

The Elite Theory in the Context of Public Policy Making

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Abstract

Behind the management of a state, there exists the minority "elite" that dictates who gets what, when and how. Thus, the idea that the minority makes the decisions (policies) that affect the general public remains inviolable and sacrosanct and as such basis for understanding public policy analysis. It is on this premise that this paper though a directed and summative content analysis beams the searchlight on the relationship the elite and public policy with emphasis on elite theory. It conceptualizes elite as people who are distinguished by their status, income and knowledge, and have a significant impact on how public policy is decided across a range of political system. To this end, the influence of the elite on decision making is examined. It also examines the concept of elite theory, its criticisms and establishes its relevance in understanding public policy dynamics.

Keywords: Elite; Policy; Policy Analysis; Public Policy

1. Introduction

The conduct of living organisms in a political environment requires rules and regulations (detailed guidelines) otherwise known as public policy. The formulation of these policies is not everybody's responsibility. Thus, the elite of the society remain the makers and shakers of public policy and as such they are the custodians of the public policy; the pendulum of public policy swings according to their wishes. Arising from this is the existence of the minority called "the elite" – those who possess such characteristics of power, wealth, different skills and a monopoly of vital information (Micheal P. Smith 1974, pg. 1003-1034). Thus, every happening in a society relating to policies and directives is a product and resultant effect of their actions and inactions.

Elites are ubiquitous, they are the most influential and prestigious stratum in society. These 'elite' are those people who are recognized as outstanding leaders in a given field. Of course, there are political, economic, scientific, business and artistic elite with which societies in all its strata are moved and shaken. Even in a democratic regime where power is meant to reside in the demos 'the people' (E. S. Brezis and P. Temin, 2008), power is concentrated in the hands of a few. All political organizations, even democracies tend

towards domination by an oligarchy, which Mills (1956) called the power elite; this is the iron law of oligarchy as stated by Michels (1915).

It is in this vein that the focus of this research paper examines the concept of the elite and how they structure and pattern the political environment through public policies with a view to establishing the cost and effects relations between the elite that paddle the canon of the leadership of the society and public policy as the instrument through which their wishes are expressed and articulated.

Conceptual Clarifications

Policy

Policy is generally perceived as a principle of behaviour, conduct etc. thought to be desirable or necessary, especially as formally expressed by a government or other authoritative body. Anyebe (2016, p.8) opines that policy is all about designating behavior of some actor or set of actors such as an official, government agency, or legislator, in an area of activity.

Policy is equally defined as a protocol that is meant to guide decisions for the purpose of achieving rational outcomes. It is a statement of intent and is implemented as a procedure. This can be distributive, redistributive, regulatory and constituent policies.

Public Policy

The term public policy is a new imaging field of study and as a result of its newness, there is no commonly acceptable definition for the term. Public policy is a dynamic new area of study and a new area of specialization in public administration.

Generally speaking, one can refer to public policy as a government programme of action. It stands for various degrees of goal, articulation nominative and regulation of various governmental activities. By this, it means what the government intends to do and how it intends to do it.

Prof. Sharkansky refers to public policy as an important activity of government. In the same vein, Y. Dror (1971), defined public policy as a major guideline action. Similarly, W. I. Jenkins opines that public policy is a set of interrelated decisions by political actors or actors or group of actors concerning the selections of goals and the means of achieving them where those decisions should be in principle within the power of those actors to achieve.

As contributed by Dean G. Kilpatrick, National Violence Against Women Prevention Research Centre, public policy is perceived as a system of laws, regulatory measures, courses of action, and funding priorities concerning a given topic promulgated by a governmental entity or its representatives.

Robert and Clark (1982) measured public policy from goal attainment and power configuration point of view. According to them, public policy making process refers to methodical steps taken by the government to proffer remedies to problems, make decisions, allocate resources or values, implement policies and in general do the things expected of them by their constituencies.

From the above description of public policy, one can arrive at a cumulative point that public policy is all about detailed instructions of what is to be done and how to go about it.

Public Policy Analysis

Public policy analysis is simply the work of public analysts which is not limited to intellectuals and academics. Public policy analysis can be regarded as the study of public policy. It is the study of the causes, processes, formation, implementation and consequences of public policy. It is concerned with the description and explanation of particular policy choices and content, the determination of strategies or techniques for optimal policy making and the implementation, performance and impact of public policies.

More importantly, public policy analysis is a systematic study. It attempts to systematically gather data, to describe, explain and prescribe public policies with the aid of certain methods and analytical techniques that help in systematically generating and analyzing policy relevant information. Similarly, Quade in his book *Analysis for Public Decisions*, published in 1976 also defines it as “any type of analysis that generates and presents information in such a way as to improve the basis for policymakers to exercise their judgment”.

Poister (1978) refers policy analysis as the “analysis of the determinants, characteristics, and implication of public policies and programs and the substantive consequences and outcomes they produce”. As an academic enterprise, public policy analysis is aimed at improving the basis for public policy making, the content, knowledge about the outcomes and impact of public policy and ways and means of improving public policy performance. In this respect, public policy analysis is an approach to public policy that aims to integrate and contextualize models and research from those disciplines that have a problem and policy orientation.

The Elite Theory

Elite theory is a theory of state that seeks to describe and explain power relations in contemporary society. The theory posits that a small minority, constituting members of the political - economic elite and policy-planning networks holds the most power and that this power is independent of democratic election. The core doctrine of the elite theory is that it is a minority that makes decisions that affect the general public and that the minority ruling group is composed of those who occupy – commanding political positions. It over time changes in different ways. At times, it is through the recruitment of people from the lower strata of society into the ruling elite group. At other times, a new group is incorporated into the governing elite or a complete replacement by a "counter-elite" through a revolution, which Pareto called the Concept of circulation of elite.

It is therefore imperative to state clearly that the core doctrine of the elite theory stresses that it is the minority that makes decisions that bind and affect the general public. Hence, the bulk of the population (masses) is destined to be ruled by their decisions. These decisions in reference are political decisions. Mosca (1939) refers to this minority as the political class which includes a “wider circle of those who influence governmental decision as well as those who formally decide policies”.

Origin of the Elite Theory

Many philosophers identify Niccolo Machiavelli as the first modern philosopher because his motivations and explanations had nothing to do with religion. He was a realist who argued that 'to achieve anything good such as the unification of Italy and expulsion of the foreigners who ruined it- the prince had to be rational and tough in the exercise of power. This Machiavellian power approach took root in Europe and contributed to the elite analyses of Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto and Robert Michels.

Classic texts on elite theory include Vilfredo Pareto's *The Mind of Society: Treatise of General Sociology*, Gaetano Mosca's *The Ruling Class* and Robert Michels' *Political Parties*. Others are James Burham's *The Managerial Revolution* and C Wright Mills' *The Power Elite*. As mentioned earlier the term "elite" had been in use since the 16th by the traditional classical theorist like Machiavelli.

The origin of the theory of political elite, which came under active discussion by social scientists like Schumpeter, Lasswell, C. Wright Mills, can be traced back to the writing of a number of European thinkers in the year preceding the growth of Fascism-particularly Mosca, Pareto and Michels.

Even though this theory was first started in Central and Western European countries; as a critique of democracy and socialism, it was suitably adapted in the United States by a number of writers to explain political processes as they existed in their countries. The origin of the theory of political elite, which came under active discussion of social scientists (in the United States in the '50s) C. Wright Mills (Sociologists) can be traced back to the writing of a number of European thinkers in the preceding growth, particularly Mosca, Pareto and Michels.

Elite and Public Policy: the nexus

As postulated by Prof. Adam. A. Anyebe, in his paper titled *An Overview of Approaches to the Study of Public Policy*, "contrary to the belief that pluralism has an in-built mechanism for ensuring equity in the share of power and influence in society, in reality, public policy is, by and large, the mirror image of the ruling elite's interest"

The elite and public policy remain inseparable. They constitute the predominant forces in the management of any political environment. In fact, one can postulate that 'what makes the elite relevant is tied to their pivotal role in the making and the unmaking of public policy the symbiotic relations between the former and latter could best capture using the elite-mass model approach to public policy.

As advanced by the Graduate Center for Public Policy and Administration of the California State University Long Beach (2002), a policy-making elite acts in an environment characterized by apathy and information distortion, and governs a largely passive mass. Policy flows downward from the elite to the masses. Society is divided into those who have power and those who do not. Elites share values that differentiate them from the masses. The prevailing public policies reflect elite values, which generally preserve the status quo. Elites have higher incomes, more education, and higher status than the masses. Public policy may be viewed as the values and preferences of a governing elite. The elites shape mass opinion more than vice

versa. Public officials and administrators merely carry out policies decided on by the elite, which flows 'down' to the masses.

Quoting Professors Thomas Dye and Harmon Zeigler in Anyebe 2018, it assumes that:

- Society is divided into the powerful few and the powerless many; only a few allocate values (the masses do not decide public policy).
- The few are not typical of the masses; elites are drawn disproportionately from the upper strata.
- There must be slow and continuous movement of non-elites into elite positions, but only after they accept elite values, to maintain stability and avoid revolution.
- All elites agree on basic social system and preservation values, i.e., private property, limited government, and individual liberty.
- Changes in public policy will be incremental rather than revolutionary, reflecting changes in elite values (not mass demands).
- Active elites are subject to little influence from apathetic masses.

Although elite theory had been criticized because:

- It is culturally relative and symptomatic i.e. it is borne out of bureaucratic and non-democratic culture. The theory is accused of not being empirical. However, some empirical statements on inequality for example were made. Those that are not testable include value commitment to the status quo, stability, political order and domination by the minority
- The theory was rejected for its polemical attack on Marxism. It has to be noted that this attack stems from works of classical theorists that were conscious rejoinders to the central element of Marxist political theory
- Elite theory was criticized for assuming self-consciousness, coherence and unity of the elite group. Elite theories-Pareto and Mosca assume the elite group is homogenous

Nonetheless, the theory remains relevant and very apt in understanding public policy. Thus, both background and ideology have nothing to do with the validity of the theory.

2. Conclusion

The argument in this research paper is to rely on the standpoint that public policy is determined by the ruling elite, who are distinguished by their status, income and knowledge and have a significant impact on how public policy is decided across a range of political system. Dye (1981) summarizes the implication of this theory as indicating that public policy reflects elite values, serves elite ends, and is a product of the elite. The corollary of this assumption is that the general citizenry or the masses are apathetic and ill-informed and do not determine or influence policy through their demands or actions.

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