Policy Failure and Learning

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Policy Failure and Learning

POSC 315 Week 12-1   Evaluation Part I

Implementation Review

- Policy implementation is very complex
- Policy isn't self-executing
- Policy Design to improve implementation is challenging
- Bureaucrats have discretion

Is Implementation Technical or Political?

The old idea:

- administration simply does the will of the legislature (see Wilson [1887, 1989] and Goodnow [1900])

The new idea:

- administration is a political process (see Appleby [1949] and Waldo [1948]) and so is implementation (see Pressman and Wildavsky [1973])

Who is Responsible for Implementation?

- The legislature?
- The executive?
- The bureaucracy?
- The courts?
- The public?
- All of the above?

Implementation Studies: Four Generations

- First Generation: The "Classics" (1930s-1950s)
- Second Generation: The "Moderns" (1960s-1970s)

- Third Generation: The "Post-Moderns" (1980s-1990s)
- Fourth Generation: The "New New" (2000s)

Policy Failure

Why some policies might not work

Possible Reasons for Policy Failure

- People may respond or adapt to public policies in a manner that negates some of their influence.

- Policies may have incompatible goals that bring them into conflict with one another.

- Solutions for some problems may involve costs and consequences greater than people are willing to accept.

Possible Reasons for Policy Failure

- Inadequate resources may be allocated to implement a policy.

- Policies may be administered to lessen their potential effect, i.e., watered down upon implementation

- Public problems are often caused by a multitude of factors, but the policy may be only directed at one or a few of them. Why?

Possible Reasons for Policy Failure

- Many problems cannot be solved, or at least not completely

- New problems may arise that distract attention from a problem

- Many national problems and policies are implemented by state and local agencies and are sometimes designed at the local level

Responses to Policy Failure

- Adjustments in enforcement

- More money or resources

- Challenge(s) to the legality or constitutionality of the policy

- The policy or its program is simply ignored

- The policy is left to local governments to implement or improve upon

- The policy is abandoned or repealed

More on Policy Failure

Policy Failure

A *Slippery* Concept

Two Types of Failure

1. Theoretical Failure

    - The causal theory didn't work as predicted

2. Programmatic Failure

    - Implementation didn't work as planned

Failure is in the eye of the beholder

- When did it fail?

- Who did it fail?

- Where did it fail?

- How did it fail?

Failure is Challenging to Define

- Some problems may be tentative first steps toward resolving a broader social problem.

- Doing something may indicate the political system "responds to problem, even if knowledge may be limited and appropriate policy tools unavailable."

- Would the "do nothing" option have been better?

Failure is Challenging to Define

Excessive Policy Demand

Constant demands on the part of the gov't to do "something" may make more failures more inevitable as more policy with more complexity fails to meet expectations.

Gov't may fuel this demand by claiming to have the resources and tools available to implement a policy that may be technically infeasible.

Failure is Challenging to Define

Reasonable Expectations

- We may reach too far in expecting gov't can solve a problem

- If we make progress, is that failure, even if we don't meet the exact goal?

Poor Causal Theory

Failure is often the product of a poor causal theory:

- Theory influences tool choice
- Choice of tools influences implementation
- Implementation influences outcomes

Learning from Failure

Policy Failure and Learning

- learning can lead to policy change
- learning is accumulating information for better decision making
- learning is a process of discovery, and key to evaluation

Two Types of Learning

1. **Single-loop learning** is a process of correcting errors in the implementation of a policy without questioning the policy itself.

- learn about performance
- learn how the process or tools may have failed
- adjust by changing the process or tools

Two Types of Learning

2. **Double-loop learning** is a process of questioning the policy itself and the assumptions that underlie it.

- learn from single-loop learning
- rethink the fundamental assumptions about the problem and if the policy is the right tool
- learn about inherent values, goals, and assumptions

More on Learning

An Urge to Learn

1. Improve performance and outcomes

    - internally, within and organization

2. Normative expectations

    - we believe gov't and policy makers should learn
    - we institutionalize learning through evaluation, after-action reports, etc.

Three Types of Policy-Oriented Learning

1. **Instrumental Learning**

   - learning about the best means to achieve a given end

2. **Social Learning**

   - learning about the values and goals that underlie a policy
   - examine the social construction of the problem
   - seeks to determine if the worked in a specific environment

Three Types of Policy-Oriented Learning

3. **Political Learning**
   - learning about the political environment and how to navigate it
   - learning about the political feasibility of a policy
   - focus on ho to make more effective arguments for a policy

The Goal of Learning

Success!

Next Time

Policy Evaluation Part II

Policy Success?