

**PROJECT** Citizen  
A WE THE PEOPLE PORTFOLIO-BASED PROGRAM

LEVEL 2



Administered by the Center for Civic Education  
in cooperation with the National Conference of State Legislatures

# STEP II

## An Introduction to Public Policy



### PURPOSE

This step provides background information that is useful in understanding the meaning of the term “public policy” and the role of public policy in local, state, and national government. When you have completed this lesson you should be able identify the private sphere, civil society, and government as three parts

of society. You should also be able to evaluate, take, and defend positions on which parts of society may be best suited to deal with certain problems. Finally, you should be able to explain the role of public policy in dealing with common problems of society.



## A What Are the Private Sphere, Civil Society, and Government?

For the purposes of this project, it is useful to look at society as being composed of the following three areas or spheres.

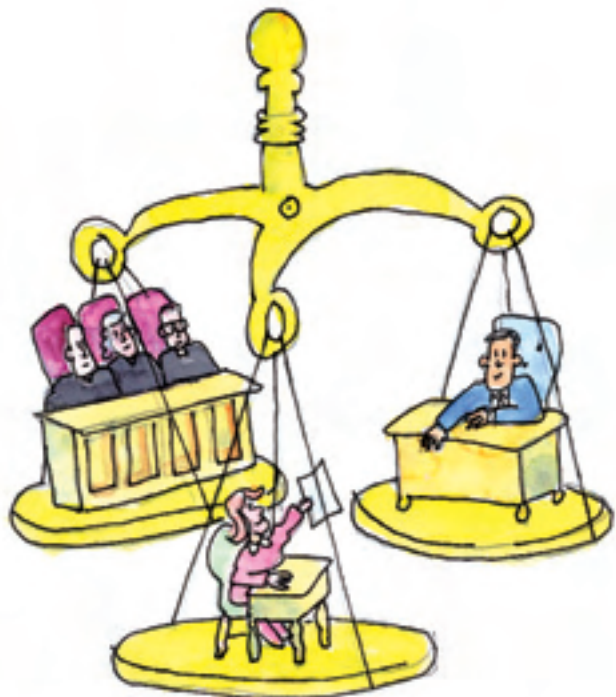


**Private sphere** This is the part of society in which family and friends associate to pursue their private interests within the law, free of unreasonable and unfair intrusion by government

**Civil society** This is the part of society where people associate or interact voluntarily to pursue interests they share. They may do so as individuals or as members of social, economic, or political associations or

organizations. Although these associations and organizations operate within legal limits, participation in them is not required by law and they are not part of government. Associations and organizations in civil society can provide an effective means for monitoring and influencing government. They may also provide a means of checking or limiting the use of power by government.

**Government** This part of society includes formal governmental institutions at local, state, and national levels. These include legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government at all three levels.



## **B** Class Activity — Distinguishing Among Areas or Spheres of Society

Listed below are some everyday events that might occur in the United States. For each event, identify whether it takes place in **A** the private sphere, **B** civil society, **C** government, or **D** a combination of any of these.

1 A local school board changes graduation requirements.

**A**   **B**   **C**   **D**

2 Susan becomes a member of the Girl Scouts.

**A**   **B**   **C**   **D**

3 Carmen and her friend go out to dinner and a movie.

**A**   **B**   **C**   **D**

4 Marco's family and friends have a picnic on July 4.

**A**   **B**   **C**   **D**

5 Sara and her two sisters join a labor union.

**A**   **B**   **C**   **D**

6 The Sierra Club lobbies state legislators to pass environmental protection laws.

**A**   **B**   **C**   **D**

7 The state legislature passes a law limiting the use of cell phones while driving.

**A**   **B**   **C**   **D**

8 Citizens join a taxpayer's association in an effort to get government to lower taxes.

**A**   **B**   **C**   **D**

9 The federal government awards a contract to a private company to repair sections of an interstate highway.

**A**   **B**   **C**   **D**

10 A city council passes a law establishing smoke free zones in public parks.

**A**   **B**   **C**   **D**



## C Which Areas of Society Should Deal with Certain Problems?

Sometimes it is very clear what problems and issues should be dealt with by either the private sphere, civil society, governmental institutions or a combination of these areas or spheres of society. At other times, reasonable people may differ about which part of society should take responsibility for dealing with certain problems or types of problems. These differences might be based on personal opinions or philosophical positions about the proper role of government in society. Some people think government should take responsibility for a large range of problems in society while others think government should be limited to a smaller range and that many problems should be dealt with by civil society or individuals acting in the private sphere.



## D Class Activity — Taking Positions on Which Area or Areas of Society Should Take Primary Responsibility for Dealing with Common Problems

The following are some common problems in society. For each problem, be prepared to take and defend a position on which of the following three parts of society or what combination of them should be primarily responsible for dealing with the problem:

Ⓐ the private sphere, Ⓑ civil society, or Ⓒ government.

- 1 Ensuring that children from birth to three years old eat nutritious food and develop healthy hygiene habits  
Ⓐ Ⓑ Ⓒ
- 2 Ensuring that children receive equal educational opportunities  
Ⓐ Ⓑ Ⓒ
- 3 Promoting the moral development of young children  
Ⓐ Ⓑ Ⓒ
- 4 Caring for elderly poor people  
Ⓐ Ⓑ Ⓒ

- 5 Protecting the borders of the country
  - (A)
  - (B)
  - (C)
- 6 Maintaining streets in cities and towns
  - (A)
  - (B)
  - (C)
- 7 Providing medical care for the indigent
  - (A)
  - (B)
  - (C)
- 8 Protecting people from criminal activity
  - (A)
  - (B)
  - (C)
- 9 Upholding the moral standards of the community
  - (A)
  - (B)
  - (C)
- 10 Building highways, bridges, and dams
  - (A)
  - (B)
  - (C)
- 11 Protecting the country from external attack
  - (A)
  - (B)
  - (C)
- 12 Promoting economic prosperity
  - (A)
  - (B)
  - (C)

## E What is Public Policy?

There are reasonable differences of opinion among scholars on the definition of the term “public policy.” Because examining these differences would divert attention from the principal goals of Project Citizen, the definition stated below has been selected as most useful for the purposes of the project.

### Definition and function of public policy

In democracies, a public policy is a concept or set of ideas that guides a course of action or a procedure used in dealing with public issues or problems.

Public policies are often embodied in laws, rules, or regulations or agreed upon procedures used by government to fulfill its responsibilities to protect the rights of the people and to promote the general welfare.



For example:

- all states have laws that provide for free public education for students of certain ages to provide them with the knowledge and skills required to be competent and responsible citizens and to be able to earn a living. These laws reflect a policy of respect for the rights of individuals to the “pursuit of happiness” and a concern with promoting the general welfare by encouraging the development of a society composed of knowledgeable, skilled, responsible, and self-reliant citizens.



Public policies serve to distribute certain benefits and burdens of society, manage the allocation of resources, and manage conflicts. For example, public policy

- provides all young people the benefit of a free public education and places upon taxpayers the burden of paying for it
- manages the use of public lands by lumber companies
- provides for a system of courts to manage conflicts among people

Governments at local, state, and national levels create public policies, carry them out, and manage disputes about them.

For example:

- a local government might promote conservation by establishing a policy requiring people to separate recyclable trash from other trash
- a state government might hold hearings to listen to disputes among developers and environmentalists about the proper use of public lands

### Implementation of public policies

Public policies may be implemented by

- governmental institutions acting alone, such as the federal government managing the distribution of Social Security benefits to eligible people
- governmental institutions acting cooperatively with civil society, such as agencies of the federal or state government awarding a contract to a private company to construct highways, bridges, dams, or airports



- governmental institutions and civil society acting independently, but dealing with the same problem. For example:
  - both local government and religious organizations might provide homeless shelters or child-care facilities
  - governmental agencies and charitable organizations such as the Red Cross might have independent programs designed to help people affected by natural disasters
- civil society handling problems not dealt with by government in accordance with a government policy. This leaves such problems to be dealt with by civil society or the private sphere. For example:
  - professional associations might provide special programs and training to enhance the knowledge and skills of their members
  - religious institutions might try to enhance the morality of their constituents

### Procedural justice and the development and implementation of public policy

Procedural justice refers to the fairness of the ways information is gathered and the fairness of the ways decisions are made. In democracies, in particular, people working in governmental agencies and institutions, the “servants of the people,” are required to use fair procedures in the development and implementation of public policy that, among other goals, enable the people to observe and take part in their government. The goals of procedural justice are to

- increase the chances of discovering information necessary to make wise and just decisions
- insure the wise and fair use of the information in making decisions
- protect important values and interests such as the right to privacy, human dignity, freedom, distributive justice, and efficiency





For procedures to be fair they should adhere to the following:

- **Be open to the public**  
Unless there is a very good reason for secrecy such as national defense or the protection of minor children, procedural justice should be open for all to witness. This is necessary to enable members of the public to be aware of what their government is doing and be able to influence it, if they wish to do so.
- **Provide relevant and accurate information to the public**  
Information should be provided if it is related to the development and implementation of public policy unless there is a very good reason for not doing so such as national security or the protection of basic rights of individuals.
- **Provide fair notice**  
People should be notified of the proposed actions of government that might affect them in adequate time for them to be prepared for what might take place.

- **Provide expert assistance when needed**  
People who wish to have a voice in a proposed action by government should have the right to the assistance of experts in relevant fields when they participate in the process, such as a translator or an attorney to help them present their position.
- **Provide the right to supportive witnesses and to examine opposing witnesses**  
People should have the right to the assistance of witnesses supporting their position and to examine witnesses opposing their position.
- **Provide the right to an impartial hearing**  
Decisions should be made by impartial third parties who do not stand to benefit from the outcome of their decisions.
- **Provide the right to appeal**  
People should have the right to appeal decisions by governmental agencies to an impartial agency.





**F Class Activity — Applying the Definition of Public Policy**

Which of the four descriptions below best categorizes the ten situations listed? Be prepared to explain your choice.

- (A) A public policy solution to a problem by a governmental institution
- (B) A public policy solution to a problem by a governmental institution cooperating with civil society
- (C) A solution to a problem dealt with by public policy and by civil society each acting independently
- (D) A solution to a problem by civil society acting alone

**1** Government funding of medical research, interstate highways, and higher education

- (A) (B) (C) (D)

**2** Providing assistance to the poor through government issued food stamps and the voluntary contributions of church members

- (A) (B) (C) (D)

**3** Providing education by religious institutions to promote their specific moral standards

- (A) (B) (C) (D)

**4** Creating the Homeland Security Department by the federal government to protect the country from the threat of terrorism

- (A) (B) (C) (D)

**5** Community groups taking disadvantaged urban youth on rural outings

- (A) (B) (C) (D)

**6** Providing training to neighborhood watch groups by law enforcement agencies

- (A) (B) (C) (D)

**7** Providing food and shelter for the homeless by both state government and private groups

- (A) (B) (C) (D)

**8** Community groups arranging for young people to visit elderly members of the community who live alone and lack social contact

- (A) (B) (C) (D)

**9** Federal government providing tax incentives to businesses for them to locate in areas of high unemployment

- (A) (B) (C) (D)

**10** Authorizing public funding of charter schools by a board of education

- (A) (B) (C) (D)

## **G** Focusing on Public Policy Problems

In the United States and some other countries, the right to privacy and a private sphere of life free of interference by government is very important. These countries also have a highly developed civil society. In such countries, many problems are dealt with privately by individuals or civil society without involvement by government. In fact, it is public policy in the United States to leave some problems to civil society and/or the private sphere.

Some problems, however, are arguably more efficiently dealt with primarily by government with the cooperation of civil society or by government alone. Because the main purpose of this program is to help you learn about how your government works at local, state, and national levels and how to monitor and influence government at these levels, you will be asked to focus on public policy problems rather than problems dealt with by civil society or the private sphere acting alone.



## **H** Class Activity — Creating Public Policy and Civil Society Solutions to Community Problems

Go to the middle column on the following chart and read the first example of a community problem. Look at the examples of a public policy solution to the problem by a governmental institution acting with or without civil society in column one, and a solution to the problem solely by civil society in column three. Then fill out the rest of the chart with your own suggestions for public policy and civil society solutions to the other problems. Use the last space to identify a problem in your own community and give examples of public policy and civil society solutions to it. After you fill in your chart, share your responses with your group members or classmates.



## FORM 2

### CREATING PUBLIC POLICY AND CIVIL SOCIETY SOLUTIONS TO COMMUNITY PROBLEMS

Read the first example of a community problem shown in the middle column below and the examples of (1) a public policy solution to the problem by a government institution acting with or without civic society and (2) a solution to the problem solely by civil society. Then fill out the rest of the chart with your own suggestions for public policy and civil society solutions to the problems noted. Use the last space to identify a problem in your community and give examples of public policy and civil society solutions for it. After you have come up with your responses, share them with your group members or classmates.

PUBLIC POLICY SOLUTION	COMMUNITY PROBLEMS	CIVIL SOCIETY SOLUTION
City officials fund a program to give needy individuals vouchers to use to "buy" food and clothing from participating merchants	Poor families in the community need food and adequate clothing	Members of a civic organization conduct a drive to collect food and clothing and then distribute it to the needy
	School-aged children are out on the streets late at night	
	Parents are not using child protective car seats properly	
	The lake in the community is polluted and filled with litter	
	Owners of a professional football team want to build a stadium in the city	
	Many local high school students have been cheating on homework and tests	