

Policy Analysis

POSC 315

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Public Policy Analysis and the Art of Problem Solving

Overview

- General Concepts of Policy Analysis
- Outputs vs. Outcomes: Understanding the Difference
- Role of Policy Analysis in the Policy Process
- Understanding Causation in Policy
- Brief History of Policy Analysis
- Role of the Policy Analyst
- Modern Policy Analysis Approaches
- Applied Policy Analysis: Let's Try It!

General Concepts of Policy Analysis

What is Policy Analysis?

A systematic approach to evaluating policy alternatives for addressing public problems using data and reasoned arguments.

Core Purpose

To provide decision-makers with clear, objective information about the likely consequences of policy choices.

Key Question: How can we use evidence to determine which policies are most effective at addressing public problems?

Outputs vs. Outcomes

Outputs

- The **measurable things** an agency or organization produces
- The tangible effort government expends
- Easy to quantify and track
- *Examples:* Number of traffic signals installed, people served by a program, laws passed, regulations created

Outcomes

- The **actual effects** of government action on society
- The **intended or unintended** consequences
- Often difficult to measure and quantify
- *Examples:* Reduction in traffic accidents, improved health outcomes, reduction in poverty rates

Key Distinction: Outputs tell us what was done; outcomes tell us what difference it made.

Role of Policy Analysis in the Policy Process

- Uses systematic analytical tools from operations research, statistics, and economics

- Assesses consequences of policy alternatives
- Predicts outcomes from implemented outputs
- Helps anticipate how policies adapt to changing circumstances

Policy analysis answers the critical question: **"How does the effort expended *cause* a particular outcome?"**

Understanding Causation

What is Causation?

The relationship between cause and effect - a foundational concept in policy analysis.

Conditions for Establishing Causation:

- **Temporal sequence:** Cause must precede effect
- **Correlation:** Cause and effect must be related
- **No spuriousness:** No other factor can explain the relationship

Understanding Causation

Types of Relationships

Positive Relationship

As one variable increases, the other also increases

Example: More education → Higher income

Negative Relationship

As one variable increases, the other decreases

Example: Higher cigarette taxes → Lower smoking rates

No Relationship

Changes in one variable don't affect the other

Example: Ice cream sales → Crime rates

A Brief History of Policy Analysis

Early Developments

- **Muller v. Oregon (1908)**
 - Supreme Court case that upheld state laws limiting women's working hours
 - Landmark for introducing social science evidence in legal decisions
 - The "Brandeis Brief" used empirical data rather than just legal precedent
- Professionalization of social sciences in early 20th century
- Expansion of policy advisors during New Deal era (1930s-40s)
- Major growth after World War II with operations research techniques

A Brief History of Policy Analysis

Harold Lasswell's Principles of Policy Science

Harold Lasswell (1902-1978) was a political scientist who helped establish policy analysis as a distinct field.

Key Principles:

- Problem-solving orientation based in theory and empirical evidence
- Multidisciplinary approach drawing from various fields
- Recognition that politics and values matter in decision-making

"In a democracy, decisions are made in a *political* system in which values are as important as neutrally derived facts." - Lasswell

A Brief History of Policy Analysis

A Policy Science

Characteristics of Policy Science:

- An applied science focused on practical problem-solving
- Addresses major policy issues facing society
- Requires interdisciplinary inquiry and collaboration
- Grounded in empirical evidence and sophisticated theory
- Dedicated to improving public policy through better information

A Brief History of Policy Analysis

Growth and Evolution

- Great Society programs (1960s) created high demand for policy analysts
- Economic approaches became dominant
 - Promised a "rational" approach to policymaking
 - Aimed to overcome political "messiness" through technical analysis
- Computer technology revolutionized forecasting and modeling
- Gradual recognition of the limits of purely technical approaches

Role of the Policy Analyst

Different Analytical Perspectives

| Role Type | Analytical Approach | Relationship to Clients |
|-----------------------------|--|---|
| Objective Technician | Let analysis speak for itself; focus on predicting consequences | Keep distance from client |
| Client's Advocate | Use analytical ambiguity to support client's position | Loyalty to client in exchange for resources |
| Issue Advocate | Emphasize ambiguity when analysis doesn't support preferred policies | Choose clients opportunistically |

Role of the Policy Analyst

Eugene Bardach's Eightfold Path

A practical framework for conducting policy analysis:

1. **Define the problem** - Clarify the issue needing attention
2. **Assemble evidence** - Gather relevant data and information
3. **Construct alternatives** - Identify possible policy solutions
4. **Select criteria** - Determine how to evaluate alternatives
5. **Project outcomes** - Predict likely effects of each alternative
6. **Confront trade-offs** - Compare pros and cons of each option
7. **Decide** - Recommend a course of action
8. **Tell your story** - Communicate findings effectively

Modern Policy Analysis

Two Logics of Policy Making

Economic Rationality of Policy Analysts

- Application of economic logic to political phenomena
- Emphasis on transparent assumptions
- Consistent methods to compare alternatives
- Aims for objective optimization of outcomes

Political Rationality of Policy Makers

- Recognizes that policy makers respond to multiple incentives
- Strategic use of information to advance goals
- Selective emphasis of favorable information
- Consideration of political feasibility and support

Modern Policy Analysis

Bridging the Two Logics

Which is Right?

- Both logics have validity in different contexts
- Policy makers aren't purely rational actors, but aren't irrational either
- Political considerations are legitimate, not simply barriers to overcome
- Politics contains paradoxes not easily resolved by economic logic

Effective policy analysis recognizes the importance and legitimacy of both perspectives.

Modern Policy Analysis

Understanding the Political Context

Why Political Context Matters:

- Explains policy outcomes that might seem irrational from a purely economic perspective
- Helps design democratic institutions that function effectively
- Enables analysts to operate more strategically and effectively
- Recognizes that values and preferences are legitimate inputs to the policy process

The best policy analysis combines technical rigor with political awareness.

Modern Policy Analysis

Evolution as a Profession

- Significant development over the past 50 years
- Increased professionalization and specialization
- Greater diversity in approaches and disciplines
- Technical skills remain essential but are no longer the sole focus
- Recognition of analysts as active participants in the policy process
- Growing emphasis on stakeholder engagement and diverse perspectives

Let's Try It!

"Horse Rich and Dirt Poor"

Policy Analysis Exercise

Let's apply what we've learned by analyzing the wild horse management problem:

- **The problem:** "Horse rich and dirt poor" - Wild horse overpopulation on public lands
- **The goals:** Sustainable population, ecosystem health, humane treatment
- **The alternatives:** Adoption programs, fertility control, habitat expansion
- **The criteria:** Cost, effectiveness, political feasibility, animal welfare
- **Observed outcomes:** To be evaluated based on historical data
- **Policy performance:** To be assessed against stated goals

Case Study: Wild Horse Management

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Try watching this video on www.youtube.com, or enable JavaScript if it is disabled in your browser.

Thoughts on "Horse Rich and Dirt Poor"

Policy Analysis Insights

The wild horse overpopulation issue presents a complex policy challenge that requires balancing:

- Ecological sustainability of public rangelands
- Economic considerations for local communities and agencies
- Ethical concerns for humane treatment of animals

Effective policy solutions must consider diverse stakeholder perspectives and employ a mix of strategies, including adoption programs, fertility control, and habitat expansion.

Continuous evaluation and adaptation of policies based on observed outcomes are crucial for achieving long-term success.

That's all for today!

Questions? Comments?