**The Policy Making Process**

**Introduction**

Every society faces problems that require collective solutions. Some examples might include improving education, protecting the environment, or ensuring public safety. In the United States, the government addresses these issues through public policy, which can take the form of laws, regulations, or programs.

While the process can seem chaotic, political scientists describe it as a cycle of stages: problem identification, agenda-setting, policy formulation, policy adoption, policy implementation, and policy evaluation. At each stage, different actors including elected officials, public servants, interest groups, the media, and ordinary citizens all play key roles. Understanding this cycle helps us see not only how government works but also where citizens can make their voices heard.

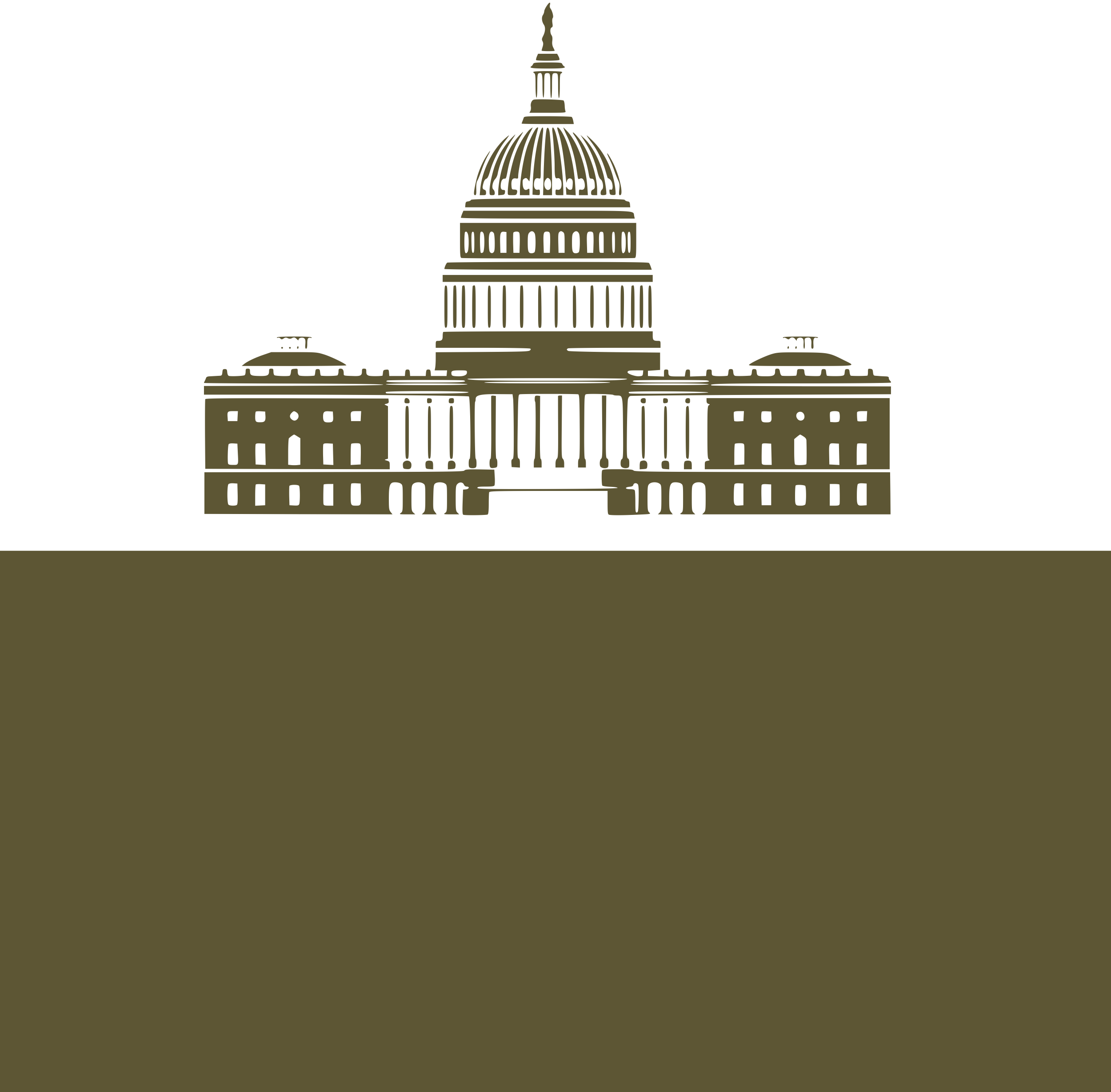
By analyzing the policy-making process, students can better understand the opportunities and challenges in translating ideas into action, and why some policies succeed while others fail.

**Key Terms and Definitions**

* **Problem Identification** – Recognizing and defining an issue as a matter for government action.
* **Agenda-Setting** – Prioritizing which issues gain government attention.
* **Policy Formulation** – Developing possible solutions and proposals.
* **Policy Adoption** – Deciding on and approving a specific course of action, often through legislation.
* **Policy Implementation** – Putting policy into effect through agencies, regulations, or programs.
* **Policy Evaluation** – Assessing whether the policy achieved its goals and what adjustments are needed.
* **Stakeholders** – Individuals or groups affected by, or with an interest in, a policy outcome.
* **Iron Triangle** – The relationship among Congress, bureaucracies, and interest groups that influences policy.

**Policy Making Process**

This diagram illustrates the stages of the policy-making process. Instructors can use this image to guide discussion or as a template for students to create their own policy maps.



**Active Learning Exercise: “From Problem to Policy”**

**Orienting Question:**  
How does a problem in society become a government policy, and what obstacles can appear along the way?

**Objective:**  
Students will trace an issue through the policy-making process and recognize how different actors influence outcomes.

**Part 1 – Warm-Up (Individual Reflection)**

* Think of a public problem you care about (examples: climate change, college affordability, vaping, internet privacy, mental health).
* Write down why it matters and who is affected.

**Part 2 – Group Activity**

1. In small groups of 3–4, pick one issue from your lists.
2. Assign each group member one stage of the policy-making process.
3. As a group, map how your issue could move through the stages:
   * Did something happen to gain attention around this issue? (problem identification)
   * Who raises attention and gets it in front of decision-makers? (agenda-setting)
   * What solutions are debated? (formulation)
   * Who approves the final decision? (adoption)
   * What agencies or actors carry it out? (implementation)
   * How do we measure success and identify problems to be fixed? (evaluation)

**Part 3 – Debrief**

* Groups share their “policy pathway.”
* Class discusses challenges (e.g., partisanship, costs, bureaucracy, political will).

**Optional Extension (Homework or Online):**

* Write a one-page reflection: *At which stage of the policy-making process do you think citizens have the most influence? Why?*

**Instructor Notes**

* This could work well early in the semester to set up later lessons on institutions.
* Adaptable for online classes: students can create a simple flowchart (hand-drawn or digital) to submit.
* Can be assessed through group participation, short written reflections, or presentations.
* Link back to historical examples (Civil Rights Act, Affordable Care Act, New Deal programs) to reinforce how the cycle plays out in practice.