

Ch. 28 - Politics and Environment

Politics—the process by which individuals and groups try to influence or control the policies and actions of the government at the local, state, national, or international levels. - example of how politics can be used to benefit the government—the Nashua River cleanup in Mass.- spearheaded by Marion Stoddart (pp 776-777) POLITICS AND ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY

How does social change occur in democratic gov'ts??

Constitutional democracies are designed to allow for gradual change in order to ensure political and economic stability

Special interest groups are those competing factions that put pressure on gov't officials to advocate those laws that favor their cause or weaken those laws that oppose it. They can be profit-making organizations (corporations) or nonprofit, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)

Most decisions result from bargaining, accommodating, and compromising among the elite, or power brokers, of the gov't who are attempting to maintain the status quo of the political system

Disadvantage of this system results from the fact that democratic gov'ts tend to react to issues rather than take measures to prevent them. This approach does not work in environmental issues, which acquire a long-term preventative plan.

How is environmental policy made in the U.S.??

Major function of the U.S. gov't is to develop and implement policy - composed of various laws, regulations, and funding

Lawmakers must first feel the environmental issue is one the gov't should address and then they create laws for the consideration of the House and Senate. Sometimes environmental bills are reviewed by 10 committees in both the House and Senate.

The most difficult process comes after the law is passed when Congress must appropriate funds for the enforcing of the new policy

Regulations are developed by the appropriate gov't agencies and often times a revolving-door relationship develops between regulators and those businesses affected by the regulations as those businesses try to get people sympathetic to their cause appointed to administrative positions in the regulatory agency

All of this results in incremental decision making in which only small changes are made in existing policies

How can the courts be used to implement or weaken environmental regulations??

Almost every environmental regulation is challenged in court by industry, environmental orgs, or both

Plaintiff - individual, group, corporation, or gov't agency bringing the charges

Defendant - individual, group, corporation, or gov't agency being charged

Civil suit - plaintiff seeks to collect damages for injuries to health or for economic losses, to have the court issue a permanent injunction against any further wrongful action, or both

Class action suit - civil suit filed by a group, often a public interest group or environmental org, on behalf of a larger number of citizens who allege similar damages

Environmental lawsuits limited by:

1. permission to file a damage suit is granted only if the harm to the individual plaintiff is clearly unique or different enough to be distinguished from the general public
2. The financial cost of a law suit.
3. public interest law firms cannot recover attorneys' fees unless Congress has specifically authorized such recovery in the laws the firms seek to have enforced
4. difficult for plaintiff to prove that a defendant is liable and responsible for a harmful action

5. court or courts may take years to come to a decision
6. sometimes plaintiffs abuse the system by bringing frivolous suits that delay and run up costs of projects

Despite these handicaps, more than 20,000 attorneys in 100 public interest law firms now specialize in environmental law. Environmental law is the fastest growing sector in American legal profession

INFLUENCING ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY

Solutions: how can individuals affect environmental policy??

Change comes from grassroots political movements—bottom up, not top down - ways to influence and change govt policies:

1. vote for candidates and ballot measures
2. contribute money and time to candidates seeking office
3. lobby, write, e-mail, or call elected officials, asking them to pass or oppose certain laws, establish certain policies, or fund various projects
4. use education and persuasion
5. expose fraud, waste, and illegal activities in govt
6. file lawsuits
7. participate in grassroots activities to bring about change

Solutions: what are the three types of environmental leadership??

1. Leading by example- use your lifestyle to show others that is possible and beneficial
2. Working within existing economic and political systems to bring about environmental improvement
3. Challenging the system and basic societal values, as well as proposing and working for better solutions to environmental problems

ENVIRONMENTAL GROUPS

What are the roles of mainstream environmental groups?

Multi-million dollar organizations led by chief executive officers and a staff of experts

Active primarily on the national level, often form coalitions to work together on issues

Greenpeace- funnels funds to local activists and projects,

Sierra Club- prefers grassroots action but still works to influence national environmental policy,

The Environmental Defense Fund- prefers legal action against corporations that degrade the environment or against govt agencies that fail to enforce environmental laws

National Audubon Society, National Wildlife Federation, Wilderness Society, etc—focus on specific issues Worldwatch Institute, World Resources Institute- concentrate on education and research

Citizens' Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste- provide info, training, and assistance to localities and grassroots orgs - these mainstream groups work within the political system, major forces in persuading Congress to pass environmental laws

"Group of 10"- 10 largest U.S. mainstream environmental agencies rely heavily on corporate donations and many chief corporate execs serve on the orgs' boards and staff—this causes opponents to believe that big corps are only trying to strong arm environmental policies thru these large environmental orgs—cause division b/w mainstream and grassroots

What are the roles of Grassroots Environmental Group?

At least 6000 grassroots' citizens groups exist in the U.S. - basic rules for effective political action by grassroots orgs:

1. have a fulltime continuing org
2. limit the number of targets and hit them hard

3. organize for action, not just for study, discussion, or education
4. form alliances with other orgs on a particular issue
5. communicate your positions in an accurate, concise, and moving way
6. persuade and use positive reinforcement
7. concentrate efforts mostly at the state and local levels

Grassroots movement for environmental justice- growing coalition to protect human and environmental rights

Environmental groups are also very active on college campuses and in public schools

THE ANTI-ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

What are the goals of the anti-environment movement?

Since 1980, anti-environmentalists have mounted a massive campaign to weaken and repeal existing environmental legislation

This attack includes:

1. stepped-up lobbying efforts against environmental laws and regulations in both Washington and state capitals
2. similar efforts by mayors and govt officials fed up with having to implement federal environmental laws w/o federal funding
3. coalition of grassroots front groups, Wise Use Movement- organized and funded by anti-environmentalists such as ranchers, loggers, and mining companies
4. global trade agreement (GATT) that many environmentalists feel could weaken existing environmental standards
5. attempts to pass federal laws that require highly uncertain risk-benefit analysis as the primary tool for determining govt environmental regulations

What are the tactics of the anti-environmentalist movement?

Establish an enemy - "green menace"- to create fear and divert attention away from real issues—"green menace" paints environmentalists as anti-business, antireligious radical extremists who cripple the economy and spend taxpayers money needlessly - weaken and intimidate- spy on activists and environmental groups, fire whistle-blowers who expose illegal environmental practices

Threaten or use violence- in the past, American environmentalists have been harassed by menacing phone calls, had their tires slashed, their pets killed, their homes trashed, their houses burned, and their jobs wrongfully taken from them

Influence public opinion- commission books, pamphlets, and PR firms in order to spread your opinions, start letter-writing campaigns

Either don't collect data or keep it secret - don't allow for info harmful to your position to leak to the public, exert political pressure on gov't agencies that are doing studies that weaken your position - falsify data, and attack independent scientists whose work challenges yours

Exploit the limitations of science and the ignorance of the public

Build up your public environmental image

Delay and wear out reformers

Use paralysis-by-analysis- urge that all government environmental decisions be evaluated by a cost-benefit and risk-benefit analysis

Support unenforceable legislation and regulations

When unfavorable environmental laws are passed, urge legislators not to fund the laws

Divide and conquer- keep people and interest groups fighting with one another so no vital issues can be addressed

EVALUATING CLAIMS OF ENVIRONMENTALISTS AND ANTI-ENVIRONMENTALISTS

Are environmental threats exaggerated?

Some cases of environmental regulatory overkill have occurred, i.e., acid rain and asbestos

In response to this problem, environmentalists must take a close look at the laws and regulations that already exist and evaluate which ones worked and why

It has already been discovered that the past way of approaching environmental legislation in a fragmented, isolated way- such as passing laws in regards to a certain chemical or a certain species- is not the best way to improve the environment

These issues require an integrated and holistic approach that takes into consideration the system as a whole- such as protecting and rehabilitating whole ecosystems

Confrontational environmental politics that pits corporate leaders (“bad guys”) against environmentalists (“good guys”) must be avoided

Whom should we believe?

Tough questions need to be posed to both sides

Citizens are encouraged to identify with consensus science and avoid the view of a small minority

Many of the issues that we face today are very complex and require a good grasp of general environmental issues in order to be understood

IMPROVING U.S. POLITICAL SYSTEM

How can we make government more responsive to ordinary citizens?

Most of the money that gets gov't officials elected comes from wealthy individuals and powerful companies, thus restricting them from responding to ordinary citizens demands and the environmental issues

It costs the average U.S. senator \$3.9 million dollars to get elected

Drastic reform is needed in the election process to fix this problem

How can bureaucracies be improved?

In the beginning, many new gov't agencies achieve some good if they are run well and stay current

After many years, most agencies become stagnant and are increasingly influenced by the businesses that they are supposed to regulate

Problems arise when many federal and state agencies overlap their policies, duplicate funds, and contradict one another

Pass a sunset law that automatically terminates any gov't agency after a certain number of years- at which time it can be reviewed by a committee as to its fate

Slow the intermingling of regulatory agencies and the businesses they are regulating

How can we level the legal playing field for ordinary citizens?

1. allow citizens to sue violators of environmental laws for triple damages
2. award citizens attorney fees in successful lawsuits
3. let citizens sue gov't officials or damages caused by failure to do their duty
4. raise fines for violators of environmental laws and punish more violators with jail sentences
5. call for courts to do a better job at regulating frivolous suits brought against environmental activists that are not factually based

How can reducing crime help the environment?

Robbery, assault, and shootings keep people out of cities and push them into the suburbs where they clear more land and waste more energy

People are less willing to ride bikes, walk, or use public transit where crime is high

People leave lights, TVs, etc on to deter burglars

By reducing crime, the environment can benefit

GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY

Should we expand the concept of security?

National, economic, and military security all tie into environmental security because all countries are dependent on the ecosphere and require an integration of all three

What progress has been made in developing international environmental cooperation and policy?

1972 UN Conference on Human Environment in Stockholm, Sweden created the UN Environmental Programme (UNEP) to negotiate and implement treaties

Today, 115 nations have environmental agencies and there are more than 215 int'l environmental treaties have been signed

1992 Rio Earth Summit Results:

1. Earth Charter- non-binding document of broad principles for guiding environmental policy
2. Agenda 21- non-binding detailed plan to guide countries toward sustainable growth in the 21st century
3. forestry agreement
4. convention on climate change
5. convention on protecting biodiversity
6. est. of UN Commission on Sustainable Development

Leaders met in 1995 and found that little improvement had occurred as all the agreements of the 1992 summit were non-binding, the results were:

1. emissions of CO₂ rose in all but 3 countries
2. air pollution in most of world's cities worsened
3. freshwater supplies are in more peril

4. area of forest the size of Idaho is burned and cut each year
5. loss of biodiversity hasn't slowed
6. little has been done to reduce poverty
7. gaps b/w rich and poor have widened
8. no national govt has developed a plan for sustainable growth and production
9. World Bank has supplied \$9.4 billion for fossil-fuel projects that increase global warming since 1992

All of this is discouraging, but the 1992 conference did give the world a forum to discuss environmental problems and it was paralleled by the Global Forum that brought together 18,000 people from 1400 NGOs from 178 countries

How can we help ensure environmental justice for all?

Forging on an alliance between human rights and environmental movement called environmental justice or eco-justice movement.

In the past, the two movements have been suspicious of one another, but an overlapping has occurred as many environmentalists are harassed for their beliefs

Both emphasize fundamental civil and political freedoms

Can we develop earth-sustaining political and economic systems over the next few decades?

Environmentalists believe that we can develop such a society but it will require a new eco-industrial revolution and the fulfillment of "the green vision". It is not just a special interest, but an ultimate interest of all people. We cannot save the world, but we can sustain our lifestyles as we know them.