Cases in Public Policy Analysis

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction to Policy Analysis

Unlike much of political science and economics, the discipline of "policy analysis" is less interested in pure theory-building than in producing information useful in political settings to resolve practical policy problems. Akin to an applied social science that uses methods from economics, political science, sociology, and other related fields for problem-solving, policy analysis is practiced by consultants to government, decision-makers in staff government agencies, and other roles that permit analysis to inform decisions.

Though this suggests that everyone engages in policy analysis, in fact very few decisions are informed by thorough analysis given the pressures of scarce resources, mandated expenditures, and the often perverse tendency of management in large organizations to engage in protective stupidity and persistence in error. In part, the problem of uninformed decision making (intentional or not) may be due to the apparent complexity of policy analysis itself. Like other technocratic disciplines intent on carving a professional niche for their followers, policy analysis is often erroneously associated with hi-tech reports using heavy mathematics and linear programming. At least in part, the value of this kind of arcane analysis may be as a means of scaring away opponents of one's recommendations.

This book attempts to simplify the discipline and make it useful to practitioners who have little time or resources for technical or visionary sophistication. Nevertheless, it recognizes the need for basic tools to diagnose, analyze, and evaluate policy problems, and it attempts to build up those skills by providing "messy" problem settings to which the tools may be applied.

POLITICS AND TECHNICAL ANALYSIS

What is *policy analysis* and how is it carried out? Policy analysis is an applied social science discipline that attempts to produce useful information for policy decision making in political contexts (Dunn, 1981, p.ix). The distinguishing feature is practical information. Information can be produced institutionally by procedures that, for example, permit regular inventories of selected variables such as the amount of money poor people spend on food, housing, and medical care. Information may also be produced intuitively by hunch or insight. For instance, the limits of social and political life under repressive regimes are

hard phenomena to measure—yet one intuitively knows the limits of his or her freedom.

But policy analysis cannot be totally technique (boiled down to mechanical knowledge and production procedures in a manual) or purely insight (a vision quest). Good policy analysis requires a mixture of both—vision to generate hypotheses and puzzles, and techniques of various kinds to order the facts and make some sense of them for decision making. The naive technocratic view of policy analysis imagines that accumulation of enough "facts" will serve to define the problem and lead toward its solution. By this view, technocrats are good because there exists only one best way to pave a street, and politicians are bad because their incessant machinations interfere with otherwise preordained neutral technical solutions. But this simplistic distinction ignores the tendency of organizations to resist analytic activities.

Thus, many line organizations become clogged with the "facts" they produce because of an inability to distinguish relevance from irrelevance. For instance, poverty is a "fact" for between 21.5 million and 30.4 million Americans. But despite development of the "poverty line" measure as a baseline, the core fact of poverty is still susceptible to extreme partisan interpretation, depending on whether one includes "in-kind" or "noncash" benefits of other programs such as food stamps and housing assistance along with cash programs like welfare (Camper, 1986).

This suggests that the facts do not simply present themselves in orderly fashion for the policy analyst. The question is: How one can design institutional incentives to encourage policy analysis where that analysis may run counter to the official line and threaten existing power relationships? Such a policy science must contain principles of economics, political science variables, and applied public management insights. Regardless of the institutional constraints to policy analysis—such as browbeating and intellectually smug, and often arrogantly indolent leadership, the available tools are rather straightforward and need to be mastered by student and practitioner alike.

BUDGETING AND PUBLIC POLICY

From what has been said it would seem that the quest for appropriate policy analysis is a function of separation of technical information from politics. Much debate still focuses on what we now know to be a false dichotomy. Where judgmental discretion exists, politics intrudes because support is required for one's viewpoint, technical or not. Discretion exists on practically any technical question—from the location of a road, how to pave it, how much it will cost, and who will benefit from it. For example, the National Railroad Passenger Corporation (Amtrak) allocates revenues and ridership across its routes on a train-by-train basis, an apparently neutral technical rule. But the allocations are "strongly influenced by analytical assumptions" (Congressional Budget Office, 1982, p. 43). For instance, how should one allocate "split-trip" passengers or those who travel on more than one route? A passenger traveling on the

"Pioneer" from Denver to Seattle also travels one-third of the way along the "Zephyr" route from Chicago to Oakland. Before April 1981, these routes were treated as separate operations with identifiable costs, revenues, and mileage. Currently, revenues associated with the Zephyr portion are attributed to the Pioneer, but only a portion of Zephyr operating costs are allocated to the Pioneer. The Pioneer's financial performance is thereby enhanced as measured by "passenger mile/train mile" and Zephyr performance is downgraded (Congressional Budget Office, 1982, p. 44). Why? Technically, the allocation can be explained by the addition of through-car service from Chicago to Seattle in April 1981. Politically, it may be explained by the rise of Bob Packwood (R-Oregon) to the chair of the Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee. The higher rate of passenger miles/train mile for the Pioneer saves the route through Packwood's home state from discontinuance (Guess, 1984, p. 388).

Similar policy problems arise through the technical act of setting prices in the hospital sector. Hospitals have discretion in determining how the prices of their services relate to the costs of production and how costs are allocated among different types of output. Resulting cost-price relationships may reflect goals ranging from the subsidization of medical care for low-income people to maximizing the income of physicians associated with the hospital. Policy analysts attempt to determine both the impact and the appropriateness of these strategies.

The budget process is both a technical and political constraint to policy discretion. Policy analysis is often considered apart from fiscal and budgetary issues as if it were simply a matter of producing the most rational input-output analysis. In the United States, public policy-making and implementation are hard to distinguish from the process of formulating, executing, and evaluating public budgets. In short, to say that personal and institutional politics intrude on analytic objectivity does not take one very far down the road to understanding.

To understand the specific role of budgetary politics in the overall relationship between policy analysis and the budget process can provide an important backdrop for making recommendations to clients. The agency analyst, of course, is constantly aware that program proposals depend almost as much on budgetary calendar timing and revenue availability as the inherent worth and justification of the proposal itself. As if by instinct, consultants and contractors recognize that indirectly the budget cycle affects their work. For example, funds to pay for development of a revenue projection model (see Chapter 3) depend in part on the accuracy of previous projections. If sales tax revenues were actually much lower than projected, funds may not exist for such items as consultants to build more models!

It may also aid comprehension to say that the budget process is ongoing while policy-making is periodic. This might seem counter-intuitive as the budget is only prepared once a year and policies are always on the drawing board. However, most nontrivial policies require public expenditures. Because

the bulk of agency policy analysis is farmed out to consultants, funding support depends upon appropriations, supplemental appropriations, continuing appropriations resolutions, borrowing, and contract authority. Though agencies have authority to shift funds among expenditure categories below a congressionally specified amount, for larger shifts congressional approval must be supplied. The budget process thus drives and constrains policy analysis. The good news is that analysts know the deadlines and the actors involved, meaning that in the appropriations process the tough decisions get made. The bad news is that tough decisions are not always wise ones.

For instance, with increasing evidence that the federal student-aid program is being abused ($1.2 billion was spent by the Department of Education in fiscal year 1986 to pay off defaulted student loans), Doyle and Hartle (1986, p. 31) suggest that "the reauthorization process represents the best chance in this decade for prudent reform." But pressures for budget cutting under 1985 Gramm-Rudman-Hollings legislation in the face of powerful beneficiary pressure for the status quo (banks, student groups, research universities) means that an impersonal, across-the-board mechanism is likely to discourage careful analysis that would sensibly cut costs and address system problems. The budget process drives student-aid policy, like most others, and this inbibits analysis. Many observers, such as Barry Goldwater (1986), have noted that the present budget process excludes analysis. Because of the pressures of time, caused largely by the domination of federal budgeting by the formulation stage (first and second resolutions often take up two-thirds of the year), proper debate time is crowded out from the subsequent authorizations and appropriations stages.

Not one of the 13 appropriations bills was passed by Congress in the 1987 fiscal year session, and Congress has not passed all 13 appropriations bills on time since passage of the 1974 Congressional Budget and Impoundment and Control Act, which added the additional formulation stage to the budget process. The usual result has been a "continuing resolution" passed under great pressure for adjournment. Goldwater (1986) suggests that this is a poor substitute for policy-making: "Because debate is sharply curtailed on these resolutions. . . hundreds of issues are allowed to pass that would never survive in a vigorously debated appropriations bill." On the other hand, can it be demonstrated that availability of more time would stimulate the intense analysis needed? While some have argued that a two-year budget cycle (biennial) would enhance policy-making and reduce the federal budget deficit, it cannot be demonstrated that biennial systems are superior in either policy effectiveness or maintaining cash-flow balances.

SEQUENTIAL POLICY-MAKING

Despite differences in policy and budgetary cycles, most organizational policy analysis follows a similar sequence of steps: (1) diagnosis, (2) analysis, (3) implementation, and (4) evaluation. This book concentrates on diagnosis and analysis. In the *diagnostic* phase, one might isolate proximate and remote causes,

state objectives clearly, and specify target groups. For instance, in Chapter 2 we use the case of cocaine abuse in an attempt to define the "messy" or interdependent policy problem where resources are already committed, consensus on their effectiveness is lacking, and time is short.

Additionally, the diagnostic phase requires projection of present data trends into the future so that policy alternatives can be structured with confidence. In Chapter 3 we examine how a rapid-transit agency that depends on sales tax revenues for much of its operating expenses attempts to project sales tax revenues for five years to stabilize fiscal planning. This is an extremely important area of policy analysis in that recent economic uncertainties have played havoc with technical projections. Thus, more successful policy analysts have been able to combine technique with judgment creatively to satisfy clients.

In the second or *analytic* phase, policy analysts must employ techniques to measure and compare programmatic costs and benefits. To develop realistic tradeoffs, it is essential that decision-makers understand not only the measurement of costs and benefits but also the principles of political economy on which they are calculated. In Chapter 4 we employ economic analysis to examine the issues involved with pricing hospital services. The topic of costs and prices is often erroneously viewed as the exclusive purview of accountants and of the private sector. Here we examine the question of how hospital pricing affects overall health care policy goals such as providing services to indigents while controlling the rising costs of health and hospital care.

Health care objectives are often set in advance by governmental regulators as part of an effort to establish minimal quality standards. In Chapter 5 we examine the issue of determining effective policy alternatives to attain a given objective, in this case hospital accreditation based on measures of their output or services provided. This technique, in which the costs of producing different levels of output are compared, is known as cost-effectiveness analysis (Lynch, 1985, p. 157). Finally, in Chapter 6 the strengths and weaknesses of the policy analyst's favorite (though often misused) tool, benefit-cost analysis, are examined through an application to the case of the 55 MPH speed limit.

Policy analysis is a sequence of logical steps in which messy data and conflicting information are used to structure alternatives to provide a semblance of rational choice. As noted, in this book we restrict ourselves to problem definition and trend forecasting in the diagnostic phase, and pricing, cost-effectiveness, and benefit-cost analysis in the analytic phase. It is our view that the analyst who masters these techniques through case application will be capable of anticipating problems and resolving them during the implementation and evaluation phases.

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CHAPTER 2

Problem Identification and Definition

INTRODUCTION

Let us preface the case study presented in this chapter with a more general notion of a "policy problem" and examine how it can be defined. Following the case reading, we can then more comprehensively view the "facts" through the lenses of several techniques of problem definition. These techniques, which are largely applicable to the case study presented here, will also be of use in defining other "messy" or multidimensional and interdependent problems, such as "acid rain" and the Space Shuttle *Challenger* disaster.

THE CONCEPT OF A POLICY PROBLEM

For decision-makers, what should an appropriate definition of a policy problem contain? To answer this, we need first to recognize three general features of a "problem." First, policy problems represent "unrealized values, needs or opportunities, which, however identified, may be attained through public action" (Dunn, 1981, p. 98). To produce information on the nature and solution of a problem, one must apply the "policy-analytic procedure of problem structuring," which Dunn (1981) calls the "most important but least understood aspect of policy analysis" (p. 98). Second, policy structuring cannot be a universal hard-and-fast procedure because of problem complexity and variability. Most real policy problems are "messes" or "systems of external conditions that produce dissatisfaction among different segments of the community" (Dunn, 1981, p. 99). What we are after is an "actionable" statement of issue dynamics from which expenditures can be made, personnel deployed, and procedures developed that will reduce or eliminate the undesirable state of affairs without undue harmful consequences to related activities.

"Messes," such as health care, urban mass transportation, and poverty, are difficult to resolve by using an analytic method and more often require a "holistic" approach that views problems as inseparable and unmeasurable apart from the larger system of which they are interlocking parts (Dunn, 1981, p. 99). Put another way, policy problems are not conceptual constructs like atoms or cells or parts per million of sulfur dioxide in the air. They are "problematic situations" that are the product of thought acting on the environment. They are artificial in the sense that someone subjectively judges these condi-

tions to be problematic. Their inherent artificiality makes it easier for policymakers to misconstrue the real problem. Separating policy problems into smaller and more manageable ones runs the risk of providing the right solution to the wrong problem. For example, the current problem of what government should do (if anything) about declining U.S. international competitiveness is frequently boiled down to one of foreign access to U.S. technology. But Reich (1987, p. 63) argues that this misconstrues the real problem: "The underlying predicament is not that the Japanese are exploiting our discoveries but that we can't turn basic inventions into new products as fast or as well as they can." Defining the problem in this way precludes the policy alternative of holding back basic inventions from foreigners and points toward solutions that give American workers and engineers experience in quickly turning basic inventions into products.

Finally, problem definition is confounded by the reality that the same information can be interpreted differently. Suppose that the number of complaints in your community about dogs roaming free has been rising annually at an increasing rate. Suppose also that the number of impoundments has been increasing at a declining rate. Based on this limited information, what is the "animal control problem"? In contrast with the "regulatory" definition, which focuses on licensing, leashes, fines, and animal contraception (that is, owner-controlled solutions), the "capital investment" definition focuses on the need for a larger and more accessible dog pound. But critics of the capital investment approach argue that a new pound would not necessarily eliminate strays (the real objective) and would merely shift the costs to the non–dog-owning public for services required by dog owners. Hence, from this perspective a more appropriate solution would be to require some combination of say, steeper fines, higher service charges or license fees, and animal contraception (a regulatory package) (Lehan, 1984, pp. 66, 67). Because policy alternatives must ultimately be traded in institutionalized settings (usually committees), "politics" will affect both initiation of the regulatory solution and its priority in relation to the capital investment (pound) solution. In general, the stakeholder with the greatest number of political resources (technical sophistication, rewards–punishment, charisma, and intense supporters) will have the most influence on problem definition and ultimate selection of alternatives.

STRUCTURING A POLICY PROBLEM

As already noted, selection of the appropriate technique for problem definition depends on a preliminary assessment of data trends, causation among variables, and relevant stakeholder positions. New information that can change our assumptions about these subjects will probably emerge during the process of problem structuring. In this event, the definition will change but the techniques for definition will not.

Of initial importance to defining a policy problem is how likely, based on the information we have, the problem can be structured for action by policy

institutions. Dunn (1981, pp. 103, 104) suggests that policy problems fall into three classes: (1) well-structured, (2) moderately structured, and (3) ill-structured problems, based on their degree of complexity and interdependence. Brewer and deLeon (1983, p. 51) also recognize that a problem may remain complex because, once defined by the analyst, it is subject to competing individual, organizational, and external environmental (client) preferences.

Well-structured problems are "those which involve one or a few decision-makers and a small set of policy alternatives" (Dunn, 1981, p. 104). Low-level agency operational problems, such as the optimum point of replacing agency vehicles given age, repair, and depreciation costs, are well-structured because all consequences of all policy alternatives can be programmed in advance. *Moderately structured* problems are "those involving one or a few decision-makers and a relatively limited number of alternatives" (Dunn, 1981, p. 104). Unlike the well-structured problem, here the outcomes are not calculable within acceptable margins of error or risk. For example, the problem for the United States in its anti-cocaine war in Bolivia could be defined reasonably well as: (1) the political power of the "Coca Nostra" (the barons who supervise production of 40 percent of all cocaine in the world market and give Bolivia $600 million annually in repatriated earnings; (2) excessive cocaine supplies caused by large acreage in production in response to U.S. demand; and (3) interagency rivalry among U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), FBI, CIA, United States Information Agency (USIA), State Department, and Bolivian governmental agencies involved in the war on drugs. According to Kline (1987, p. 27), the United States has placed its highest priority on crop control instead of going after the "handful of men, and their organizations who have such a stranglehold on the social and economic life of the nation." The problem, nevertheless, is capable of being structured, and solutions can clearly be evaluated according to that definition.

The more typical and potentially dangerous situation concerns *ill-structured* problems, or those involving "many different decision-makers whose utilities (values) are either unknown or impossible to rank in a consistent fashion" (Dunn, 1981, p. 105). Moreover, "Many of the most important policy problems are ill-structured. One of the lessons of political science, public administration, and other disciplines is that well-structured and moderately structured problems are rarely present in complex governmental settings.... One of the main tasks of policy analysis, therefore, is the resolution of ill-structured problems" (Dunn, 1981, p. 105).

For example, the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 (Ronald Reagan's new drug policy) attempts to define and resolve an ill-structured problem. First, there are few agreed-upon societal values, only those of conflicting individuals and groups. All would like to see drug use reduced (except suppliers), but consensus largely ends there. The bulk of the proposed $1.7 billion cost of the plan (65% or $1.04 billion) will go to drug enforcement whereas only $441 million (27.5%) will go for educational and drug-treatment activities (Brinkley, 1986b). The resultant allocation of funds suggests differences in both perspec-

tive and power resources among actors involved in drug policy. Second, policymakers tend to maximize their own values and are not motivated to act on the basis of societal preferences. The prospect of substantial enforcement money quickly turned the chance for coordinated policy into a gold rush and predictable turf battle between the Customs Service and the Coast Guard, both of which wanted new radar planes (Brinkley, 1986b).

Third, commitment of resources to existing policies and programs prevents policymakers from considering new alternatives. This is partly a fixed-cost budget problem exacerbated by an incremental budget process that provides little incentive for analysis. More powerful stakeholders in the annual budget process are able to lock in expenditure preferences with legal authority (called permanent appropriations or entitlements). This pattern, which occurs in federal, state, and local government policy processes, removes the bulk of items from policymaker discretion. In this fashion, as noted in Chapter 1, the politics of the budget process determines public policy.

There is also the problem of making choices on the basis of perceived constituent demands in the context of budget deadlines, which serves to drive out policy analysis. For instance, there is the paradox that enforcement of marijuana laws may be driving people to use cocaine and more harmful drugs. Suppliers prefer cocaine because it is easier to conceal and transport. Cocaine prices are also much higher than marijuana prices, and marijuana is bulky and harder to transport. But drug enforcers prefer going after marijuana because its bulk looks impressive before the television cameras, and seizure of a few tons increases productivity measures at lower risk than for cocaine. Thus, according to law enforcement experts, enforcement of marijuana laws contributes to higher marijuana prices and lower supplies, and this drives addicts to harder drugs (Lindsey, 1986). In this context, the 1986 recommendation of the Georgia attorney general to make possession of marijuana a felony instead of a misdemeanor (Hopkins, 1986) must be viewed as either selection of an inappropriate solution from valid and reliable data, or misguided posturing before constituents of "get tough on criminals" in general. Based on available evidence, such a law will increase the incidence of hard-drug users and make enforcement even more difficult.

These institutional features, together with the inability of policymakers to collect enough information on all possible alternatives or predict the range of consequences associated with each alternative, render the ill-structured problem largely immune from conventional definition techniques. We are faced with a difficult choice of both methods and facts to maintain our credibility as policy analysts. The wrong method or model can select the wrong facts and give us the right solution to the wrong problem (e.g., the crop eradication or "technical fix" model as a solution to the problem of cultivating cocaine in Bolivia when definition of the problem must include the dimensions of local elite power and high U.S. demand for cocaine). Despite these obstacles, let us turn to a "best available" methodology for defining the ill-structured problem.