



## Lesson 2: Introduction to Public Policy

### Overview

In this lesson, students look at the link between policy and problems. First, students read and discuss a short article defining policy. Then they discuss policy and its connection to problems. Next, in small groups, they do a multimedia search using newspapers, magazines, television news, or online news sources to find examples of public policy.

### Objectives

#### Students will be able to:

- Define public policy.
- Explain that public policies are created to address problems and needs.
- Explain that a policy itself may sometimes be considered a problem.
- Find and identify problems and policies in a newspaper.

### Preparation & Materials

- Newspapers—1 per 2–3 students
- [Handout 2A: What Is Public Policy?](#)—1 per student
- [Handout 2B: News Search](#)—1 per student

## Procedure

### I. Focus Discussion—What Is Public Policy?

A. Explain that in this course, students are going to be dealing with policy, analyzing it, and even trying to influence it, and therefore it is important that they understand what policy is. Distribute Handout 2A: What Is Public Policy? to each student. Ask students to read the handout and look for the following:

- What public policy is.
- Why it is made.

B. When they finish, hold a discussion by asking the questions at the bottom of the handout:

1. What are some examples of policies that you can think of? Which of these are private policies and which are public policies?
2. What are some institutions that create public policy? What levels of government are these institutions?
3. Read below different definitions of public policy written by political scientists. Which do you think is the best definition? Why? How would you define public policy?

### II. Connecting Policy and Problems

A. Explain that the problem they work on needs to have some connection to government and that connection will likely be through policy.

B. Provide students with simple examples of policy/problem connections such as:  
Policy: In the last few years, at least six states have enacted laws restricting cellphone use while driving.

1. What **problems** do you think these state laws (which are policies) are trying to address?

(Prevent accidents. Accept other reasoned responses.)

2. Problem: People who are extremely overweight are more likely to have serious health problems. More children than ever before are being diagnosed with diseases, like diabetes, related to being overweight.

What **policies** might a school district enact (which is a government agency) to address this problem?

(Ban on vending machines, cafeteria requirements to offer healthy food, mandatory P.E. classes. Accept other reasoned responses.)

3. Policy = Problem: A school has a policy of leaving four minutes between classes, which many students feel is not enough time and results in many students being tardy.

What is the problem?

(The policy.)

What can be done about the problem policy?

(It can be eliminated, changed, or replaced with a new policy allowing greater time between class periods.)

Explain that policies are often controversial and viewed as a problem by some people. So in some circumstances the problem may be a policy.

### III. News Search: Problems and Policies

A. Divide the class into groups of 2–3 students. Provide each group with a local news source (newspapers work best, but online news and other media could be used.)

Distribute [Handout 2B: News Search](#) and review it with students. Tell the groups that their challenge is to find as many articles/stories as they can that discuss at least two of the following:

- Government
- Policy(ies)
- Problem(s)

Give them time to complete part 1 of the search.

B. When groups have completed part 1 of the search, ask them to quickly review all of the stories/articles they found. Then have them do part 2 of the search. Each group member should:

- Choose one article/story that describes an interesting or compelling problem.
- Make sure the article/story selected mentions at least one public policy.

Answer the questions on Handout 2B.

C. Tell students that in the next lesson they are going to return to the same groups and take another look at the articles/stories they have collected. (Either collect the articles/story summaries or have students keep them for the next lesson.) Also remind students that they need to start thinking seriously about the problem/issue/need they will address in CAP.