Why Bother Teaching Public Policy Analysis?

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ABSTRACT

In the textbooks, public policy analysis is a rational process in which policies are formulated to address social problems perceived by the public to be unacceptable. Effectiveness is one of the major criteria of policy evaluation. Consensus on effectiveness is difficult to achieve because underdetermined causes are the occasion for conflicting beliefs about the causes and solutions of problems, which Kahan (2016) calls "fact polarization." Fact polarization can be explained by political ideologies, which are expressions of cultural worldviews. These worldviews are based on incompatible beliefs about how society should be organized. Using gun violence as an example, this article shows how beliefs about the causes of gun violence, associated values, and policy solutions vary among liberals, libertarians and economic conservatives, and social conservatives. If policy is ideologically determined, the textbook presentation of policy analysis as a rational process that will help policymakers make better decisions may be wishful thinking.

INTRODUCTION

Policy is one of those terms that is frequently heard but infrequently defined. Individuals, groups, businesses, and governments have policies, but in the academic world of policy analysis, policies are solutions. As Kraft and Furlong (2015) explain in their textbook, "The term *policy* refers in general to a purposive course of action that an individual or group consistently follows in dealing with a problem" (p. 4). Problems and solutions can be private or public. If I have a problem with an inordinate level of finger-nail biting, I, along with any interested friends and family members, are responsible for formulating a solution, that is policy, to deal with the problem. But the policy is private.

On the other hand, citizens may perceive that some condition in society is unacceptable and cannot be addressed by an individual, group, or several groups working together. This kind of unacceptable condition in society is a public problem. "Public problems refer to conditions the public widely perceives to be unacceptable and that therefore require intervention" (Kraft & Furlong, 2015, p. 3). When politicians step in to address public problems, their solutions are called *public policy*. "Public policy is what public officials within government, and by extension the citizens they represent, choose to do or not to do about public problems" (Kraft & Furlong, 2015, p. 3). Some examples of such public problems are global warming or climate change, poverty, Internet pornography, and higher education affordability. Many believe that these problems can only be solved by large-scale collective action through government.

How should politicians decide on the best policy? The textbook answer is that they should engage in rational decision-making. Kraft and Furlong (2015) state the standard

case:

> According to models of rational decision making, one defines a problem, indicates the goals and objectives to be sought, considers a range of alternative solutions, evaluates each of the alternatives to clarify their consequences, and then recommends or chooses the alternative with the greatest potential for solving the problem. (p. 117)

This process is called *policy analysis,* which can be conducted in more than one way, but "the most common approach to policy analysis is to picture it as a series of analytical steps or stages, which are the elements in rational problem solving" (Kraft & Furlong, 2015, p. 117). These are the steps: 1) define and analyze the problem, 2) construct policy alternatives, 3) develop evaluative criteria, 4) assess the alternatives, and 5) draw conclusions (Kraft & Furlong, 2015, p. 118).

STEPS IN POLICY ANALYSIS

Step One

The first step is to define and analyze the problem. After the Oregon college mass shooting, President Obama asked the media "to show America the number of gun deaths as compared to the number of terrorism related deaths since the 9/11 attacks" (Shaw, 2015, para. 1). The media quickly responded with a graph showing 316,545 deaths by firearms compared with 313 deaths by terrorism on American soil (Shaw, 2015, para. 2). For many, the high number of gun deaths qualifies as a public problem that requires a public solution. A major question in this step is, what causes the problem of gun deaths? In the United States, two causes have figured most prominently in the debate about gun policy. The first is the market in guns. A relatively free market has produced a high number of guns per resident. Guns are too easily available to individuals with malicious purposes. An opposing opinion is that gun regulations are responsible for the problem because they have disarmed the public and rendered citizens defenseless.

Steps Two and Three

The question in the second step is, what are the policy alternatives? Assuming the market in guns is the cause, the logical solution or policy is gun control: The market in guns should be regulated. Assuming the opposing view that gun regulations cause the high number of gun deaths, the solution or policy is to repeal gun regulations and pass concealed carry laws. How should the policy analyst decide between these opposing policies? The answer in step three is to apply evaluative criteria. Kraft and Furlong (2015) recommend a widely accepted list of criteria: effectiveness, efficiency, equity, liberty/freedom, political feasibility, social acceptability, administrative feasibility, and technical feasibility (p. 175).

Criterion of Effectiveness

Effectiveness is a criterion that has a couple of questions associated with it that are difficult to answer, at least definitively. In rational problem solving, if the correct cause is addressed, the appropriate policy should be effective. But can the correct cause be determined? For a scientist, the answer is yes, in principle, but the facts are never well enough established, especially in the social sciences, that all doubt is eliminated. Some

things cannot be measured; some things scientists do not yet know how to measure. They escape the scientific method. In the light of unsettled scientific evidence, each causal viewpoint continues to have "life." But can the public agree on the best available evidence? The answer seems to be no. Why? The reason may be that underdetermined causes make fact polarization feasible. According to Kahan (2016), polarization over questions of fact is one of the signature features of contemporary democratic political life. Citizens divided over the relative weight of "liberty" and "equality" are less sharply divided today over the justice of progressive taxation than over the evidence that human CO2 emissions are driving up global temperatures (p. 1).

Kahan's analysis may be surprising because the usual understanding is that conflicting values basically divide people. Kahan appeals to two cognitive processes to explain fact polarization. Motivated reasoning is the basic process. "Motivated reasoning refers to the tendency of individuals to unconsciously conform their assessment of information to some goal *collateral* to determining its *truth*" (Kahan, 2016, p. 2). Kahan (2016) mentions a variety of well-researched collateral goals: the maintenance of a positive self-conception, the rationalization of self-serving behavior, the desire to avoid the anticipated stress or anxiety of unwelcome news, the desire to perceive coherence rather than complexity in pieces of evidence relevant to an important decision (p. 2). Motivated reasoning is responsible for the second process, confirmation bias, which "involves the tendency to selectively credit or discredit evidence based on its consistency with one's existing beliefs" (Kahan, 2016, p. 2).

Kahan believes that politics is unique in that the collateral goal for everyone is identity protection. People are attracted to a group with whom they share values. Their beliefs are shaped by the desire to maintain a connection to and status within this group, which defines their identity, even though they may not literally belong to it. Many facts are neutral regarding membership in a group. Kahan (2013) suggests these examples: Pasteurization removes infectious agents from milk, fluoridation of water fights tooth decay, and privatization of the air-traffic control system is inimical to air safety (p. 419). Other facts have social meanings that signal membership. For example, two opposing opinions about the causes of gun violence have been defined in this article: a relatively free market in guns and gun control laws. These policy-relevant facts that are imbued with social meanings are determined by identity-defining affinity groups. In Kahan's (2016) words.

> Where positions on some risk or other policy relevant fact has [*sic*] come to assume a widely recognized social meaning as a marker of membership within identity-defining affinity groups, members of those groups can be expected to conform their assessments of all manner of information—from persuasive advocacy to reports of expert opinion; from empirical data to their own brute sense impressions—to the position associated with their respective groups. (p. 1)

Affinity groups understand policy-relevant facts through cultural cognition, which "refers to the tendency of individuals to conform their perceptions of risk and other policy-consequential facts to their cultural worldviews. Cultural worldviews consist of systematic clusters of values relating to how society should be organized" (Kahan, 2011, p. 23).

Many policy analysts are highly educated social scientists. Would they be less inclined to conform their perceptions of policy-consequential facts to their cultural worldviews? Kahan, Peters, Cantrell Dawson, and Slovic (2017) conducted a study to

answer the question. They measured subjects' numeracy, which "encompasses not just mathematical ability, but also a disposition to engage quantitative information in a reflective and systematic way and to use it to support valid inferences" (p. 60).

The results suggest that political polarization is magnified among high-numeracy individuals. The authors report that more numerate individuals are benefitted by forming identity-congruent beliefs just as much as less numerate individuals are, and harmed [by loss of membership in an affinity group] just as much from forming identity-noncongruent beliefs. But more numerate individuals have a cognitive *ability* that lower-numeracy ones do not. ICT [identity-protective cognition thesis] predicts that more numerate individuals will use their ability opportunistically in a manner geared to promoting their interests in forming and persisting in identity-protective beliefs. The results in the experiment suggest that high-numeracy partisans did exactly that (Kahan, Peters, Cantrell Dawson, & Slovic, 2017, p. 75).

Policy analysts and ordinary citizens do not differ in their use of cultural cognition, but policy analysts have the cognitive ability to provide superior justifications of their policy preferences. Ordinary citizens must consult experts, who are certified by their affinity groups, to learn how best to defend the "correct" policies. Citizens only want to read, hear, or watch positive discussions of these policies. They thereby insulate themselves from alternative perspectives that might provoke feelings of aversion. The media participate in political polarization, which has been escalating in recent years (Hopkins & Sides, 2015).

Cultural Worldviews and Political Ideologies

Kahan is not clear about the meaning of *clusters of values*, but he may have in mind values related to two intersecting polarities—between an individualistic versus solidaristic or communitarian social order and a hierarchical versus egalitarian society—that he believes are foundational (Kahan & Braman, 2006, p. 151). Associated values may be identified at the proximate level. These values are not independently selected, but depend on the definition of a problem and its causes to form a coherent whole. Ultimately, however, beliefs about the problem, causes, and values are determined by cultural worldviews. Political ideologies can be understood as expressions of cultural worldviews.

The relationship between beliefs about the problem, causes and values can be illustrated by typical ideological beliefs about the causes of gun deaths. For liberals, the cause is a free, unregulated market in guns; for libertarians and economic conservatives, it is gun control laws; and for social conservatives, it is malevolent people. What are the associated values? Liberals value collective responsibility (group wisdom), libertarians and economic conservatives value individual freedom from interference, and social conservatives value personal responsibility (individual character). Causes and values only make sense in relationship with each other. For example, if the cause is a free, unregulated market in guns, the value of individual freedom from interference does not make sense.

What are the policy recommendations? Liberals recommend gun-control laws, a recommendation that follows logically from their preferred cause. Libertarians and economic conservatives favor the repeal of gun regulations and passage of concealed carry laws, recommendations that follow logically from their preferred cause. Social conservatives may also support repeal of gun regulations and passage of concealed carry

laws, but they will not have much confidence in these policies because they do not address the primary cause: a defect in character. Social-cultural renewal is required. Social conservatives might even argue that gun control laws will work just as well.

Kahan and Braman (2006) tested the hypothesis that "individuals' cultural worldviews would determine . . . [the] empirical claims they accept." Gun control was one of the policies studied. They assumed the liberal and libertarian/economic conservative opposition: "Gun-control proponents argue that greater restrictions will promote public safety by reducing gun violence and accidents, while gun-control opponents argue that such restrictions will diminish public safety on net by rendering innocent persons unable to defend themselves from violent criminals" (p. 156). The results supported their hypothesis about cultural worldviews and related values.

> Persons of hierarchical and individualistic orientations . . . [believe] that gun control has perverse consequences, a belief congenial to the association of guns with hierarchical social roles (hunter, protector, father) and with hierarchical and individualistic virtues (courage, honor, chivalry, self-reliance, prowess). Relatively egalitarian and solidaristic individuals . . . [believe] that gun control enhances safety because of their association of guns with patriarchy and racism, and with distrust and indifference to the well-being of strangers. (p. 156)

Kahan and Braman (2006) conclude that cultural worldviews explain factual beliefs more powerfully than political ideologies (pp. 156-157). However, the typology of cultural worldviews and political ideologies are not essentially opposed. Political ideologies can be mapped onto the typology. The *clusters of values* that Kahan and Braman identify in the above quotation are fundamentally related to the values associated with political ideologies. Given the relationship between cultural worldviews and political ideologies— that political ideologies are subordinate expressions of cultural worldviews—one would expect cultural worldviews to explain factual beliefs more powerfully.

Other Criteria

Aside from the criterion of effectiveness, Kraft and Furlong (2015) recommend two other criteria of policy evaluation: equity and liberty/freedom (p. 175). The meaning of these values varies with political ideologies. The definition of a problem, causal hypothesis, policy, and values are ideologically related. In the end, however, effectiveness is the most important criterion because it validates the definition, causal hypothesis, policy, and associated values. Kraft and Furlong (2015) also recommend criteria that are irrelevant to a decision about the most effective policy but relevant to implementation: efficiency, political feasibility, social acceptability, administrative feasibility, and technical feasibility (p. 175). When a decision about the most effective policy has been reached, whether arrived at rationally or through cultural cognition, implementation of the policy is not always feasible.

Steps Four and Five

In step four of policy analysis, the instruction is to assess the alternatives: "Which [policy] alternatives are better than others?" (Kraft & Furlong, 2015, p. 118). It follows from the preceding discussion that the answer is ideologically determined. In the fifth and final step, the policy analyst is asked to draw conclusions: "Which policy option is the most desirable given the circumstances and evaluative criteria?" (Kraft & Furlong, 2015, p. 118).

Again, following the preceding discussion, the answer is ideologically determined. Kahan would say that ultimately the answers in both steps four and five conform to cultural worldviews.

CONCLUSION

Are policy analysts engaged in wishful thinking? In the textbook, policy analysis is rational: "Policy analysts are trained in the rational assessment of public problems and their solutions, and they often use economic methods to find the most logical, efficient, and (they hope) effective ways to deal with public problems" (Kraft & Furlong, 2015, p. 134). In the textbook, policy analysis will help policy makers make better decisions: "Analysis and politics are not incompatible as long as it is understood that analysis by itself does not and should not determine public policy. Rather, its purpose is to inform the public and policymakers so that they can make better decisions" (Kraft & Furlong, 2015, p. 205).

The argument of this article is that public policy analysis is neither rational nor helpful to policymakers in making better decisions because it begins and ends in cultural worldviews. Why bother teaching it?

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