

THE POLICY PROCESS: A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF WATER POLICY MAKING IN THE STATE OF GEORGIA

Danielle Jensen-Ryan and Laura German

AFFILIATION: UGA

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The policy process is often discussed as a means to alleviate “wicked problems,” particularly those focused on environmental issues. Yet, attempts to address “wicked problems” often leads to different conclusions and dissension, rather than agreement. In an effort to clarify the differences that occur during policy processes, scholars have advanced alternative policy theories explaining the political process. Competing theories focus on instrumental, political, and critical conceptions of policy processes. The instrumental (or means-end) conception stems from the notion of rationality while political-based policy theories seek to understand political struggles occurring during the policy process. Critical policy theories investigate both the rational and the political through a focus on actors and wider interests involved in political spheres. In an effort to advance our understanding of the political processes at play during “wicked problems,” we utilized a critical-based policy assessment to examine how water policy was made in Georgia and which contextual factors and stakeholders (rational) as well as wider influences (political) significantly influenced policy trajectories. The state of Georgia presented an ideal setting to explore “wicked problems.” A water paradox, Georgia receives 50 inches of annual precipitation and is located amid 14 major river systems and seven highly productive groundwater aquifers. Yet, despite abundant water resources, Georgia’s supply is pressured by population growth, and agricultural and economic water use. This paper utilized a year-long ethnographic approach to provide an in-depth analysis of three water policy case studies in the state: the 2008 Comprehensive Statewide Water Plan, the 2012 Moratorium on Groundwater Withdrawals, and ongoing riparian protection debates. Findings indicate that established systems of informal relationships provided the greatest influence for each water policy case study in Georgia. The emergence of social structures as significant in determining water policy efforts in Georgia ultimately provides evidence for a more critical model of policy making in the state—a model which focuses on policy as a social construction through which informal stakeholder ties determine much of what happens in formal democratic structures and policy processes.

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