Surprisingly, a generally accepted definition of public policy has been elusive. Some texts define public policy as simply "what government does." Others say that it is the stated principles which guide the actions of government. Still others say that the discussion of a definition contributes little and moves quickly to illustrate a variety of case studies.

**Simple Definition of Public Policy** [**^**](http://profwork.org/pp/study/define.html#top)

Let's start with a simple definition of public policy:

Public policy is a course of action adopted and pursued by a government.

As a working definition, this is adequate for common parlance. However, nuances deserve further attention, inviting a more elaborate definition. The fuller definition offered below is intended to clarify and to make explicit what will be the subject matter of this text.

**Full Definition of Public Policy** [**^**](http://profwork.org/pp/study/define.html#top)

The full, **preferred definition** for our purpose is:

Public policy is a purposive and consistent course of action produced as a response to a perceived problem of a constituency, formulated by a specific political process, and adopted, implemented, and enforced by a public agency.

The meaning and discussion will pull apart this definition, piece by piece, to elucidate not simply the proposed definition but the nature of public policy itself. We will plant the seeds for the public policy cycle as a method of analysis. Along the way, some related terms will be used and also defined.

Please ponder the assumptions contained in the long definition and ask yourself if you can take these assumptions at face value. We mean to make problematic the glib assumptions that many bring to public policy. Start your critical thinking with this list extracted from the long definition above:

* "Public policy is a purposive and consistent course of action" suggests goals and the absence of logical contradictions. This is still essentially the same as the short definition, above.
* The phrase "produced as a response to a perceived problem of a constituency" implies that government is *responsive* to its legitimate stakeholders, particularly citizens and voters. Do these groups, the constituents, have real grievances? Are they mistaken perceptions? Have they badly defined the purported problem? Does public policy respond to *every* complaint of *every* group? Do some get attention and not others? Yet, agency (an active party) is invoked: Government must decide, typically through elected representatives, and citizens and groups need to be effective at pressing their grievances. Problems abound here.
* Then we need to identify a specific action: "formulated by a specific political process." The action that might bring about a public policy must *go somewhere* -- and we need to identify which organization has jurisdiction and might feasibly respond. Here, we must think in concrete and specific language. There must be agency, which means that we are dealing with established authority. Notice how the long definition raises doubts and introduced complexities.
* Finally, the policy must be "adopted, implemented, and enforced by a public agency." That is, some actions must be administered and implemented. Actions must ensue. Something must happen. Try to connect the original issue to the resulting administration. There could be a large gap. This reveals the simplistic and naive presumptions that often underlie public policy. Pause and reflect.

Later, we will review different approaches to public policy. A more systematic and dynamic way of thinking will be introduced. Stay tuned.