



PUBLIC POLICY

What is Policy?

A simple explanation of public policy is when, where, and how the government invests its resources. Public policy is a plan of government actions that guide decisions for the purposes of achieving a desired outcome, and represents the overall direction of the federal government. Public policy is formed by the laws, regulations, and executive orders issued by the government.

The legislative and executive branches, represented by the Congress and the Administration respectively, are the primary policymakers in the federal government. The Congress exercises its policymaking powers by creating laws that authorize government actions, and budgeting and appropriating federal funds. The executive branch's policymaking power is embodied in departmental regulations that establish administrative law, executive orders that mandate administrative actions, departmental and agency budget requests that fund federal government programs, and internal rules and standards.

Why is Policy Relevant?

Getting a tangible idea of where policy affects their daily lives helps to illuminate the relevance of the policy process to the average taxpayer. To think about it plainly, public policy is your tax dollars at work. At that most basic level, policy applies to you because it's your dollars that are being spent.

But public policy permeates nearly every aspect of your daily life. Transportation policy helps determine the speed limits on the roads you drive and the fines you face if you break the speed limit. Energy policy helps determine the fuel-efficiency requirements of your car and the price you pay at the pump through gas taxes. Tax policy helps determine exactly how much of your pay check you actually take home every month. Welfare policy helps determine the size of your Social Security check. Education policy helps determine the size of your child's class and what it takes to receive a high school diploma. Environmental policy helps determine the purity of the air you breathe and the water you drink.

Why Get Involved in Policy?

Clearly, policy is important and dictates many of the most basic things in life. Don't you have a right to know how your money is being spent, and shouldn't you have a say in where that money goes?

For many, policy seems to be a distant, abstract process, played out in smoky backrooms, left exclusively to government officials and lobbyists in Washington D.C. The truth of the matter is that there are ample opportunities to engage in the policy process through the press, the legislative process, the regulatory process, and through collaboration with other interested individuals to research and advocate for a particular issue. You are a vital part of the public policy process because your unique expertise and experience and your innovative solutions present a fresh perspective to policymakers who do not share your applied understanding to natural resource issues.

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