MODELS OF POLITICS

What is politics?

- There are many ways to define politics:
  - ➤ Politics is a struggle over *"who gets what, when, and how."* - Harold Lasswell
  - ➤ 'Politics' refers to conflicts over character, membership, and policies of any organization to which people belong – Theodore Lowi and Benjamin Ginsberg
  - ➤ Politics is the art of looking for trouble, finding it everywhere, and applying the wrong remedies – Groucho Marx

Thinking about politics

- Social science provides us with models that we can use to structure how we think in order to *describe*, *predict*, and *manage* political situations. As in the natural sciences, models are abstractions that simplify reality so that we can isolate and examine individual aspects of an issue.

- In order to be effective, models of politics or public policy need to be simple, organized, and congruent with reality. It should also be framed in commonly accepted concepts and language.

The rational/technical view of policy

- One model of politics sees public policy as the result of a rational progression through a series of steps:

  - ➤ problems are identified
  - ➤ public policy responses are developed
  - ➤ policies are rationally selected based on their technical merits
  - ➤ policies are implemented
  - ➤ policies are evaluated

- This model can be useful for organizing information about a policy and sometimes for describing a political decision, but it doesn't always make sense and it is not very useful for predicting political decisions or formulating strategy.

Governmental politics: Graham Allison

- Background on Allison: Professor at Kennedy School of Government. "Governmental Politics" theory of policy articulated in *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* in 1971.

- Public policy is the result of the actions and choices made by *multiple actors* in a *political setting.* "Solutions" to public problems to do not come from methodical, detached analysis: they result from complex webs of decisions, deadlines, and

events. Specific policy decisions are as much a result of the interests and skill of individual actors as the rational reasons which support them.

- "To identify what a particular formal governmental decision was made, or why one pattern of governmental behavior emerged, it is necessary to identify the games and players, to display the coalitions, bargains, and compromises, and to convey some feel for the confusion." *(Essence of Decision, pg. 146)*

- Who "plays" in this process is determined by formal governmental positions ("Players are men in jobs") and by each individual's own interests. There are many issues on the agenda at any time, and players have to pick and choose the ones to which they will devote their time.

<u>Conflict and displacement: E.E. Schattschneider</u>

- Background on Schattschneider: One of the 20th Century's leading political scientists, wrote and taught many of the foundation ideas about interest groups, pressure politics, and political parties. Seminal work on interest group politics was the *Semisovereign People* published in 1960.

- The fundamental idea of politics is *conflict*. The outcome of conflicts is determined by the scope: how the conflict is expanded or contracted to take in or push out other participants. Every new participant in a conflict brings with them a new set of ideas and resources that disrupts the balance between the original combatants. *Defining the scope of a conflict* is consequently the most important strategy of politics.

- "What happens in politics depends on the way in which people are divided into factions, parties, groups, classes, etc…a change in the direction or location of the line of cleavage will determine the place of each individual in the political system, what side he is on, who else is on his side, who is opposed to him, how large the opposing sides are, what the conflict is about, and who wins." (*Semisovereign People*, pg. 60-1)

- "All politics deals with the displacement of conflict or efforts to resist the displacement of conflicts. The substitution of conflicts looks like an argument about what the argument is about, but politicians are not as confused as they seem to be."

- In this framework, political decisions are the result of how issues are framed and defined and how conflicts are rearranged and displaced. One good example: the spotted owl and the management of forests in the Pacific Northwest. Environmentalists expanded the issue nationally as a deliberate strategy to bring in more interests and change the decision-making arena.

Political paradoxes: Deborah Stone

- Deborah Stone is a Professor of Law and Social Policy at Brandeis University. She is Editor of the American Prospect and wrote *Policy Paradox: the Art of Political Decision Making* (1997).

- Policy is an inherently political process defined by political reasoning and strategic representation. "Political reasoning is reasoning by metaphor and analogy. It is trying to get others to see a situation as one thing rather than another…It is strategic portrayal for persuasion's sake, and ultimately for policy's sake." (*Policy Paradox*, pg. 9)

- Policy does not happen in a marketplace of competitive, self-interested individuals: it happens in a community where decisions are made collectively and people are sometimes motivated by unselfish interests. The struggle over policy is a struggle over ideas, not just material needs. "People fight about ideas, fight for them, and fight against them…Moreover, people fight with ideas as well as about them. The different sides in a conflict create different protrayals of the battle: who is affected, how they are affected, and what is at stake." (*Policy Paradox*, pg. 25)

- Interests do not exist in an objective, abstract sense. They emerge when people are mobilized. Representation, by individuals and groups, is the process by which effects and experiences are framed to promote the development and activation of interests. "Problems do not have inherent, fixed effects that fall in certain patterns, willy-nilly. Rather, a large part of politics consists in trying to influence how other people perceive effects of policies or proposals." (*Policy Paradox*, pg. 224)

- "Problems are defined in politics to accomplish political goals – to mobilize support for one side in a conflict. To define an issue is to make an assertion about what is at stake and who is affected, and therefore, to define interests and the constitution of alliances. There is no such thing as an apolitical problem definition. In confronting any definition of a policy problem, the astute analyst needs to ask how that definition also defines interested parties and stakes, how it allocates the rolls of bully and underdog, and how a different definition would change power relationships*." (Policy Paradox*, p. 231)

- Rational decision models assume that people have clear goals, clear alternatives for action, and a clear understanding of the costs and benefits of each alternative. In the real (political) world, the process of goal definition is itself a means for advancing support for a particular decision. Similarly, how alternatives are presented – which ones are included and which ones are ignored – is itself a political struggle influencing which ones are ultimately selected.

Resources:
Schattschneider, E.E. *The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America.* Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988.

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