

Group Dynamics and Public Policy Formation: Insights from Nigerian Society

Michael Ayobami Fajobi^{1*} and Samuel Pamilerin Adesina¹

¹ Department of Political Science, University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

*Corresponding author

Abstract

This paper appraises the theoretical assumptions of group theory within the purview of public policy with an overview of major interest groups in Nigeria that influence government decisions. It begins by providing conceptual clarity on policy, public policy, and public policy analysis to lay the foundation for the subsequent discussion. The paper then examines the underlying assumptions of group theory and critiques its applicability within public policy discourse. Through the analysis of secondary data, this paper explores the role of group agitation in shaping policy formulation and implementation processes. It highlights the significant influence of group actions on government policies, illustrating how various interest groups exert pressure and influence decision-making processes. This paper concludes that public policy emerges as a result of collective agitation and interaction within a given society. It recognises that various groups play pivotal roles in shaping policy outcomes, yet their actions are typically governed by established rules, fostering a climate of peaceful competition among competing interests.

Keywords: Interest Group; Policy; Public Policy; Public Policy Analysis.

1. Introduction

Human existence is often characterised by extensive engagement in social interactions which does not exist in isolation of social problems and as man interacts in different scope of life such as economically, culturally, and politically these social problems remain inherent in human society. This preliminary assertion aligns with the Aristotelian perspective that human beings are inherently political animals. This notion portrays humans as social beings who are intrinsically inclined to engage in communal interactions for survival and flourishing. However, in addressing social problems impacting humanity, government as sovereign authorities are often observed formulating policies in response to discernible societal issues with a view to fostering development, growth, stability, and administrative efficiency (Obi, Nwachukwu, & Obiora, 2008).

In view of this, public policy can be better understood by adopting political theories with the utmost goal of establishing the nexus between politics and public policy. Perhaps the most laudable importance of theory in the public policy making process is to appropriately dissect the causes and consequences of political and governmental actions and decisions (Oni, 2006).

More elaborately, theoretical dimension of public policy analysis simply clarifies our thinking and understanding of politics and public policy. In the light of this context, the primary objective of this paper is to undertake a critical examination of group theory within the realm of public policy. To enhance clarity and precision, this paper is structured into five distinct sections; the introduction followed by conceptual clarification, the third section presents discourse on group theory and basic assumptions of group theory in relation to public policy, the fourth section is dedicated for relevance and critique of the theory. The fifth session therefore entails interest group and public policy making progress in Nigeria and concluding remark.

Conceptual Clarification

The following concepts are defined in order to understand the main thrust of this paper. These are policy, public policy and public policy analysis.

Policy

Within the context of this work, a policy is perceived as a relatively stable, purposive course of action followed by an actor or set of actors in dealing with a problem or matter of concern. Anyebe (2016, p.8) elucidates that policy can be perceived as delineating the conduct of an individual actor or a collective of actors, such as a public official, governmental entity, or legislator, within a specific sphere of operation.

In the same vein, policy is the proposed course of action which government intends to implement in respect of a given situation confronting it (Ezeani, 2006). Policy is often characterised as structured resource allocation mechanisms manifested through projects and programmes aimed at addressing evident public issues begging for governmental intervention (Abdulsalami, 2004).

Loosely speaking, policy is a statement of intent or an action plan of an institution, group, or government. The implication of this explanation is that there could be individual policies, institution policies, company policies, and governmental policies (Dye, 1995).

Public Policy

The concept of public policy is not universally defined or understood in a singular manner. Its interpretation varies significantly depending on the context, geographical location, and specific circumstances surrounding the subject matter at hand.

Consequent upon this, diverse conception of public policy exists, with some constraining it to the tangible actions undertaken by government, others focusing on governmental intentions, and yet others encompassing both the actions and inactions of government. (Dye, 2004). In a more explicit context, public policy is often formulated with the objective of impacting a specific targeted population within a defined geopolitical entity. The implication of this definition is that the people could make demands on the political system but it ultimately rests with the government to decide whether to acquiesce to these demands or disregard them.

Public policy is designed at solving a particular problem. Hence, from the standpoint of Arowolo and Egugbo (2010, p. 15) we can say that public policy “is an action or inaction taken or not to be taken by government”.

Robert and Clark (1982) assessed public policy through the lenses of goal attainment and power configuration. They defined the public policy-making process as the systematic series of actions undertaken by the government to address issues, make decisions, allocate resources or values, implement policies, and fulfill the expectations of their constituents.

Furthermore, public policy can be conceptualised as a network of interrelated decisions made by a political actor or group of actors regarding the identification of goals and the strategies for attaining them within a defined context, where these decisions ideally fall within the authority and capacity of those actors (Jenkins, 1978). Public policy therefore has to do with the formal decision of government in relation to its people and the ultimate goal of every public policy is to address the concern of the people. In the light of this, public policy could be based on education, agriculture, health, trade policy among others (Makinde, 2005).

Public Policy Analysis

Literature abound on the explanation of what public policy analysis connotes, Eminue (2009) perceived public policy analysis as any type of analysis that generates and presents information in such a way as to improve the basis for policy makers to exercise their judgment. Conversely, Chandler and Plano (1988, p. 96) posit that policy analysis involves “a systematic data-driven approach that offers alternatives to relying solely on intuition when assessing the impacts of policies or policy options.

Specifically, within the realm of public policy analysis, the emphasis lies on elucidation rather than prescription, conducting a rigorous investigation into the origins and impacts of public policy while amassing dependable research findings of general applicability. (Dye, 2004). From the foregoing, it can be deduced that policy analysis is the systematic study of the causes, processes, formation, implementation and consequences of public policy.

Group Theory in Public Policy Discourse

Group theory is a variant of pluralist theory notably with two variants; the total group view led by Arthur Bentley (1870- 1957) and moderate group view led by David Truman (1913-2003). The idea of group pressure was systematically articulated into a theoretical framework in the 20th century. Those who led this advancement were Arthur Bentley in his work “The process of government” subtitled “The study of social pressure”, David Truman in his work “Governmental process” and Earl Latham (1939-2013) in his book “The group basis of politics” published in 1952 (Eminue, 2009)

The group theory of politics posits that public policy and group struggle are inseparable due to the fact that what may be called public policy is the equilibrium reached in this group struggle at any given moment. Group theory analysis therefore represents a balance which the contending factions or groups constantly strive to win in their favour. Consequent upon this, public policies reflect the activities of groups (Anderson, 2003). In essence, group theory in public policy domain attempts to analyse how each of the diverse groups in a society tries to influence public policy to its advantage at the policy formulation level.

Group theory in relation to public policy recognised public policy as a reflection of the interest of dominant groups, as groups gain and lose power and influence, public policy will be altered in favour of the interests of those losing influence. Corroborating the foregoing, Latham argues that what we perceive as public policy is essentially a transient balance achieved during inter-group struggle. Once this equilibrium shifts in favor of new groups, a new policy emerges or the existing policy undergoes modification. Politics, fundamentally, involves a dynamic equilibrium formed through the contestation among diverse groups (Latham, 1965).

The major proposition of this theory in relation to public policy is that power to dominate and influence policy decision is dependent on group solidarity and power as a result, the ability of a group to tilt the policy of government to its favour depends on a number of factors as captured by Anyebe (2018, p.25) prominent among them are: wealth, organisational skill, leadership quality, bargaining skill, access to decision-makers and a modicum of luck.

More elaborately, the significance of wealth stems from the fact that extensive political mobilisation necessitates considerable resources. In all corners of the globe, even within the most democratic societies, political engagement incurs substantial costs. Consequently, only individuals or groups with financial means can orchestrate the mobilisation of the electorate and sway decision-makers to align with their preferences. However, wealth alone, devoid of organisational prowess renders a group ineffective. Success in influencing policy decisions hinges on the ability to conceive compelling ideas and garner widespread support for these ideas. In contemporary period, effective organisational skills entail the strategic inclusion of all stakeholders in the policy decision-making process. Pragmatically, a group seeking to mobilise the public to champion its ideas must navigate adeptly through the complexities of mainstreaming diverse interest groups. Central to organisational capacity for mobilising the public is leadership. A tangible leadership structure coupled with effective negotiation skills is pivotal. Without these foundational elements, a group will undoubtedly struggle to advance its agenda in policy arena (Anyebe, 2018. p. 9).

It is pertinent to note that ultimately, no group has monopoly of influence over government policy due to the fact that different groups are constantly striving to shape public policies in their favour, either independently or in collaboration with other groups that share similar interests. The tactics employed in this struggle include coalition building, compromises, exchanging favours, and conflicts among groups. In this dynamic environment, the majority or more influential people typically prevails in having their preferred policies enacted. However, even the minority or less dominant group manages to have their perspectives acknowledged, albeit temporarily (Anyebe, 2018, pp. 11-12).

Basic Assumptions of Group Theory

The group theory as a coherent theoretical analysis in public policy discourse is guided by the underlying assumption as succinctly espoused by Anyebe (2018).

1. Society is nothing other than the complex of group that composed it.
2. The society is a sort of Mosaic: apparently the word “Mosaic” was gotten from the scriptures how Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt about 3 million people made of different groups and size which entertain different interest. The meaning of this Truman’s idea is that the society always consists of groups. For instance, in Nigeria parlance, there exist labour groups, student groups, and even landlord association group.

3. Society is a conglomerate of groups which combines bricks, federate and form coalitions and constellation of power in a flux of restless alterations. In other words, the groups are many and the composition of the group is not static.
4. The society is sustained by push and resistance between groups which always results into competition among groups yet the society never breakdown. Bentley refers to push and resistance as the “Balance of group pressures”.
5. Politics is a product of group conflict. The proponents of group theory all dismissed the role of an individual in policy analysis.
6. Social policy is determined by group pressures. The advocate of this group is what will culminate into social policy (Anyebe, 2018: pp. 20-22).

Summatively, the idea of group theory in relation to public policy can be summed up as the product of competition and negotiation between groups in the society. The theory is relevant in analysing how diverse interest groups influence public policy without tearing up the nation. Another crucial importance of the theory is the fact that it promotes the core principle of democracy as it encourages popular participation among groups without restriction. The theory therefore frowns at any despotic tendency on the part of the leaders since what constitutes public policy is the agitation of diverse groups.

Critique of the Group Theory

Despite the usefulness of group theory in public policy domain, the theory has been criticised on quite a number of grounds. Perhaps the most generic criticism of the theory is the fact that the theory is concerned with the role of groups without adequate recognition to the individual member of the group in their analysis. While not disputing the fact that politics is a struggle among groups, one must also recognise the significant role of specific individuals. This is especially relevant in third world countries, where instances of one-man dictatorship demonstrate that an individual can wield considerable power and influence over an entire nation. Such individuals have the capacity to hold a country hostage and dictate outcomes, often by suppressing or eliminating competing groups within the society.

Futhermore, this criticism also known by the nomenclature “anti- individualist stance of group theory” is championed by Liberal theory of democracy the argument here is that any attempt to reduce the role of an individual in public policy making is an exercise in futility as individuals are not utterly irrelevant in policy formulation process (Olaniyi, 1998).

Another notable criticism of group theory is that of Roy Macridis in his book titled “Comparative Politics” published in 1960. Macridis posits that group theory postulates simplistic view of politics by reducing public policy to interaction between groups in the society. Hence, attempting to explain politics and policymaking solely through the lens of interests and group struggles is deceptive and ineffective. This narrow focus overlooks numerous other factors, including ideas and institutions, which play significant independent roles in shaping policy development (Anyebe, 2018).

The most critical criticism of the theory was offered by Mancur Olson. Olson criticised group theory as a logical fallacy based on the assumption that self-rational interested individuals acting in pursuit of group interest. Simply put, the agitation of the group in policy formulation process is a reflection of personal interest of those at the top echelon of the group consequently; individuals acting out of self-interest are in no way pursuing the interest of the group (Obi, et. al, 2008)

Conversely, another evident shortcoming of group theory is that in reality many people (especially the poor and disadvantaged) and interests are either not represented or only poorly represented in the group struggle. As Professor E. E. Schattschneider remarks about the under organisation of the poor, "The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent." Those who are not represented will have little voice in policymaking and thus their interests are likely to be sidelined. (Anderson, 2003, p. 1)

Interest Group and Public Policy Making Progress in Nigeria

Interest group is the representation of people or organisation with common concerns and Interests. They also work together to gain, preserve and promote certain benefit for their members through public campaigns, advocacy, strike actions and lobbying government to make changes in public policy either directly or indirectly.

Types and Activities of Interest Groups in Nigeria

Without doubt, there exist several Interest groups in Nigeria with diverse functions that they perform in relation to politics basically for the benefit of their members. This paper identified the following typologies in literatures:

Professional Associations: They are the most influential Interest groups in Nigeria. It consists of different professional bodies such as Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), Nigerian Medical Association (NMA), Nigerian Society of Engineers, Nigerian Economic Society among others. The utmost concern of these associations is to protect the interest of their members and readily available to influence public policy at any available opportunity a perfect illustration apt to this discourse was how Nigerian Medical Association called an industrial action of medical doctors to demand an improvement in health care delivery between 1983 to 1985. In similar vein, the Nigerian Bar Association has been at the forefront of the movement for the adherence to the principle of rule of law in Nigeria. It is important to note that professional interest groups are elitist and non-violent in pursuit of their interests (Oni, 2006).

Trade Union: in Nigeria parlance, the central trade union is known by nomenclature as the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC). The union was established in 1975 via Decree Number 44 of 1976 as the sole representative of all trade unions in the country. Nigerian Labour Congress has been on the forefront advocating for improvement in workers welfare and notably increment of minimum wage of workers in Nigeria. It is pertinent to attribute the April 2019 increment of minimum wage in Nigeria to the activities and agitation of the NLC in collaboration with other union in the country.

The Media: the press is a specialised interest group in Nigeria perhaps the most vocal in the country. The motive behind this submission is the fact that other interest groups channeled their demands and support through the media. Hence, the media is a veritable tool in educating the people about the plans and actions of government as the press also serve as watchdog checking the activities of government. The organised interest groups representing the press include; Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ), the Nigerian Guild of Editors, and the Newspaper Proprietors Association. These groups also play crucial role in influencing public policy in Nigeria.

Student Groups: the role of student groups on broader societal issues cannot be relegated. For instance, Nigerian student groups in 1962 played a crucial role during the nationwide campaign against the Anglo-Nigerian Defense Pact. The student group were also noticed during the “Ali must go” campaign in 1978. The activity of student group in Nigeria is coordinated nationally by the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) although there are other student groups across higher institution of learning in Nigeria. Over the years, student association in Nigeria have been advocating for improvement in Nigerian educational policy, facility upgrade across different institution of learning as well as influencing national decisions of government such as removal of government subsidies on petroleum products and the dissolution of Special Anti-robbery Squad (SARS) of the Nigerian Police Force (NPF) as a result of the ‘End Sars struggle’ in October 2020.

2. Conclusion

It is apt to submit that public policy is a product of group agitation and interaction in the society however, despite the high level of competition and agitation from diverse groups, the group theory in relation to public policy observes that groups are guided by the rule of the game which gives room for a peaceful competitive atmosphere among groups in influencing the plan, action and decision of government.

By and large, every group must strategise and package their agitation methodically in order to gain government attention. This paper therefore concludes that despite the inherent shortcoming of the group theory in relation to public policy, the theory is relevant in understanding the role of groups in influencing the policy of government.

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