



DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS, BOSTON

WORKING PAPER SERIES

**ELECTORAL POLICY, ITS STRUCTURE, IMPLICATIONS, AND
PRIMARY AND SECONDARY IMPACTS**

By

CHARLES CNUUDE

Professor
Department of Political Science
University of Massachusetts, Boston
Email: Charles.Cnude@umb.edu

December 2005

Note: This paper represents a work in progress. Please contact the author before citing any information from this paper.

Electoral Policy, Its Structure, Implications, and Primary and Secondary Impacts*

Courses in public policy depend on bringing together two streams of literature. One is the well-developed literature on the general policy process. The other is the growing literature on specific, substantive policy areas. The latter includes such topics as social welfare policy, foreign policy, defense policy, educational policy, environmental policy, health policy, policies on civil rights and civil liberties, to name a few. The purpose of this paper is to begin a discussion of the development of a relatively new public policy curriculum to add to the coverage of such courses. It thus hopes to make a contribution to this second literature by bringing to the attention of the field a policy area that has been all but ignored in the past. It is the substantive area of electoral policy.

For the most part the policy field that deals with the inauguration of the political process which results in other substantive policies has been left out of the discussion. Yet it is the set of policies that structure elections in democracies. In this paper I will argue that electoral policy is a compelling substantive policy area that should be included in public policy.

Several questions have to be asked when taking a public-policy oriented approach in teaching about electoral systems. They are the same as the curriculum asks about any policy field: What options are available to citizens and decision makers as they consider decisions about elections? From whence do these options derive? What are the factors underlying these options? What are the impacts of the choice of one option over another? What are the secondary effects of these choices?

Since the argument in this paper is that electoral policy should be added to the curriculum of public policy courses it is in effect making an proposal and an argument. It proposes the beginning of a discussion of what the content of that curriculum should be. The initial discussion will be that the curriculum should begin with the policy issues related to the main features of the different electoral systems found in democratic polities.

The paper will also argue that the curriculum should include an analysis of the factors that underlie alternative electoral policies. It will argue that the curriculum should analyze the policy impacts on society emanating from these different systems. Finally it will argue for the inclusion of the secondary effects of these impacts. My hope is that a new curriculum will emerge that will emphasize the choices available to students and citizens in general, as well as to decision makers and constitutional designers, concerning the consequences for democracy from the options available in electoral policy.

The paper proposes to begin the development of such a curriculum by suggesting some of its content in the pages below. Readers and others interested in participating in this discussion are encouraged to contact the author.

*Copyright 2005 by Charles Cnudde

Electoral Systems

Democratic polities have developed three main types of electoral systems, each of which have many variations. The proposal for a new curriculum suggest examine only the broad differences in order to highlight the policy issues involved in each. Subsequent discussions may elevate the importance of the many variations once the importance of electoral policy has been established.

In establishing electoral systems, polities have to make two types of policy decisions. They are the decision about the nature of the constituency or district from which electors will select candidates on the one hand and the counting rule concerning the number of votes necessary to elect on the other. When thinking about these decisions from within a given polity these decisions seem obvious because we are so familiar with the existing system that they appear as “givens”. In fact they are not, since there are many alternatives to the “status quo” that are available and each has profound policy consequences. Decisions about the district and the counting rule are factors that underlie each type of electoral system.

Constituency

In general, in terms of constituencies we have single-member districts which elect only one candidate and multi-member districts which may elect more than one candidate, and in some cases may select many candidates. Examples of single-member districts are city council elections in which there is one council seat to be filled in each constituency. An example of a multi-member district would be the case in which council members run city-wide (or at-large) to fill all or many of the council seats at once.

Counting Rules

In terms of counting rules, there are three broad decision types, the many variations of which will be ignored for the sake of this discussion.

The three broad counting rules are:

The plurality rule in which the candidate with the most votes wins, even if the plurality is less than a majority,

The majority, run-off rule in which a candidate must win a simple majority (defined as 50% of the vote plus one more vote) with the provision that if no candidate wins a majority a second, run-off election occurs between the top two vote-getters in the first election, and

Proportional representation (PR) in which parties win the number of candidates in rough correspondence with the percentage the party achieved in the election.

Under the plurality rule it is possible that when there are a large number of candidates, the winner could have far less than majority support. For example three candidates could split the vote almost evenly. In that situation, one candidate could win the election with only thirty-four per cent of the vote. Under the majority, run-off procedure a majority is required by law. If the election does not produce a majority winner, the law requires a second election between the top two candidates. Since there are only two candidates, the assumption is that one will achieve a majority vote. There have been precedents in the odd case where the vote is an exact tie, to settle the result (perhaps after a recount) by flipping a coin. Under proportional representation usually the candidates run on party “lists” and candidates win according to the per cent the party gains in the election. The common practice is to establish a “quota” of how many votes a party needs to elect a single candidate by dividing the total number of votes by the number of seats to be filled. The party will elect the number of candidates according to how often its number of votes reaches the quota. Different jurisdictions have slightly different ways of calculating the quota and different ways to redistributing the votes in excess of the quota.

It is clear that there is a relationship between these decisions of constituency and counting rules. One may not have a combination between proportion representation and single-member districts, for example. Nevertheless the combination of these two decisions underlies the types of broad policies structuring elections in democratic polities.

Table 1 depicts the three general types of policies structuring elections. It gives the usual combinations of electoral policies extant in democracies. It labels the single-member district, plurality rule combination as electoral type A. Similarly, it labels the single-member district, majority, run-off combination as type B, and the multi-member, proportional representation combination as type C. Each of these policy positions has a distinct history and consequence.

Table 1. Policy Decisions: Electoral Structure

<u>Electoral Type</u>	<u>Constituency</u>	<u>Counting Rule</u>
A.	Single-member	The Plurality Rule
B.	Single-member	The Majority, Run-off Rule
C.	Multi-member	Proportional Representation.

Electoral Type A.

Type A, combining a single-member district with the plurality rule, is the electoral policy most common to the United States and most other English-speaking nations. One frequently hears citizens in those countries speaking of the requirement of a majority. Often in fact one hears majority rule equated with democracy. In fact, although majority outcomes often occur in those countries, the requirement of the rule is a plurality, which as noted above, can be far short of a majority.

Presidential candidates in the U.S., for example need a plurality of the votes in a state to win its electoral college votes (exceptions are Maine and Nebraska, where the congressional districts rather than the state-wide tabulation determines the electoral votes, but the plurality rule still determines the district [which in this case is the State] winner.) The famous quote from the 1956 election when a voter said “you are the thinking man’s candidate” to Adlai Stevenson in which he replied, “but I need a majority” wasn’t technically true. He needed more votes than any one else in enough states, but apparently there were not enough thinkers to give him even that.

It is true that the Electoral College requires the majority rule, but that decision is removed from the voting (and thinking) public. It is interesting to note that this, along with some state and local elections, are the few instances of the majority rule in the U.S. However, the run-off is not a part of the Electoral College process in that the choice goes to the House of Representatives if a simple majority fails.

In addition to Presidential elections in the U.S. elections to the Congress also use the plurality rule, with the exception of Louisiana. Thus national elections in the U.S. use the plurality rule, for the most part. British Parliamentary elections also use this procedure and many use the British racing idiom to describe it, “first past the post.” This practice spread from Britain to many colonial counties, including the United States.

This type has several implications. An important one is that in a society in which there are many divisions of opinion such that the most opinions are spread across many small groups, most of that opinion will not receive representation. Instead the largest single group will, even if it itself consists of a small minority of the points of view. Other small groups will be outside the political process because they are divided.

Type B

Type B combines a single-member district with the majority requirement. The majority requirement is a political response to the unease many have with elections won with a minority of the votes. The choice between A and B represents a clear policy option that has profound implications. Citizens may feel that it is undemocratic to elect with a minority of the vote. However the implication of requiring a majority is that a coalition of minority voters can defeat the largest single number of voters. What are the circumstances in which this preference may prevail?

One is when there is ethnic or other antagonism that divides the society. In many parts of the old Confederacy the largest single number, although not always a majority, was African-American. Under the plurality rule if these voters voted together they could win. The majority requirement prevented that outcome. Similarly in Eastern Europe supporters of the former communist party often constituted the largest number of voters. Most of those nations adopted the majority rule when they achieved democracy to prevent the communists from winning.

The place of the run-off election makes clear the bias against the largest number in this policy. If a majority occurs in the first election there is no problem. The largest number wins. If the largest number does not achieve a majority, which is often the case, a new election occurs between the top two finishers. Note that in the plurality case the top winner would have been elected. The run-off thus is an opportunity for others to unite to defeat the candidate with the largest number. Frequently, but not always, that is the outcome. The question of whether it is democratic to require a majority at the expense of the largest number is a matter that should be debated as citizens consider electoral policies and their implications.

Type C

Type C based upon the logic of a multi-member district and proportional representation is the electoral policy often adopted in Western Europe. In this type usually we have party lists from which voters select candidates. Votes are tallied (often using a quota as described above) and the candidates from the lists win according to the percentage of the total vote in the district for that party. In an ideal case in a district that will elect ten candidates, if a party wins 50% of the vote, it will elect five of the members from its list, a party with 40% would elect four and so forth.

This type of electoral policy avoids the problem of the conflict between two problems: that of the largest number being deprived of representation if it is not a majority, as can occur under Type B, and the problem of leaving out smaller groupings which can not muster a plurality, as can occur under Type A. Until the percentages reach the level of very small groups, (many nations that use this type establish “thresholds” of what percentage, such as five percent, a party must achieve to be included in the calculation; a decision that is subject to political manipulation) most will be represented, but proportionally in this type. Since many different kinds of opinions will be elected to governing bodies according to their weight in the electorate, many feel that this type is the most democratic, defining democracy in terms of representation.

Consequences of Electoral Policy

The best known consequence of electoral policy is the way it structures the number of political parties in a nation. Duverger (1954) codified much thinking on this topic and is so doing began a trend of research on the subject. Duverger’s “law” says that where one sees single-member districts with plurality elections one sees two parties. In short, a consequence of Type A will be two-partyism. Recently, () has presented a proof of Duverger’s law, consequently, although there are exceptions, we can take this relationship as established.

Although a formal proof may not be necessary, it is logical to conclude that Type C will lead to multi-partyism. If there are different opinions about public policy in a society, these different opinions will find their expression in support for different organizations constituted to represent those opinions. An electoral policy that makes it possible for each of these opinions to be represented by different parties in rough

proportion to their weight in the society means that there will be a multitude of parties: the number will be a function of the number and size of the different opinion groupings.

In sum, proportional representation means that there will be a multi-party system. The number of parties is unknown, but will depend upon empirical factors which relate to the kinds of policy divisions in the society. In the limiting case of complete consensus there may be only one or a few parties. We assume that such situations will be few and transitory; in most cases there will be a diverse number of parties in any large society and consequently many parties under the Type C policy configuration.

The consequences under Type B are another matter. In fact until recent work has shown differently, scholars classified Type B and A in the same category. This mistake undoubtedly was occasioned by the empirical reality that nations using these types had majority governments. This result derived from two different sources. These sources help to inform us about the consequences of these policy options.

Type A leads to majority government even though the requirement for winning is merely a plurality. Parties under this type must bring together the largest number. The largest number that can defeat any other number is a simple majority. Consequently parties under electoral policies which require the largest possible winning coalition provide an incentive to build a majority because the most secure plurality is a majority.

This is the reason that majority governments frequently occur in Type A situations. Under Type B, on the other hand, the electoral policy requires a majority. Majority governments occur then not because of the coalition-building incentives that the public policy affords but because of the artifact of constitutional mandate or statute. The outcome under Type A is organic and under Type B, statutory.

Nevertheless it is interesting to ask what Duverger would say about the Type B requirements. What is the number of parties to be expected? The prior literature does not address this question. In an insightful empirical analysis () has shown that in the cross-national world there is an answer to this question. It is one more than two, or in Duverger's terms, three.

The theoretical reasons for this outcome are currently unknown, but there are some hints. First, unlike under Type A, the first election constituency under Type B is in fact not a single member district, but a two member district. This fact means that there is a profound difference between Type A and Type B opportunities for the parties. In the first election under Type B the party that contemplates second place does not have the same incentive to move toward a larger coalition as does the losing party under Type A.

Secondly, under Type B that party can hope to survive until the run-off and renew its efforts, whereas under Type A it is finished. A similar analysis concerning the parties that do not make it to first or second place in the first round may mean that they have incentives to work together to form a third party to challenge the number two party in the first round.

Table 2 summarizes the consequences of these electoral policy positions. It contrasts the two-party outcome of Type A with the multi-party outcomes of the other two types. Although A. and B. are similar in that majority governments are associated with both. They are different in their major social consequences: The party systems that they foster. The long and short of it is that the Type B policy, like the Type C policy, and unlike the Type A policy, results in a multi-party system. As a result we have three types of policy options which have different consequences for the party systems. Unlike the analyses of previous writers we now know that two result in multi-partyism. One of these results in three parties, one in many, the number of which is unknown and undoubtedly due to empirical factors; and one in two parties. These consequences have important secondary effects.

Table 2. Consequences of Electoral Policy

<u>Electoral Policy</u>	<u>Consequences for the Party System</u>
Type A.	Two Partyism
Type B.	Three Parties
Type C.	Multi-partyism

Secondary Effects of Electoral Policy

Often secondary effects of policy choices are not closely articulated with the policies themselves. For example it may take years before the secondary effects are clear. It is also the often the case that other factors intervene to weaken the relationship between the policy and these effects. In the case of electoral policy, on the other hand, the secondary effects for the nature of party regimes are so powerful and immediate that they structure the nature of the regimes that derive from these differing electoral policies. In a fundamental way, the choice of electoral policy impacts the nature of the political-party regime in that society. What is the nature of the regime alternatives?

Political-party Regimes

The secondary effects include how stable the government will be, how closely representative of opinion it will be, and how inclusive of diverse groups in society it will be. These characteristics are some of the elements of what this paper considers as political-party regimes. In each case these secondary effects have their sources in the policy decisions that give rise to these electoral policy options

Governmental Stability

It is well known that two-partyism tends to blur ideological differences because it provides incentives to the parties to appeal to the largest number of voters who often occupy the ideological center. This effect is the famous “median voter” result that is at the heart of Anthony Downs () theory of economic democracy. It means that parties will tend to have majorities. It may seem ironic that a system that does not require majorities will nevertheless frequently result in majority government. The explanation is that the most secure plurality is a majority because that plurality can not be defeated by any other percentage of the vote. Because of majority governments these systems do not have frequent, unplanned turnover. When turnover occurs in which party controls the government, that turnover does not lead to wide fluctuations in public policy as both parties court the middle. On both counts two-partyism leads to relative governmental and policy stability. The governments of the United States and the United Kingdom serve as the usual examples of this effect.

In contrast, multi-partyism tends to lead to fluctuations in these regards. The large number of parties would mean that few governing coalitions will last for long and ideological differences will frequently disrupt the governing process. The politics of Western European nations, such as Italy after World War II, serve as examples of this result.

It would seem logical that the three-party outcome would stand somewhere between the two-party and multi-party effect in these regards. The permanent competition between three parties would enhance ideological divisions and thus foster wide fluctuations in the policy positions of the regime compared to a two-party system but less so than under a multi-party system. Three parties, if they result from majority, run-off systems, would produce less stable governments than two-party government, but undoubtedly more stability than multi-party regimes. Consequently as one compares Type A to Type B to Type C, there would be a corresponding increase in governmental instability as a secondary effect of these electoral policy options.

Representation

On the other hand if the two-party system leads to governmental stability, this result is at a price. One cost is in the level of representation. As noted above the representation of many differing opinions, although minority opinions, which occurs in proportional representation, means that that form of democratic expression is at a maximum under Type C.

Israel, for example, with the most thorough going case of Type C (in which the entire nation is the electoral district for proportional representation) has the best representation of ranges of opinion among nations, and perhaps the most unstable government

ideologically. Representation in the United States and Great Britain, because of the blurring effect, in comparison, is minimized under the Type A option.

Again the Type B policy may stand somewhere between these outcomes in this regard. When this electoral policy results in a three-party system, more shades of opinion will be represented in the governing halls of a nation than would occur in a two-party system. Yet a multi-party system would represent an even greater range of opinion, other things being equal.

The variation in representation would seem to move from proportional representation where it would be the greatest to the majority, run-off system where it would be lower, and finally to the plurality system where it would be comparatively lowest. The secondary effects of electoral policy produce a ranking on this variable from Type C, to Type B, to Type A.

Inclusiveness

As argued above, parties under Type A conditions need to appeal to the largest number of voters. This means that they have an interest in developing a politics of inclusiveness as they can't afford to ignore even a small percentage of the electorate. Two-partyism consequently puts a premium on "the big tent", a politics of including everyone in the quest for the largest number.

Under Type C conditions, parties have a primary need to appeal to their ideological supporters. The parties can enter the governing process if they can achieve a reasonable percentage of the vote. While they undoubtedly would prefer a larger percentage to a smaller one, they do not have the overwhelming need of parties under Type A conditions, where they are completely excluded if they don't win the plurality.

Again it seems reasonable to assume the Type B conditions stand somewhere between these two. Parties under Type B have to win a majority, but they do not have to do so until the second round, after the more minor parties have been eliminated. The fact that two parties can "win" in the first round means the competitive structure for those parties is quite different from that of the two parties, only one of which can win, in the Type A situation.

It is clear in comparison that the need for inclusion is more relaxed for Type B parties. Nevertheless the majority requirement means that the inclusion imperative is not as weak for these parties as it is in the multi-party case under proportional representation.

Inclusiveness is an important party-regime condition that has not been well investigated in the literature. Nevertheless it is, like the other secondary effects, a dimension that varies. It is a variable in which Type A parties rank highest, Type C lowest, and Type B ranks somewhere between.

Policy Options and Trade-offs

The relationship between secondary effects and the electoral policy choices available present students, citizens in general, and policy makers with a perplexity. The perplexity is due to the relation between the stability, representation, and inclusiveness variables identified in this analysis. That is to say, the policy choices have to do with the selection of electoral systems.

If the policy goals are the choices between the secondary effects of stability, representation, and inclusiveness and the intermediate outcome is the party system, the choices over electoral policies have clear and immediate consequences. The problem is those choices lead to different party systems and they lead to secondary effects that have inverse relationships. In other words there is a trade-off among these goals.

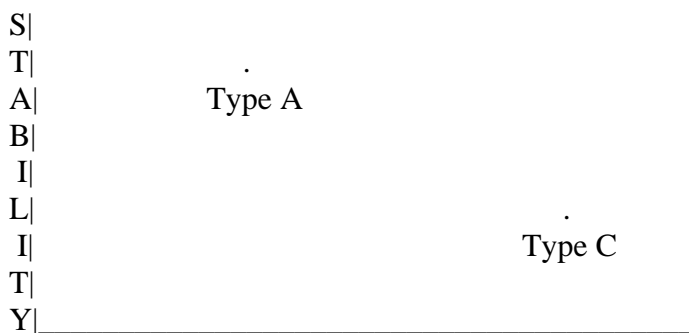
If the policy goal is to favor stability, the instrumental choice that gives that goal is the combination of single-member districts with plurality rule. The regime choice that is the result of Type A gives a two-party system which clearly favors governmental stability. There are many reasons to favor a choice of stability. Domestic peace is clearly one. In addition stability often is a criterion that investors look to when making their decisions.

Foreign investors in particular may want to minimize their risks by selecting stable nations in which to invest. Under this logic the instrumentality that leads to stability would be a preferred choice.

The problem is that another likely policy goal is representation. Under democratic theory many students, citizens, and policy makers prefer the structures that result in the most representative policy. As we have seen the instrument that leads to this outcome is proportional representation. The Type C situation with multi-member districts and proportional representation leads to a multi-party system which in turn enhances representation.

The problem is that there is a trade-off here. We can have stability or a high degree of representation, but not both. The reason is that the choices restrict us to the combination of district and counting rules that are mutually exclusive and inconsistent. We can choose Type A which rules out Type C, and vice versa.

Figure 1 illustrates this trade off. It shows that one can have a lot of stability but little representation, indicated by the point at Type A or a lot of representation but little stability, indicated by the point at Type C. Analytically, the points should be viewed as the end points of vectors moving in the space from the origin. A curve connecting the points would describe the trade-off curve between stability and representation brought about by the differences in electoral policy choices.



REPRESENTATION
Figure 1. Policy Trade-offs

The figure also shows that in the real world there is not a black and white situation. To make the point in ordinary language it has been necessary to use stark terms as if there were no differences of degree among the options.

Of course the Type A position is not devoid of representation as the position on the illustration shows. It also is not perfectly stable. Similarly, Type C may include some level of stability and departs from complete representation. The real situation is that each is more in one direction than the other but not perfectly associated with a given position.

This picture is consistent with the situation that policy choices often present, the lack of perfect relationships, but nevertheless, clear trade-offs. In this case Type A provides more stability than Type C, whereas Type C provides more representation. The problem is that the choices are not between stability and representation, but the instruments associated with the Type A and Type C situations.

A similar problem occurs when we consider the options related to inclusiveness and representation. Again the instruments work in opposite directions. With Type C we get a high degree of representation through multi-member districts and P.R., but for inclusiveness we want Type A which gives us single-member districts with plurality elections. Again, we can't have both. As the instruments are mutually exclusive and inconsistent, we can have one but not the other.

With Type A we obtain both stability and inclusiveness, but at a cost of how representative the polity would be. In democracies this is a high price to pay. Democracies of course place a high value on representation. One would think that choices among electoral policy options would be guided by this value. Despite this assumption, there is little discussion of changes in the electoral policy in the United States. In the United Kingdom, there is such discussion, but time will tell if there is serious support for this kind of constitutional change.

Minor and Third Parties in the United States

The example of the place of third or minor parties in two-party systems illustrates this problem. Students often ask what could be done to reduce the barriers against third parties in America. Usually they have in mind issues like inviting more candidates to the Presidential debates or making it easier for third candidates to get on the ballot. Many students feel that the polity would be more representative if those parties had a greater opportunity of entering the government.

In fact there have been campaigns in the United States to reduce the barriers against those parties. Yet rarely do those campaigns address the role of electoral policies. It is clear from this analysis that the Type A configuration discriminates against third parties, compared say, to the Type C situation. Consequently none of the agitation against these barriers would have effect as long as electoral policy remains the same.

Conclusions

There are three major electoral policies that democracies evolved to solve the problem of deciding how to select governmental leaders. These are based upon the decisions of the nature of the constituency and the counting rule. The combination of these will result in the following electoral systems: single-member districts with plurality rule, single-member districts with majority rule (and run-offs), and proportional representation.

Each of these combinations has impacts on society. The most immediate impact is the number of parties that will compete in these elections. The first combination above (Type A) will result, everything being equal, in a two party system. The second (Type B), it is believed, will result in a three-party system. The third, (Type C) will result in a multi-party system.

As one might expect each of these party-regimes will have secondary effects. Type A has the effect of emphasizing stability and a politics of inclusion. Type C, will result in instability, more of a politics of exclusion, while maximizing representation. Type B will result in some moderate levels of each of these. The choices for citizens and decision makers involve a choices over trade-offs in which the gains in one dimension will be offset by losses in another.

There are several general points that have been emphasize here that can inform students who study public policy. These points can be derived from this discussion and can for the basis for expanding upon it. They are:

1. Public policy involves choices among instruments that are not perfectly related to desired policy goals.

The choices among electoral policies give rise to party systems but those do not uniquely determine the major goals of democracy, such as representation, inclusiveness, and stability.

2. Public policy involves choices that are related to major social goals.

Although the electoral policies are not perfectly related to desirable goals they are in fact related, so that these choices have important consequences for societies that value representation, inclusiveness, and stability.

3. Public policy often involves choices among trade-offs.

It is possible to achieve one kind of desired goal such as representation, but often at the expense of another such as stability.

4. Electoral policy is a substantive field that involves the choice calculations similar to every other substantive policy area.

There are instrumental, intervening, and secondary goals involved in electoral policy choices.

5. Electoral policy is logically prior to other substantive policy areas, because it provides the decision making context for those policies.

In democracies the policies that structure elections provide the decision making context for citizens in general, decision makers, and constitution framers that determine the other policy choices in society.

Electoral policy like every other substantive policy area is the result of the polity's decisions. It is thus the end product of the political and administrative system. Unlike some policy areas, however, electoral policy frequently has constitutional status because it provides the overarching legal framework that structures which individuals will participate in a nation's decision making. Thus it at the same time is the one of the products and part of the governing apparatus for the political system. Future discussions of this policy area could explore the implications of this dual role, as well as the primary and secondary impacts of the many variations of electoral policies that exist in the world.

The above pages sketch out suggestions of some of the issues that a new curriculum on electoral policy would contain. The actual development of a curriculum, however, will be a collective enterprise. A discussion among many interested in the teaching of public policy would lead to a help to form the actual curriculum for this field. This paper hopefully has helped to begin the process of that development.