนโยบายสาธารณะ กลุ่มที่หลากหลายก็แข่งกันผลักดันสาธารณะของนโยบายสาธารณะตามที่ตนต้องการ สังคมต้องการนโยบายสาธารณะเพื่อตอบสนองการเปลี่ยนแปลงของความต้องการ ไม่เท่าเทียมที่มักจะมาจากระบบของการเปลี่ยนแปลง และปัญหาสังคมเป็นอีกหนึ่งปัจจัยสำคัญที่ตัดสินรูปลักษณะของนโยบายสาธารณะ โดยที่ปัญหาสังคมนั้นมีความละเอียดอ่อน หรือไม่คงที่ ซึ่งหมายถึงว่าคนในสังคมมีมุ่งมองที่แตกต่างหลากหลายเกี่ยวกับปัญหาสังคม ดังนั้นการนิยามปัญหาและประเด็นทางสังคมถูกใช้เป็นเครื่องมือในการโน้มน้าวทิศทางและสาธารณะของนโยบาย คุณค่าและแนวความคิดล้วนมีที่ทางอยู่ในมุมมองต่อปัญหาสังคม บางคุณค่าและแนวความคิดครอบจางานนิยามประเด็นปัญหา ซึ่งก็จะถูกนำไปเป็นตัวการกำหนดสาธารณะและทิศทางของนโยบายสาธารณะไปโดยปริยาย และสุดท้าย ความความคิดเห็นสาธารณะและผลประโยชน์สาธารณะ ซึ่งมีความหมายในตัวเองที่แตกต่างกันอย่างมีนัยสำคัญ ก็เป็นตัวการกำหนดทิศทางของนโยบายสาธารณะอย่างมากได้ทั้งสองอย่าง

คำสำคัญ: นโยบายสาธารณะ, ความขัดแย้ง, ปัญหาสังคม, การแข่งขันระหว่างกลุ่ม, ความคิดเห็นสาธารณะ, ผลประโยชน์สาธารณะ

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Public policy and society are intricately connected. This paper focuses on the impacts of various societal aspects on public policy. For example, energy needs within society necessitate power generation as well as energy and environmental policies. What feeds into the public policy is argued in this paper to be social issues and problems, along with the people and their interrelationships as well as their relationships to the society and the environment. Societal influences on public policy deserve discussion within policy studies. This paper posits that public policy is responsive to societal conditions and problems. Just as public policy is explainable through institutional analysis, such as political party influence and electoral competition, the societal explanation of public policy is of equal importance. This paper will do the following. It will look at and discuss societal aspects as determining sources of public policy. Such societal aspects are: social conflict, social stratification and inequality, crimes as directly related to social conflict, group conflict, group competition, and social problems. The second half the paper directs at more depth of these societal aspects, such as the significance of public perception of social problems as well as public attention to social problems. Controversial issues such as social values, social structure, public opinion, and public interest are discussed toward the end of the paper – all essential sources of public policy.

Social Conflict and Public Policy

A large portion of public policy is explainable by many forms of conflict within human relations as well as the relationship of humans with the environment. A major portion of conflict perception is probably deeply rooted in the concepts of liberalism and individualism. The central theme of liberal ideology is a commitment to the individuals. The common desire of individuals is to construct a society in which they could easily satisfy their interests. Radical individualism is based on the assumption that the individual is egoistical, essentially self-seeking and largely self-reliant. Also at the heart of individualism is the doctrine of rights, in which individuals are the holders of natural rights. For Locke, they comprise the right to life, liberty, and property; whereas for Jefferson, as stated in the

U.S. Declaration of Independence, they are those to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness (Heywood 2018, 12-21).

Individualism and the notion of supreme importance of the individual also strongly relate to the idea of private interest. It is thought to be the selfish and usually materialistic interest of particular individuals or groups. Each individual has a tendency to advance his or her self-interest. Such a notion of private interest gives rise to conflict or, at least, competition. If private individuals act rationally, they are assumed to prefer their own interests to those of others. Therefore, various and especially contradictory interests within a society compete with one another, entailing some degree of conflict. Individualism along with the notion of private interest are also related to rational choice theory, which theorizes that individuals consistently choose the most rational and efficient means to achieve their various ends (Heywood 2015, 163-164, 168).

The market economy – the societal significance of the market – is also intimately connected to both liberalism and individualism. According to Adam Smith in his 1776 publication, **An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations**, the market operates according to the wishes of individuals. Freedom within the market means freedom of choice, being the ability of businesses to choose what goods to produce, of workers to choose their employers, and of consumers to choose what goods to purchase. Relationships within such a market, such as between employers and employees, are voluntary, made by self-interested individuals for whom pleasure is equated with the acquisition of wealth (Heywood 2018, 19-20). Also, the economy is believed to operate according to impersonal pressure of market competition that naturally promotes economic prosperity (Heywood 2018, 24).

Freedom to compete usually compels individuals to do so in the market economy. Those with the ability and willingness to work will possibly reach that goal of prosperity, while those incompetent and, perhaps, lazy will not. Heywood (2018, 25) cites **Self Help**, a book published in 1859 by Samuel Smiles as saying that heaven helps those who help themselves. This is perhaps to suggest that individual's responsibility is widely employed by supporters of the laissez-faire concept of the nineteenth century (Heywood 2018 25).

Heywood (2018, 25) also argues that the Laissez-faire Doctrine about freedom and competition draws in large part on ideas that Charles Darwin, a British naturalist, geologist, and biologist, developed in his 1859 publication, **On the Origin of Species**. Darwin discovered that in the process of natural selection of species, strong traits and genes compete to dominate weaker ones, leading to the sole maintenance of the strong genes and traits of species. Thus, there was some degree of conflict between these traits and genes. Heywood also refers to Herbert Spencer's 1884 book, **the Man versus the State**, as extending Darwin's theory to become the social principle of survival of the fittest. Those competing efficiently in the market survive and rise to the top and the ultimate goal of prosperity, while the less productive ones, unable to compete, have to leave the market (Heywood 2018, 25).

Also related to the above discussion is the concept of utilitarianism. It is a moral philosophy advanced by Jeremy Bentham and James Mill, equating good with pleasure or happiness, and evil with pain or unhappiness. Individuals are assumed to act so as to maximize pleasure and minimize pain – so-called utility maximization – usually deriving from material consumption (Heywood 2018, 22-23). Such utility maximization is normally propelled by individual self-interest.

Societal conflict subsumes all the above concepts – individualism, freedom, self-interest, competition, the market economy, and the goal of prosperity. With reference to this last, individuals and groups choose to prosper through fulfilling their self-interests, and are likely to hurt others and the public in the process. With freedom, individuals may have little-bounded desires, directed toward the maximization of pleasure through economic gain at the expense of others in the society. Pursuing material interests, status, power, or privilege at the sacrifice of others is one of the clearest forms of substantive conflict (Jeong 2008, 24-27). Competing to reach the goal of prosperity, each individual maximizes his or her own utility, this being considered the usual and desirable practice in the market economy. Prosperity reached by the competitive and survivalist individuals should add up to prosperity for society as a whole.

Hardin (1968) discussed population as a problem, as there is usually a competition for resources. Following Thomas Malthus' work, **An essay on the Principle of Population**, published in

1798, which argued that population would increase geometrically and therefore outweigh natural resources it needs. Hardin painted a picture of a pasture open to all – the common property. It is plausible that each herdsman would try to keep as many cattle as possible on the pasture. Such common property may have worked satisfactorily for centuries because tribal wars, poaching, and diseases would have kept the numbers of both people and cattle well below the capacity of nature and the environment. But with technological advance and particularly an increase in population size, it is possible that a problem would be generated. Hardin termed the result of these as the tragedy of the commons. As a rational being pursuing the self-interest, each herdsman seeks to maximize his gain. The utility most likely increases by each increasing the number of cattle. With freedom and the desire to maximize utility, each herdsman would possibly expand his herd without limit; and the pasture would come to constitute a scarce resource (Hardin 1968, 162). Thus, freedom brings about ruin to all.

Other resources face a similar happenstance. Oceans continue to suffer like pasture; and national parks continue to be of the same size as before, while human population size increases. Pollution also constitutes the tragedy of the commons, as it is in the interest of all to discard unwanted materials as waste. The environment, considered as common property, continues to be bombarded by waste materials. The depletion of natural resources also suggests a similar tragedy (Hardin 1968, 1245).

In accordance with the common property problem, conflict occurs when one person steps on another's foot. One person's consumption of certain resources means a lesser amount left for another. Social conflict of this kind calls for public policy to lessen it. The use of plastics pollutes the environment with waste. The Thai Ministry of Resources and Environment is considering bringing forward a complete ban on key plastic pollutants, possibly in approximately one to two years (The Thaiger 2019a). This concern about the environmental effects of plastic waste materials was heightened by the incident in which a baby dugong, Mariam, died on August 17, 2019 from an infection exacerbated by bits of plastic materials in her stomach (Boyle 2019). The public policy being considered indicates the Thai state's effort to lessen the conflict between society and the

environment brought about by the heavy polluters, at the expense of others sharing the environment and society.

Closely resembling the common property problem is the free-rider problem. More often than not, individuals are not likely to voluntarily forego their interest to make others better off. This is the view that individuals usually act out of their self-interest. Altruism is considered exceptional, while self-interested behavior is thought to be the rule, especially when economic issues are at stake (Olson 1971, 1). Countless examples include voluntary payment of union dues and contribution to charities. Suppose the Ministry of Defense asks for donations for the benefit of national security; the sums received would likely be insufficient for the purpose. State activities such as pollution control and national security, if provided, would benefit everyone in society. These are the so-called pure public goods. Yet, individuals mistakenly view them as being free of charge, while there definitely are costs involved. Being self-interested and rational, individuals have an incentive to leave it to others to pay for these goods. In other words, such individuals are engaging in free riding the benefit of the goods.

Ostrom (1990, 8-9) examines such public policies required to bring about collective action and essential services. She argues that they usually encompass taxation and regulation requiring certain individual actions, such as tax payment and abstention from behavior unfriendly to the environment. The ban on plastic bags is an example of coercive policy. Without such state action, individuals, being rational, self-interested, and self-seeking, as suggested by the concept of individualism, would wait around for others to reduce the use of plastic bags. Since such bags give people the benefit of convenience in their busy lives, avoiding them would cause some inconvenience, and therefore is against individual interest. Command and control as a policy measure is thus necessary, so as to manage the common property problem.

Ostrom (1990, 12-13) proposes a lesser degree of coerciveness in the policy measure, while also lessening the common property problem. The so-called privatization method assigns particular individuals with some property right toward what otherwise is considered as common property, such as land. The idea is that, if people own a piece of land assigned to them, they have both the authority and incentive to keep other individuals from exploiting the land (Bickers and Williams 2001, 109).

Pollution marketable permits represent another situation whereby the right to pollute the environment can be allocated to firms or factories. With such right, the extent to which each specific firm pollutes the environment is exactly known; and no further pollution is allowed. This method of pollution right allotment instrumentally places a limit on how much pollution a firm can generate over a particular time period. Hence, the problem of exploitation of air or water quality, which once used to be common property, is argued to be abated by the issuance of pollution marketable permits (Stiglitz 2000, 229).

Social Stratification and Inequality

Human history is replete with caste and class systems. The caste system is a closed one, allowing little change in one's social position, whereas the class system is more open to social mobility. These two systems are forms of social stratification, functioning to distinguish individuals and suggesting difference, usually in terms of inequality, among them. Sociology describes stratification as ubiquitous; and, ironically, individuals in a particular society usually see it as a fair societal arrangement (Macdonis 2007, 254-255). The societal function of stratification, in a way, benefits the operation of a society. Among occupational positions, those not easily gained and involve difficult work, requiring special and extensive training, usually receive more rewards and prestige. This helps promote productivity and efficiency, because such rewards and prestige encourage people to reach for these positions and to work better, longer, and harder (Macdonis 2007, 265).

Social stratification can, on the other hand, give rise to social conflict. Class conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat constitutes the core of Marxist thought. It is argued that in industrial societies, the capitalist class or the bourgeoisie, owns and operates factories and businesses in the pursuit of profit. It seeks the profit by selling a product for more than its cost of production. Marxism argues that capitalism turns most of the population into industrial workers, the proletarians – those selling their labor for wages (Macdonis 2007, 100-101). Part of the profit seeking is through keeping wages low, which is against the interest of the latter – the wage earners. Conflict thus arises. Marxist Theory posits that capitalism influences state policies to the detriment of the

wage laborers (Hay 2006, 60-61). In South Africa, the policy of apartheid was made legal in 1948 to separate the white minority from the black majority. For the purpose of political control over the black population, it denied the blacks citizenship, ownership of land and voice in government. Most black South Africans also received little schooling and performed menial, low paying jobs (Macionis 2007, 257). Social conflict was apparent with such discrimination, as evidenced in the struggle against apartheid led by Nelson Mandela, who was jailed in the process (Macionis 2007, 254-255).

Measures usually in the form of public policy are to lessen social inequality. For instance, the Student Loan Fund Program was set up by the Thai Ministry of Education for the purpose of assisting individuals from low income families who wish to extend their education beyond the secondary school into the undergraduate level. They are not required to settle the loan until they have completed their studies. Such educational opportunities are directed toward underprivileged students mostly from poorer families (Thailand. Ministry of Education 1999). Another is the Thai Inheritance Tax Law of 2015 that has inequality reduction as an objective. Only individuals with an inheritance beyond a specified value are required to fulfill this tax obligation (Pisanu Sangiampongsa 2019, 83).

Progressive taxation generally addresses the inequality problem. It is in accordance with the Public Finance principle of vertical equity, advocating that individuals with high income and greater ability-to-pay should pay higher taxes than others (Stiglitz 2000, 468-470). The personal income tax rate in Thailand is progressive. For example, those with yearly incomes of less than 150,000 baht are exempted from tax payment. With earned incomes between 150,000 and 300,000 baht per year, the rate is five percent. The rate increases up to 35 percent for yearly incomes over four million baht (Thailand. The Revenue Department 2014).

Social inequality in need of a response by public policy is generally equated with unfairness or injustice, which possibly becomes a source of social conflict. John Rawls, in his major work in 1970, *A Theory of Justice*, introduces the theory of justice as fairness, in which justice lies in more distribution of material benefits to the least advantaged. In this manner, a higher level of social equality would be the result. The presumption in favor of equality is rooted in the assumption that most people, deprived of knowledge about their talents and abilities, would choose to live in an

egalitarian, rather than an in-egalitarian, society. This idea is used to justify redistribution and social welfare policies (Heywood 2018, 30; Stiglitz 2000, 478). Through such public policy delivering more equality, social conflict is believed to decrease in part.

Crimes as a Source of Social Conflict

Criminal acts constitute one type of social conflict, as some individuals encroach on the lives and properties of others. Property crimes, in particular, involves stealing or dishonestly obtaining or damaging another's property. Possible explanations of crimes on personal property include population growth, urbanization, unemployment, and economic hardship. Conflict between social classes, as explained by Marxism, may also lead to criminal acts, according to some historians (Carrabine et al. 2014, 175-176). Developments in computer and telecommunication technology have created greater opportunities for theft and other forms of crimes to become more extensive. Certain crimes are against persons, such as sex crimes (Carrabine et al. 2014, 175-176, 196-199).

Be they crimes on property or person, politically, they all relate to social contract theory. Individuals are selfish, greedy, and power seeking; in the state of nature, these traits may run wildly, in the sense that one may inflict harm on others, since there is little or no control on such human acts. It might be in one's self-interest to take the property of another for economic gain, giving rise to social conflict. In social contract theory, the state embodies the interest of all citizens and acts as a neutral referee, when individuals or groups come into conflict with one another (Heywood 2018, 16-17). Primarily, the state would have a policy of honoring personal property and safety, recognized and approved by law.

In a murder case involving a Thai Member of Parliament of the Pheu Thai Party, Khon Kaen Provincial Court sentenced him to death in its ruling on September 24, 2019. The Court found the MP guilty as charged for masterminding the murder of an assistant to the chief of Khon Kaen Provincial Administrative Organization. The motive for the murder was the fact that the murder victim had an affair with the MP's wife (Chakrapan Natanri 2019). In this case, the affair that the victim had with the MP's wife is the source of interpersonal conflict. The perpetrator acted on the conflict by

inflicting harm on the murder victim. The Thai state endorses the sanctity of personal safety and life; any infliction on these is to be corrected.

Group Conflicts

Intergroup competition and conflict constitute pervasive problems in human society, giving rise to phenomena such as prejudice, terrorism, ethnic cleansing, and war. Such competition and conflict can be understood from the perspective of social identity theory. It posits that people categorize themselves and others into an in-group and an out-group, based on their self-views and evaluation of the features and characteristics of the groups to which they belong. They then strive to develop, maintain, and improve the group's positive social identity. A positive social identity is achieved by in-group favoritism, through emphasizing the positive features and characteristics, while downplaying those that are negative to one's own group. A positive social identity is also achieved through out-group derogation – devaluing its positive features and characteristics while emphasizing the negative ones. In-group favoritism alone or in combination with out-group derogation creates intergroup bias via depreciating another group while simultaneously valuing one's own group (De Dreu, Aaldering, and Saygi 2014, 1-3). Such unfair group actions could give rise to conflict among groups.

Group theory explains group formation, whereby individuals with a common interest converge to press their demand on the government or the state. This is an in-group, according to the above discussion. An interest group is one with shared attitudes. It becomes political if and when it makes a claim through or upon state institutions. Individuals become more influential in politics when they act as part of or on behalf of group interests. The group becomes an essential bridge between the individual and the state or government. In Dye's (2013, 22) terms, the struggle among groups constitutes politics within specific policy issues, such as health, welfare, and education. In each particular issue, there is usually a number of groups interacting, each attempting to push its cause – its policy preference. At times, one group gains in acquiring the policy preference, thereby incurring loss to another or other groups. This struggle constitutes intergroup conflict, just as there are conflicts among individuals. In interest group politics, a group has power or attempts to gain power in order

to influence the direction of public policy. Changes in the relative influence of any interest group can be expected to result in changes in public policy; policy will move in the direction desired by the groups gaining influence and away from those losing it. The influence of a group is determined by its large membership base, wealth, organizational strength, leadership, access to decision makers, and internal cohesion, or all of these together.

Group Competition

Affecting policy directions is a means by which groups compete with each other. Cobb and Elder (1983, 125-127) outlines group-oriented strategies to discredit opposing groups within the process of policy competition. Cobb and Coughlin (1998) examine the issue of elderly drivers, who sometimes compromise road safety. Within the issue, there are two opposing groups, whereby one argues for the elderly to continue driving as usual, while the other advocates curbs on their doing so. The two contradictory groups verbally attack each other to further their causes.

A means of attacking the opposing groups is discrediting them. An example is the opponents of the American Civil Liberties Union characterizing it as a communist front. A second tactic of group attack is defaming the leaders of the opposing group. A leader of a pro-dam group could be discredited for personal benefit to be gained from the dam's project due to her possession of a large share in an electricity generation business. Another strategy is appealing to the opposing group's members. An example is canvassing support from individual doctors when the American Medical Association argued against the Medicare proposal in the policy battle in the early 1960s (Zelizer 2015). The tactic was to bypass the organization to get support from its individual members. Coopting the leaders of the opposition is also a strategy of group attack, thereby compromising the opposition (Cobb and Elder 1983, 125-127).

There are also issue-oriented strategies for fighting the opposition. Each group attempts to make arguments on the issue in a way that promotes their cause. In Cobb and Coughlin's study of elderly drivers (1998, 127-128), the group arguing against old-aged drivers geared attention to the accident victims. It argued that those who were seriously hurt by the car crashes deserve the sympathy of the

public. The group favoring the elderly drivers contended that a special regulation on the elderly's driving would be a discrimination against the elderly. The argument was that the elderly had worked hard and had contributed benefits to the country, and hence, deserved to spend their golden years in leisure. But the group that opposed their driving referred to them as "impaired drivers."

Social Problems and Public Policy

Public policy is generally the main response to social problems and issues. Social problems are those that affect many in society. Therefore, public policy should address public problems, not private problems of individuals. Social problems and issues, then, comprise one major source of public policy.

According to Gerston (2010, 25) the scope of a problem refers to the number of people within a geographical boundary being irritated by a specific problem. If it is sizeable, the demand for action is said to have a broad base and is likely to trigger public policy. For example, a toxic spill into a nation's water system is considered a social or public problem, since it has spatial consequence, with impacts on many individuals. Similarly, Cobb and Coughlin (1998, 417) refer to this as incidence and prevalence of a problem. A large number of people being affected generally instigate a public policy response. Their study of elderly drivers found those in support of curtailing driving by the elderly referred to the statistics that drivers over the age of 65 incurred more accidents and fatalities than did other age groups.

The intensity of a social problem triggering public policy response is the intensity of an event as perceived by the public (Gerston 2010, 26). However, if the event captures public attention, particularly in the form of fear or anger, then policy makers are likely to pay attention. For example, the 9/11 incident in the United States, evoking tremendous public sorrow and anger from the American public, led the nation's leaders to seek out and punish the terrorists. On the contrary, the issue of global warming that was the subject of an international conference held in Tokyo, Japan in 1997 failed to generate intensity perception in the public. U.S. policy makers declined to join 178 other nations that agreed on emission rules. The problem had to be readdressed repeatedly before

it came to be viewed as serious by the American public. By the same token, Cobb and Coughlin (1998, 418) discuss the severity of the problem of elderly drivers. The movement to stiffen the driving regulation on the elderly tried to publicize the trauma, both emotional and physical, experienced by accident victims and their loved ones. When the intensity or severity of a problem is high, it is termed a crisis. The emergency component of a public problem usually prompts immediate attention.

The Subtlety in Public Perception and Reception of Social Problems

According to the above discussion, there is a connection between the public perception of social problems and the policy responses to them. In Systems Theory, public policy response is the output of a political system. That output represents values which are allocated and distributed in society (Danziger 1996, 143-144). Both the specification of values as well as their allocation and distribution constitute a delicate matter. It must be determined which and whose values among societal members are to be addressed. Also, how the values are to be allocated and to whom they are to be distributed is always contentious and usually provokes debate and disagreements.

Following are examples of the disputable conditions. Values tend to be associated with resource scarcity. Either there is an insufficient amount of a particular value to satisfy everyone or the enjoyment of one value by some requires a loss of that particular value to others. For instance, in most political systems and societies, health care is rarely adequate for all members. Also, with a certain level of publicly provided health care, some members of society see it as too high, whereas others see it as too low; and some see it as about right. Another example is the banning of toxic farm chemicals in Thailand for public health reasons. It could, at the same time, have adverse impacts on the hitherto agricultural practice and production (Bangkok Post 2019). Resource being scarce, every value allocation and distribution entails a trade-off, as well as some inequality in the distribution of values in the form of benefits. There is also an allocation of burden, usually through taxation, an output of the political system (Danziger 1996, 144). There are often disagreements, competition, and sometimes serious conflict among societal members over the output

In another perspective, social problems are considered violation of norms, which are in themselves culturally defined and socially labeled. Therefore, specifications of social problems are inherently relative. Certain behaviors and conditions are socially labeled as social problems, whereas others are not. For instance, people who hear God talking to them are considered schizophrenic, but those who talk to God are believed to be perfectly sane. Murder is a social problem, whereas killing war enemies brings reward medals. A prostitute is punished, but the client is not. It can be seen that deviance from norms is not inherent in an act or condition, but a property bestowed upon by the audience of such deviation (Eitzen and Zinn 2000, 7-8). How the acts and conditions are labeled is rather subjective within a society and culture.

The Significance of Public Attention to Social Problems

The policy literature refers to public perception and attention to social problems as involved in issue or problem definition. How a problem is socially defined is crucial in determining public policy response or non-response. Generally, the greater the public attention, the greater for there to be a policy response to it. Issues and problems could also be defined and perceived in certain ways that could catch public attention. According to Cobb and Elder (1983, 112-124), issue definitions are likely to appeal to more groups and subgroups in society. In other words, an issue that is ambiguously defined will likely catch the attention of a larger public. Women groups that desire more gender equality, such as in wages and salaries, are perhaps able to sell their cause if the issue is defined as social equality, rather than gender equality. The former encompasses broader aspects of social equality, such as racial equality and that of other minority groups. Issue expansion is also probable if the issue is defined as being socially significant. A case in point is the Thai celebrity, Toon Body Slam's 2,215 kilometer marathon, purportedly for the purpose of raising funds for public hospitals (Bangkok Post 2017). It brought about greater public awareness of the societal need for the public health care, possibly leading to increased budget allocation to this policy area.

Cobb and Elder (1983, 117-118) also refer to temporal relevance, that is when an issue has long-term implications beyond the exigencies of the immediate situation. This will capture the

attention of a larger public, since more people, over a longer time span, would find the issue relevant to them. For example, highlighting that pollution would impinge upon future generations is believed to entice more public interest in the issue, such as among those younger, as well as parents with small children and babies. The reference to the fact that plastic waste materials could last for some 400 years fits in this temporal significance factor.

Two more things need to be said about issue expansion. First, technical complexity is likely to have less public appeal. Cobb and Elder (1983, 120-121) propose that a more non-technical definition of an issue stands to capture more public attention. An example is fluoridation, a technically complex issue. Tax issues also involve technical complexity. Second is what is termed categorical precedence. A somewhat new issue will catch the eyes of the public, hence, widening its discussion. As a result, a policy response will then be likely.

Social Values and Public Ideas Appended to Social Problems and Public Policy

There are always values involved in issue definition. Social values are applied to promote some causes and to downplay others. The case of abortion, for instance, involves religious views, women's rights, the valuation of the fetus, as well as its right to life. Nossiff (1998) found that values played a large role in the discourses on the abortion issue, such as in those of the pro- and anti-abortion movements in New York and Pennsylvania. Among other things, values and discourses are used by both sides of the issue to build political clout to affect public policy. In both states, the Catholic Church and its community make up the anti-abortion lobby, whereas the women's rights group together with feminists were in the pro-abortion one. In the cases compared, pro-abortion activists prevailed in New York, while anti-abortion forces triumphed in Pennsylvania, with the Democratic Party aiding the former.

Intimately related to values are public ideas. Neither are clearly right or wrong as they depend on opinions. Yet, they comprise the main content of the discourses that are freely used to promote some causes. The purpose of discourses is to persuade so as to build ideational power – the

acquisition of power through ideas – via reasoning and argument in order to expand the base of support (Carstensen and Schmidt 2018, 7-8).

Also on the abortion issue, Yishai (1993) did a comparative study on the abortion policies of four democratic countries – Sweden, Ireland, the United States, and Israel. The study matched different public ideas among the four democracies to varying abortion policies. For Sweden, the public idea is viewed from the social welfare perspective, in which the right to an abortion is incorporated into the principle of social citizenship. This resulted in an enabling abortion policy wherein abortion is considered not a crime and is made available when a woman demands it. Such enabling policy endows women with the right to decide whether or not to have a child. The abortion consultation and procedure are free of charge within the Swedish public health care system (Yishai 1993, 211, 216).

The United States' abortion policy is classified as a hindering policy. While the state acknowledges the right of a woman to make her own reproductive decision, it does not commit to enabling her to act upon her decision. Although the law does not infringe on women's freedom to decide on productive choices, women do not have a constitutional entitlement to financial assistance for an abortion. Yishai (1993, 216-217, 212-214) relates such policy to the libertarian perspective. Individual liberty and minimal government, as societal values, are pervasive among the American public. This provides the justification for the mediocre public expenditure on abortion. Women are called upon to use their individual freedom in making their choices.

Yishai (1993, 217-218, 214-215) designates Israel's abortion policy as intrusive, restricting individual choice. There, abortion constitutes a criminal offense, except under certain specified circumstances. In determining the practice, a woman is obliged to undergo a process of examination and interrogation before approval is granted. But once the authority approves an abortion, the Israeli state provides a woman with the necessary facility and covers the expense to terminate the pregnancy. The demographic perspective is connected to such intrusive policy. The Jewish principle asserts that abortion is not murder. In that light, the abortion idea is related to Israel's

population problem, whereby the state uses the abortion policy to simultaneously adjust the demographic situation.

Catholic Ireland's abortion policy is restrictive in Yishai's (1993, 216, 211-212) terminology. It permits the state to have monopolistic control of both the articulation of demand and implementation. The right of privacy is unequivocally denied, making the abortion policy in the Republic of Ireland one of the most restrictive among modern democratic societies. The Offences against the Person Act makes abortion illegal in all circumstances. Such law is directly connected with the religious perspective, whereby a puritanical form of Catholicism strongly influences the policy. The Catholic doctrine proclaims that the fetus is a living human being from the moment of conception.

Yishai (1993) also argues that in none of the four democracies can a radical feminist perspective or idea be located. This perspective advocates the values of gender equality and women's rights. Such value and idea brought more progressiveness to the Swedish abortion policy. However, even if Sweden is a high-grade welfare state, it is still a patriarchal one, in which women enjoy the benefit of welfare policies that they have a limited role in shaping.

Social Structures as Determinants of Public Policy

Etzen and Zinn (2000, 8-10) discuss social, structural, and institutional arrangements as possible causes of social problems. Some institutionalized societal arrangements are more biased against some people than others. For example, some criminal justice systems are believed to be biased against the poor, the disadvantaged, and minorities. Thus, the correction institutions house these individuals, rather than the more wealthy ones.

Marxism makes a similar argument that the social structure works to pit the proletariat against the bourgeoisie. Such confrontation is, in the Marxist view, deeply rooted in industrial society. This social arrangement is also responsible for the social inequality, along with the existence of social classes. An important aspect of the argument is that the capitalist state is always under the influence of the bourgeoisie in terms of the public policy. It responds to the interest of that class to the detriment of the proletariat. In other words, the state constitutes the instrument of the bourgeoisie. It

determines the direction of social change and development. The bourgeois class, through its influence on state policies, dominates society and societal values.

Most of Marxist arguments posit that the economic structure determines, shapes, and defines political, social, cultural, intellectual, and technological aspects of a civilization (Chelaa 2017). The bourgeoisie occupies the supreme social status, via its economic power of productive wealth, while the proletariat merely live off the sale of its labor (Heywood 2018, 66). This constitutes capitalism in the Marxist argument. The state, in its policy making, must pay much attention to the economic condition within a state. Its attention would inevitably be on the bourgeoisie, since it controls the means of production which essentially affects the economic condition of a state. It is, then, argued that the state loses its autonomy in its policy making to capitalism and the bourgeoisie.

Other arguments follow. In particular, the state may respond to the needs of other social groups, in so far as policy does not contradict with the interest of the capitalist class. Other than the supremacy of this class by itself, the economic well-being of any state largely depends on the productive wealth that the capitalist class generates. Governmental legitimacy owes much to the country's economic well-being. A state and its institutions, therefore, cannot help but uphold dearly the interest of the capitalist class. With economic determinism and the vitality of the economy, it is argued that state policies that favor capitalism and the capitalist class will in the end benefit the rest of the society (Anusorn Limmanee 1999, 47-53; Jessop 1982, 7-31).

Lindblom and Woodhouse (1993, 91-93) also describe the privileged position of businesses in public policy making. Businesses and related interest groups possess a high degree of influence over public policy making, both by the legislature and the executive. Businesses perform essential economic functions: houses must be built and jobs must be made available, for instance. If they falter, recessions and personal distress could follow, such as when loss of sales to imports led American Steel, automobile, and other industries to throw millions of workers out of employment. A disruption in the operation of big businesses also means a loss of tax revenues, especially when they relocate to other countries.

The economy and economic well-being are of major concern to state institutions. Politicians and government officials know that failure of businesses to maintain high employment will upset voters, as illustrated by President Bush's plummeting popularity and electoral loss to Clinton. Since irate voters tend to throw incumbents out of office, democratic governments cannot expect to survive politically in the face of widespread or prolonged economic distress. State policy makers, therefore, are constantly concerned about the performance of businesses (Lindblom and Woodhouse 1993, 91).

Institutions and structures, then, determine the nature of social problems and public policy. The above analysis illustrates the social and economic structure that causes economic and political inequality among societal members. The salience of a special class – the bourgeoisie – justifies its special influence on policy content. The institutionalized position of businesses and the capitalist class is argued in Marxism to extend beyond direct influence on public policy to power over ideas (Carstensen and Schmidt 2018, 12-14), thereby deflecting other ideas from emerging to compete with their influence. Such power over ideas is ingrained within the social structure and the economic determinism.

The Public Opinion and Public Policy

The general conception of public opinion constitutes the voice of the people – so-called public opinion. This is usually indicated by opinion polls reported in the news. The opinions aggregated by polls belong to private individuals, mostly in regards to social problems as well as governmental and policy matters, rather than private matters. What used to constitute private affairs, however, are regarded today as public or social problems, suggesting that these problems are wider in scope (Clawson and Oxley 2017, 15).

An important issue is how this so-called public opinion is derived. Public opinion is normally defined as the sum or aggregation of the opinions of individuals. Public opinion, then, refers to the preferences of individuals, tallied, such that all persons' opinions are counted equally. But such definition of public opinion is subject to debate. Since most societies are organized hierarchically,

public opinion might not be a mere aggregation of disparate individuals' opinions. In fact, some formation and expression of opinions carry more weight and significance than others. For instance, leaders of labor unions not only influence the opinions of their members, but also present their members' view to public policy makers. Simply tallying up the opinions of individuals on a specific issue overlooks this varying weight of opinion. Different groups of people have differential positions, significance, and influence on public policy. The varying weight of public opinion together with the varying social positions among individuals are in accordance with the argument for the significance of the social structure, with respect to its impact on public policy content. This dovetails with the immediately preceding section of this paper (Lindblom and Woodhouse 1993, 91-93; Anusorn Limmanee 1999, 47-53; Jessop 1982, 7-31).

Despite the argument that public opinion involves differential weights, the public opinion polling industry is in the business of extensively assessing and reporting public opinion using its definition of one person, one vote preference. State officials and institutions, the legislature and the bureaucracy alike, still find such polls essential. In a representative democracy, legislators usually attempt to follow citizens' voices and preferences, as reflected in opinion polls. President Obama gave speeches that referred to American public opinion. For instance, upon the Supreme Court's decision legalizing same-sex marriages, he stated that the decision affirms what millions of Americans believe in their hearts, emphasizing that public opinion shifted toward supporting same-sex marriages (Clawson and Oxley 2017, 3). As such, polls become an essential tool for democratic politicians in responding to the general public's wishes.

Democratic theorists generally support the influence of public opinion on public policy. They favor the concept of popular sovereignty – power in a democratic society ultimately rests with the citizenry. As such, participatory democrats expect the influence of the public on public policy to be rather substantial. Policy makers should, in their view, enact policy that coincides with the wishes of the majority, known by tallying up the citizens' opinions. Viewing political equality as important, participatory democrats expect responsiveness to the entire public, not simply the specific section of the public with strong voices. Pluralists also expect public policy to emulate public opinion,

although they prefer to keep citizens somewhat removed from the policy making process. For them, opinions are best expressed via organized groups, which are comprised of private individuals. These groups, then, lobby policy makers, trying to convince them to support the policy that is in the interest of the groups' members (Clawson and Oxley 2017, 350-351).

One indication of the connection between public opinion and public policy is public acceptance of the latter. In Cobb and Coughlin's study of the elderly drivers (1998, 420), at issue was whether the public, especially the elderly, is willing to go along with the new driving test requirement. Public acceptance refers to value acceptability in this particular study. In a Thai case, the 2013 protest on the streets against the Amnesty Bill perhaps suggests the fact that the public rejected the Bill, because it was proposed by the party directly connected with the former Prime Minister Thaksin. The Bill was argued among protesters to open the way to acquittal of Thaksin, who had been convicted of corruption (BBC 2013). Public opinion, then, could affect the legitimacy of a proposed policy, scorching its process through the legislature.

The Public Interest and Public Policy

The public interest or the societal interest is distinguishable from public opinion. The latter constitutes the tallying of personal opinions, indicating that each person's opinion represents her private interest. It is thought to be the selfish and usually materialistic interests of particular individuals or groups. In contrast, the public interest is closely related to the general will, which, in Rousseau's terminology, refers to the welfare of the whole, the public, the collective interest of society – the common good. The general will is always positive, implying something beneficial to the public. Democratic elitists urge state officials to make policy decisions based on the general welfare of the public – the general will – not simply following public opinion (Clawson and Oxley 2017, 9).

By entering into the social contract, the public subjects itself to an authority, albeit not totally forgoing individual freedom. The authority – the government – bases its decisions on the general will, reflecting the collective good of the community (Heywood 2015, 165). Public policy of all types should constitute the general will, in that it should always be, or at least expected to be, of benefit to society.

Health policy, for instance, should positively affect public health. Rousseau distinguishes the general will from the will of all – the sum of individual desires (Clawson and Oxley 2017, 6). Such sum of individual desires comprises public opinion, which represents the amalgamation of individual preferences in society. As such, public opinion, in comparison to the public interest, bears no indication whether it is positive or negative; it could be either.

The public interest and the general will, are both in line with the belief of elite democrats. They believe that the public should be involved in electing officials but leave the policy details to the elected officials. They view citizens as not interested in following politics closely enough to make decisions about complex matters and as incapable of seeing beyond their own interest. Citizens, therefore, are unsuited to the making of choices that are in the best interest of the nation. Elite democrats, then, prefer to leave policy making to those with expertise – the leaders. Officials should do as they see fit – the general will – corresponding to the common good (Clawson and Oxley 2017, 351). These ideas of elite democrats differ somewhat from the representative democracy theory which puts a higher emphasis on public policy being responsive to the public opinion.

The Thai excise tax on sugary drinks which went up on October 1, 2019 can be considered to be in the public interest, since too much sugar poses a health risk. The tax hike this time is imposed on the producers of the drinks, who are prohibited from passing the tax burden on to consumers. The tax increase aims to make the producers reduce the sugar content of the drinks so as to deliver health benefits to consumers of the products (The Thaiger 2019b). All taxes are coercive in nature; but they, including this particular one, are generally expected to be for the common good, satisfying the general will. The public interest is, therefore, one essential source of public policy.

Conclusion

This paper has described extensively reviewed concepts dealing with societal reasons bringing about public policy and policy directions. Various societal forces were argued to exert impacts in their own ways. At any one time or on an issue, one societal force might dominate a policy direction, while at another time or in another issue area, other forces might dictate certain policy

contents and, in the end, policy outcomes. Various forms of social conflict such as competition for resources, inequality and social stratification, societal values and public ideas, institutional structures, public opinion, and the public interest were all shown to have special roles in guiding public policy.

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