# POLICY PARADOX:
## THE ART OF POLITICAL
## DECISION MAKING

*Revised Edition*

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# 2

# Equity

## THE DIMENSIONS OF EQUALITY

The most famous definition of political science says it is the study of
"who gets what, when, and how."[1] Distributions—whether of goods
and services, wealth and income, health and illness, or opportunity and
disadvantage—are at the heart of public policy controversies. In this
chapter we will describe issues as distributive conflicts in which equity
is the goal. It is important to keep in mind from the outset that equity
·is the goal for all sides in a distributive conflict; the conflict comes over
how the sides envision the distribution of whatever is at issue.

To see how it is possible to have competing visions of an equitable
distribution, let's imagine we have a mouthwatering bittersweet choc-
olate cake to distribute in a public policy class.[2] We agree that the cake
should be divided equally. The intuitively obvious solution is to count
the number of people in the classroom, cut the cake into that number
of equal-sized slices, and pass them out.

I've tried this solution in my classes, and believe me, my students

[1] Harold Lasswell, *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1936;
2nd ed. with postscript, Cleveland: World Publishing, 1958).

[2] This analysis of equity is largely based on, and extends, the work of Douglas Rae and
his coauthors. See Douglas Rae, "The Egalitarian State: Notes on a Contradictory System
of Ideals," *Daedalus* 108, no. 4, (Fall 1979): 37–54; and Douglas Rae et al., *Equalities*
(Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981).

always challenge my equitable solution. Here are some of the challenges:

1. Some say my solution is unfair to the people left out of the class in the first place. "I wouldn't have skipped class last week if I had known you would be serving chocolate cake," says one. Students not even taking the course come up to me in the halls: "Unfair!" they protest. "We would have enrolled in your course if we had known about the cake." My cake is written up in *Gourmet Magazine* and students who applied to the university but did not get in write letters of protest. All these people describe my solution as *equal slices but unequal invitations.*

2. Some of my colleagues buttonhole me when I get back to my office. This is a Political Science Department course, they say, and your cake should have been shared in accordance with the structure of the department. The chairperson sends me a memo proposing the following division of any future cakes:

   > Your undergraduates: crumbs
   > Your graduate teaching assistant: mouthful
   > All other grad students: work on our research while we eat cake
   > Assistant professors: slivers
   > Associate professors: wedges
   > Full professors: wedges with extra frosting
   > Chairperson: wedge with extra frosting, and a linen napkin

   This solution might be described as *unequal slices for unequal ranks, but equal slices for equal ranks.*

3. A group of men's liberationists stages a protest. Women have always had greater access to chocolate cake, they claim, because girls are taught to bake while boys have to go outdoors and play football. Moreover, chocolate cake is more likely to be served in courses taught by females than males, and those courses draw proportionately more female students. In short, gender roles and gender divisions in social institutions combine to make gender the *de facto* determinant of cake distribution. The men insist that men as a group should get an equal share of the cake, and they propose that the cake be divided in two equal parts, with half going to the men (who comprise one-third of the students in the class) and half going to the women. *Unequal slices but equal blocs.*

4. One semester, all the students in my public policy class had just

attended a three-course luncheon, which, mysteriously enough, did not include dessert. Several of them thought my chocolate cake should be treated as the last course of the luncheon. They pointed out that some students had managed to commandeer two shrimp cocktails, pick all the artichoke hearts from the salad as it was passed around, and grab the rarest slices of roast beef from the platter. Shouldn't the other students—the ones who had only one shrimp cocktail, no artichoke hearts, and overcooked roast beef—get bigger slices of my chocolate cake? This solution, which I had to agree seemed fair, might be called *unequal slices but equal meals.*

5. Every year, a few students come forth, believe it or not, saying they hate the taste of chocolate. There's always someone who is allergic to chocolate. And another who says he was born without the crucial gene for chocolate digestion, and though it would do him no harm to eat my cake, he wouldn't derive any nutritional benefit from it either. These students think I might as well give them very, very small pieces (they want to be polite and sample my cake) and give bigger pieces to those who can truly appreciate the cake. Their solution might be called *unequal slices but equal value to recipients.*

6. The economics majors in the class want no part of these complicated solutions. Give everyone a fork, they yell, and let us go at it. *Unequal slices* (or perhaps I should say "hunks") *but equal starting resources.*

7. One semester I was caught with only enough chocolate to make a cupcake. It couldn't really be divided among the large number of people in my class. The math whizzes proposed an elegant solution: Put everyone's name in a hat, draw one ticket, and give the whole cupcake to the winner. They had a point: *unequal slices but equal statistical chances.*

8. Just when I thought I finally had an equitable solution, the student government activists jumped up. In a democracy, they said, the only fair way to decide who gets the cupcake is to give each person a vote and hold an election for the office of Cupcake Eater. Democracy, they implied, means *unequal slices but equal votes.*

Look carefully at what happened in the chocolate cake saga. We started with the simple idea that equality means the same-size slice for everyone. Then there were eight challenges to that idea, eight

different visions of equality that would result in unequal slices but equality of something else. Here is the paradox in distributive problems: Equality may in fact mean inequality; equal treatment may require unequal treatment; and the same distribution may be seen as equal or unequal, depending on one's point of view. I have used the word "equality" to denote sameness and to signify the part of a distribution that contains uniformity—uniformity of slices, or of meals, or of voting power, for example. I have used "equity" to denote distributions regarded as fair, even though they contain both equalities and inequalities.

If we can get a systematic description of the challenges in the chocolate cake problem, we will have some tools we can apply in policy analysis. In any distribution, there are three important dimensions: the recipients (who gets something?), the item (what is being distributed?), and the process (how is the distribution to be decided upon and carried out?). Challenges 1, 2, and 3 are all based on a redefinition of the recipients. Challenges 4 and 5 redefine the item being distributed. And challenges 6, 7, and 8 focus on the process of distribution. The box below summarizes these concepts and the discussion to follow.

Challenge 1 is based on the definition of membership. It is all well and good to say that something should be divided equally, but the sticky question is, "Among whom?" Who should count as a member of the class of recipients? Sometimes this question seems straightforward, as when the state of New Hampshire says that all people who have purchased tickets to its lottery are eligible to win. But more often, defining the class of members entitled to "equal treatment," whatever that is, is the core of a political controversy.

Take the seemingly simple concept of citizenship. Who is to count as a citizen of the United States? On first thought, one might think a citizen is anyone born on American soil or born of American parents or legally naturalized. But once we think about the different purposes and policies for which we need a concept of citizenship, the definition becomes less obvious. When the right to vote is at issue, it is often believed that people should meet certain qualifications to be considered voting citizens. They should know how to read so that they can follow policy debates (literacy tests); they should own property so that they "have a stake in the system" (property qualification); or they should reside in the jurisdiction a certain length of time so that they "understand the issues" (residency requirements). In nineteenth-century England, citizens receiving public welfare were not allowed to vote, presumably because their need for assistance demonstrated their lack
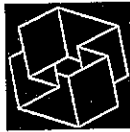
CONCEPTS OF EQUALITY

*Simple Definition*   Same size share for everybody

*Complications in the Polis:*

| *Dimension* | *Issue* | *Dilemma* |
|---|---|---|
| Recipients | 1. Membership (the boundaries of community) | unequal invitations / equal slices |
| | 2. Rank-based distribution (internal subdivisions of society) | equal ranks / equal slices; unequal ranks / unequal slices |
| | 3. Group-based distribution (major internal cleavages of society) | equal blocs / unequal slices |
| Items | 4. Boundaries of the item | equal meals / unequal slices |
| | 5. Value of the item | equal value / unequal slices |
| Process | 6. Competition (opportunity as starting resources) | equal forks / unequal slices |
| | 7. Lottery (opportunity as statistical chance) | equal chances / unequal slices |
| | 8. Voting (opportunity as political participation) | equal votes / unequal slices |

past performance goes hand in hand with a belief in the legitimacy of rank-based distribution. Military organizations and universities, factories and corporations, indeed government itself—all pay their employees according to rank, and rank is understood to be awarded according to some notion of individual merit.

Rank-based distribution is at the heart of the debate about pay