

The Policy Cycle

The **policy cycle** is a representation of the path a policy takes through its 'life span'. It was developed to get away from the narrower 'how a bill becomes a law' perspective of older civics textbooks. The cycle is divided into a series of **stages**, each of which represents a distinct phase of the policy process. The process is called a cycle because it incorporates feedback from the impact that a policy makes into the policymaking process itself.

The stages include:

Condition. A condition is a state of affairs. It may exist without anyone thinking that government ought to take action.

Problem. A condition becomes a problem when it is perceived by relevant actors as needing governmental intervention.

Systemic agenda. A problem gets on the systemic agenda when it is widely discussed among attentive publics as an issue for governmental involvement. Press coverage is a good indicator of systemic agenda status.

Formal agenda. A problem gets on the formal or governmental agenda when it is scheduled for discussion or action by a governmental body. This can include a congressional hearing, the introduction of a bill, or the filing of a court case.

Formulation. This stage includes making a policy explicit and legitimating it by *enactment* by a policy-making body. [Most of 'how a bill becomes a law' takes place in this stage. In the policy cycle approach, this is but stage of the policymaking process.]

Implementation. The policy is put into effect--oftentimes by establishing a governmental agency or expanding the duties of an existing agency.

Impact or Effect or Consequences. When the policy has an effect on the initial condition that stimulated the policymaking attempt. If the policy has effects on conditions other than the one that stimulated the policymaking activity in the first place, we speak of 'unintended consequences' or 'unintended impacts'.

Evaluation. People evaluate the consequences of policies, and may demand further action. These new demands 'feed back' into the policymaking process. That is, people may see the policy as causing problems itself--so this 'condition' becomes defined as a new 'problem' for government.

For example, welfare policies were established to alleviate a serious need. But many people came to see the policies themselves as also causing problems--primarily a disincentive to work among recipients. It remains to be seen whether welfare reform will result in a different set of problems that will 'feed back' into the policy cycle once again.