Policy Analysis

Policy analysts are heavily involved in figuring out the right path forward in a noisy political climate. A policy analyst looks at government activities and asks how policies are positively or negatively impacting society. They look at economics and decision theories to assess the risks of particular outcomes or to predict likely social costs and benefits of various alternatives. Are government programs successful and effective? Why or why not? What can we do differently? How can we modify our institutions, processes, and behaviors to lead to better outcomes?

In this process of exploration, an analyst must realize that habits and traditions may prevail over rational activity in making policy choices. Moreover, bold and creative approaches may be discouraged, as bureaucracies tend to favor routine and procedural approaches.

Policy Models

One of the ways we can understand how government policies come to be is to use policy models. These models help identify important aspects of problems. They explain current conditions and help predict future outcomes in a simplified manner. They also prioritize limited resources. Finally, they allow communication of political ideas in a clear fashion.

There are many different policy models, and most political analysts will use more than one. Think of these models like a special lens that can be snapped onto a camera. You are looking at the same scene, but using different lenses to capture different perspectives. In this case, the scene is a condition present in US society (e.g., poverty, veterans’ health, unemployment). The lenses help analysts look at the condition in different ways, with various underlying assumptions, so they can understand how solutions are selected.

There are four policy models this course will explore: rationalism, public-choice theory, elite theory, and incrementalism. These are by no means the only models that exist. Political scientists have developed, and will continue to theorize about, models to explain how society and government entities make decisions.

Rationalism as a political theory was first defined by Max Weber, a German philosopher, sociologist and political economist. It begins with the collection of information to clearly define a problem, which results in an evaluation of several options using quantitative data and calculated potential outcomes. This process finally leads to the selection of a preferred course of action given a balanced assessment of costs and benefits. There are several strong assumptions that underlie this model. Is it truly possible to have perfect information? Are we capable of evaluating all options? Is it possible to accurately predict all possible outcomes from our actions? Is it possible to assign measurable values and costs to certain conditions in society? Fundamentally, would this model present a preferred course of action we are willing to take, or is human nature at odds with a purely rational approach?

Public-choice theory looks at how a group can make policy decisions together. It is assumed that individuals tend to make decisions in their self-interests. However, this does not mean they always find it to their advantage to operate independently. All players in the policymaking process can benefit from collective decision-making, even when trying to maximize their own gains. When it comes to developing government policies, public-choice theorists believe a social contract exists between members of society, that members choose to follow certain rules and support the government in exchange for services and protections provided to all. Information is collected to define a problem, and options are evaluated with a strong preference for policies designed to appeal to the largest population. The outcome of this model tends to be majority rule, which may not necessarily be the optimal choice.

Elite theory assumes most of the population has little interest in public policy; therefore, there is a small, elite group of individuals in society who direct political leadership as policy decisions are made. Elites tend to be well educated and have access to resources. Policies that promote stability generally are favored, as elites would like to preserve their social status. This is not to say that change cannot occur. There may be policies that are a change in the status quo because elites feel the overall welfare of the public is in jeopardy.

Incrementalism focuses on continuation of existing policies only with gradual changes. This model assumes that policymakers have limited resources, information, and time; therefore, they cannot thoroughly review programs and make significant changes to policies on a regular basis. The status quo is generally accepted, and change often comes in the form of a new policy added to existing programs. This model comes with low risks and less conflict, but it also can be incredibly inefficient and unable to respond to crises. It also may be the reason why the government bureaucracy has grown so much over the past century.

Policy Evaluation

Policy evaluation is what we end up learning from our analysis. We can see what the government is doing or not doing well, the effect of political institutions, processes and behaviors on policies, and perhaps most importantly, how policies are changing the way we live in America (for better or worse).

Specifically, are we achieving our goals, at what cost, and with what effects on society? It is important to note the difference between policy impacts and policy outputs. Outputs from a government agency (how much has been spent or the number of people served) are not a measure of the impact (whether people's lives have improved). Impact must be measured to truly gauge program success. Program evaluation tools include before and after comparisons, site visits and citizen feedback, trend analysis of conditions, and even controlled social experiments that monitor the outcomes of two separate groups of people.

It is possible to conduct government-sponsored research and evaluation, but does not come without challenges. We must be conscious of bias towards positive results. Government programs are very expensive and those who designed those programs would like to have their work validated. Another thing we must be mindful of is generalizing results. Policy research tends to focus on small case studies and larger program findings are then extrapolated to the nation. Finally, we must be mindful of ethical and legal issues such as citizens consenting to experimentation and monitoring of their personal circumstances.

Despite efforts to evaluate programs to improve efficiency across the government, programs are seldom terminated. One reason is that it does not seem worth the effort. While a program could be budgeted for millions of dollars a year, it is a tiny percentage cost paid by each taxpayer. Compare this cost to battling beneficiaries who want their program to continue, and it seems irrational to cut the program. When we talk about battling beneficiaries, we are looking at individuals who will aggressively lobby their representatives in government. Our system of government is sensitive to lobbying organizations and financial supporters who can choose where they want to make their investments. In an election year, a politician would not want to lose out on campaign funds from a dissatisfied constituent. Politicians also have ownership over government programs. While they are not involved in the day-to-day operations (this responsibility lies with the Executive Branch), the legislative branch has oversight through its congressional committees. As such, shutting down a program that has been previously championed can be perceived as is admitting fault or poor oversight.