Who should lead Policy or Politics?

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What is Public Policy[2]?

Meriam Webster dictionary defines **public policy** as "*government policies that affect the whole population.*[3]"

Wikipedia defines it as "*the principled guide to action taken by the administrative executive branches of the state with regard to a class of issues, in a manner consistent with law and institutional customs.*[4]"

While **Politics** is defined as, "*the activities associated with the governance of a country or area, especially the debate between parties having power.*"[5]

Wikipedia defines Politics as "the process of <u>making decisions </u>that apply to members of a group. More narrowly, it refers to achieving and *exercising positions of governance — organized control over a human community, particularly a state*. <u>Wikipedia</u>"

Some define politics as the "*<u>exercise of power</u>*[6]"

Public Policy vs. Related Fields

While related, public policy still differs from other disciplines such as political science, economics, or philosophy. This can be illustrated by looking at some excerpts from the description of the Public Policy program at Stanford University.[7]

> *Students (and other interested parties as well) often ask about the differences between Public Policy as a major and related subjects, such as political science, economics, or certain fields of philosophy. Public policy analysis requires students to understand tools and principles taught in political science as well as economics and to integrate that learning in order to <u>pursue goals whose values are based in moral and political philosophy.</u> In contrast, **political science** deals chiefly with the processes of <u>political decision making</u>, while **economics** focuses principally on efficient <u>resource allocation</u>. **Philosophy** seeks to provide a rational relationship between fundamental values and actions.*

In order not to create a philosophical debate, or a useless discussion loop, I want to keep with my original question: **"Which should drive the other, public policy or politics?"** From the above definitions and distinctions, we realize that politics is mainly concerned with the "<u>*exercise of power*</u> and <u>*governance*</u>" while public policy should aim at achieving the "<u>*public good*</u>."

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[2]. I sought "as simple as possible" definitions derived mainly from dictionaries and other open sources for the sake of simplicity.
[3]. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/public%20policy
[4].https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_policy
[5]. Can be found at the following link:
www.google.ps/search?safe=active&ei=LfkFWvOgEszWUda3ntAN&q=What+is+Politics&oq=What+is+Politics&gs_l=psy-ab.3..0l10.4254.6485.0.6925.8.8.0.0.0.0.241.1140.0j7j1.8.0....0...1.1.64.psy-ab..0.8.1140...0i67k1j0i203k1j0i20i263k1.0.W9q81zVYGXA
[6]. Can be found at the following link:
https://www.google.ps/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=3&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwiCvKOC37TXAh XC66QKHaIoCeoQFghcMAI&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.open.edu%2Fopenlearn%2Fpeople-politics-law%2Fpolitics-policy-people%2Fwhat-politics%2Fcontent-section-2.1.4&usg=AOvVaw3ZRZAAvsvpHKURLyftLReQ
[7]. https://publicpolicy.stanford.edu/about/what-public-policy-stanford

The questions:

This article will attempt to answer the following questions:
1. Do we or can we trust politicians to be good public policy makers?
2. Can public policy rely on politics to achieve its goals?
3. What are the political requirements for sound policymaking?
4. By the same token, can policy makers be good politicians and succeed in political positions of power?
5. What can public policy offer politics and those in the positions of governance?

The Answers

First: Can politicians be good policy makers?

As we know public policy goes through a sequence of steps called policy cycle which range from *identification of issues, lobbying for them, getting them approved and adopted, and then translating them into action plans to be carried out by the executive branch of government*. At some point, many of these public policies depend on the support of those politicians in power who can advocate for them to pass. Many good policies fail to elevate to the higher level or the next step because they get killed by politics.

What may be critically needed, then, is for politicians to have the moral commitment for the *public good* rather than the *greed* for the accumulation of power. In other words, good policymaking can greatly benefit from the support of politicians, who are accountable, who have integrity, and who work for the public good. Of course, some public policies are adopted by some politicians only as an election agenda. The real test is how long will they hold onto these "ideals" and how far they can go to show their commitment. If politicians understand how public policy works and how they can create a win-win policy alternatives they definitely can be good policy makers; by contrast, if all they care about is the accumulation of power and ascending to the top they will hinder good policy making, because most of the time they are self-serving and not serving the "general good."

Second: Can public policy rely on politics to achieve its goals?

This question may be asked in a different way, "can politicians be trusted to make good policy?" Politicians are well known for switching positions and many master the art of deception. Public policies require stable and steadfast stand for them to pass and succeed. Many lobbyists for or against some public policies are in fact shrewd politicians. They measure the value of any public policy on *"what is in it for me?"* scale; and to them the issue is not about "*fairness*" it is rather about who "wins and who loses." Thus, policy makers and those who are pushing for policies (especially socially oriented policies – serving the public good) should be aware and learn to practice the art of "aligning" and "leveraging" their policies to appeal to those in power. Relying on the assumption that politicians are always motivated by creating "added public value" for the achievement of "public good" may be shortsighted. Therefore, intelligent public policy requires good understanding of the nature and dynamics of politics and the ability to align itself with powerful politicians **but** without losing its direction or deviating from the long-term goals and strategies. It may require adopting some tactical steps to draw politicians in; but by all means the long-term strategies should be protected from the influences of bad politics. It is better to align with politicians who have good record of accomplishments around social causes because they are less likely to betray the moral majority.

Third: What are the political requirements for sound policymaking?

Good policymaking cannot succeed, especially on the long run, if the following conditions exist:

1. **Highly centralized undemocratic systems**; because these tend to be highly political and public interest may not be well served.
2. **Fragmented political systems** with a great deal of negative political activity caused by political in-fighting.
3. **Unstable legislative structures** that are democratically and publicly elected.
4. **Lack of balance among the three branches of government** (legislative, executive, and legal).

It is most dangerous when/if the executive branch dominates the scene and becomes the policy initiator, maker, and implementer of public policies at the same time. This lack of balance will create a lack of accountability and a weakened ability of others to question those in power.

5. **Low level of public trust in the government and/or the public officials**. This lack of confidence will very often seep into public policy making and to those working in it who may be perceived as "traitors" and "collaborators" with the corrupted politicians.

There is no ultimate solution here; the most important thing is to be clear and stay in open communication with key stakeholders. Never lose sight of the policy goals and try really to strengthen effective leadership that guides the strife for an adopted vision. Always try to enlarge the circle of the good, attract to it the powerful, and try to garner as much support as possible. What we all should be striving for is an effective democracy—a mode of governance that is built on sound legislative and legal rules and that is led by an able and "honest" government, accountable public institutions, and engaged citizenry.

Fourth: Can policy makers be good politicians and succeed in political positions of power?

While a good policy maker may hold public office, not every public policy maker can be a great politician. Nevertheless, public policy makers should be schooled in political science and should be trained on how to play the game of politics, or at least be aware of its dynamics. Public policy makers, like project managers, tend to be very practical and action driven; they may get frustrated by all the propaganda and "politics" and their frustration may lead them to antagonize key politicians or worse yet, quit the process altogether. "Dirty politics" can kill the best of public policies, and so the best approach is to stay the course and maneuver well, when needed.

Fifth: What can public policy offer politicians and those in the positions of governance?

What can public policy offer politicians and those in position of power? In other words, *how can we market public policy so it gains their support*? We can think of the following:

1. Adopt public policies that have *an impact on a broader margin of citizens* and not just serving a few. This is not a "numbers" game; it is rather a matter of IMPACT. For example, human rights issues, while maybe targeted for the benefit of a few, do have a wide impact on the whole society.
2. Engage as much constituents as possible from early stage of public policy making. Most politicians want to win the public support, which may translate to trust or vis-à-vis. The larger the numbers the more attention they will pay.
3. Sell the policy as a political win; never sound, "begging" for support. Present yourself as an equal. Politics needs public policy to survive. There is a great deal of power in a mobilized society gathered around a social agenda. What a better forum for a political candidate to "shine" than an issue that attracts a lot of public interest.
4. No matter how dirty it is, politics is still needed; change agents work on two levels: internally within the system as much as possible and externally by strengthening the forces of change that produce democratic and effective governing structures. This means creating pressure for change through advocacy and supporting politicians who align with the concerned public agenda.
5. Remember, that many great public policies were adopted, and implemented because there was a "moral minority" among politicians who saw the need for change. A good example is the "Civil Rights movement" who was supported by a minority of white leaders. Politicians can lend their voice to public policies at some point of time were these policies need the required packing for them to pass; lack of such support means the death of even the best of policies.

Politics VS Public Policy, Who Should Lead?

This leads us to the larger main question **"who should lead, policy or politics?"** The answer may not be that easy. The relationship between the two is very interconnected and interdependent. As we have illustrated above, sound policies require smart and effective utilization of political means. The public policy cycle exposes the policy under consideration to the scrutiny of politics via the various governmental institutions; and any public policy can hardly win if the political apparatus does not support it. In democratic systems, however, policymaking is at the center of the political process. Good policies especially those aimed at promoting public value for the public good are quite often the declared agenda of aspiring or returning political candidates. Passing and implementing policies that serve a wide margin of citizens is seen many times as the criteria by which a politician is measured and evaluated.

Furthermore, and because the voters hold the real power for deciding the fate of any politicians; many of the latter believe what will get them elected or/and re-elected is how well they serve the public.

Thus, policy makers should "partner" with politicians for the sake of creating sound and effective policies. Politicians, on the other hand, should collaborate with public policy makers who are mostly change agents driving social changes that have amassed public interest.

By contrast, in highly centralized un-democratic systems the relationship is negative, antagonistic, and confrontational between the two—the politicians on one side and policy makers and policy advocates on the other. Politicians in these systems are typically a minority who is self-serving manipulators that only care about themselves; and who rule by and through the accumulation of power. In such systems public policy making will become a highly complicated endeavor and lobbying for or against certain policies is highly dictated by the interests of the few (such as businesses and/or political parties) and the many. Thus, public policy becomes a game to serve the few than the public good notion mentioned earlier. This is not public policy as it should be; it is rather politicizing public policy. Under this regime, policies that are passed are those that align and serve the "elite." This is representing "**the elite public policy making model**" which is characterized by a minority of policy makers who create policies as "they see fit" and far away, from what the public actually need. The issue becomes not much about collaboration but rather about domination and the misuse of power.

We should all know that policymaking is imbued with politics but it should not lose its soul to politics. **Politics should not hijack policymaking**. Similarly, policy makers should learn to work with politics in a smart and pragmatic way and they should be trained in politics. Moreover, they should not seek to become politicians for the sake of politics; *they should rather play politics for the sake of policy*. Developing effective advocacy strategies and engaging as many stakeholders as possible is the best approach to winning gains in the public policy domain.

In modern societies who were able to develop effective systems of governance public policy making has become an institutionalized process that starts with the citizen and ends with him/her. The government as a tool that generates political activity does strive to meet the public interest effectively and fairly. In these systems of democratic governance transparency, accountability, and integrity are not just mere "buzz" words; they are rather *foundational cornerstones* upon which public institutions operate and are held accountable for that.

Democratic societies adopt public policies that many of its political leaders have actually envisioned and/or supported. Actually, many of those leaders have been able to transfer their vision of reform and development to their people; and as a result, the masses were mobilized to create public policies that translated this vision to reality. *We can cite many examples here: Gandhi, Kennedy, Mao Tse-tung, and others.*

In order for sound public policies to be realized, it is imperative that democratic political systems exist because they provide a better guarantee that politics will be in support of policy. **Good politics is required for good public policy and that can only be achieved in a democracy.**

Conclusion

To conclude, the real issue here is not about who should be the leader. In fact, neither politicians nor public policy makers and/or advocates should be at the helm; ***it is rather the people, the voters, the public who pay the taxes and cast their vote; those are indeed more deserving; and that is, in my view, the correct answer.***

Brief Bio:

Professional Profile

Dr. Abu Zayed has been a senior management professional and consultant with a proven record of accomplishment in leadership, consulting, training, teaching and research. He has held many key positions in Palestine and abroad; among which: The Chairperson of the Department of Public Administration; Deputy Dean, Head of the Registration Department at Birzeit University. Furthermore, he has also held key positions such as Senior Management and Organization Development expert; **Internal Management Consultant at Oregon Health Science University, USA; Senior Financial Oversight Analyst at the Division of Mental and Developmental Disability for the State of Oregon; Senior HR Consultant at Multnomah County (USA).**

Dr. Abu Zayed accumulated an excellent knowledge of the public and private sectors and has worked with several ministries in the Palestinian Authority -- such as the Ministry of Local Governance, Ministry of Education and Higher education, Ministry of Culture; Ministry of Economy; Palestinian Anti-Corruption Commission. This experience has helped me gain solid knowledge of the needs of the sector and the key-players.

Furthermore, he has worked on several key projects covering institutional building, strategic management, Human Resources Management/Development, and Local Governance. He has conducted many workshops and trainings in variety of areas, such as human resources, change management and leadership development. I have been the leading consultant for projects with Inter Alia; UNDP, CHF, GIZ, JICA, BTC, and KFW focusing on strategic management and restructuring. He has conducted a number of workshops and classes in US, France, Sweden, Tunisia, and other countries. Following are some of his Key qualifications:

- ➢ 20 years of consulting, training and research in organizational and institutional development, capacity building, human resources management, program evaluation.
- ➢ 15 years of organizational, program and project leadership and/or coordination in Palestine and abroad.
- ➢ 15+ years professional experience in group facilitation and team building.
- ➢ 15+ years of experience in advocacy engagement in areas of disability, gender equality, and human rights.
- ➢ 10 years of professional experience in institutional assessment and evaluation.
- ➢ Expert-level knowledge of strategic management and project management practices.