

Comparing Policy Alternatives

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THE NEED FOR A METHOD. The term "policy studies" is applicable to such a disparate variety of recent research efforts that teaching courses in that "area" has become a major challenge. Any choice of an instructional approach necessitates the adoption of a particular perspective in policy analysis, usually to the exclusion of several others. Those of us who focus our courses on policymaking, for instance, tend to ignore the vast literature on policy impact, and vice versa; while others among us who consider policy "substance" primary, generally do so by giving short shrift to questions of policy cause and consequence. Attempts to develop a course syllabus which is both sufficient to "cover" these various perspectives while managing to "fit" all relevant information into a semester (or quarter) session are often nightmarish experiences which only the most masochistic among us can possibly enjoy.

If this dilemma seems familiar, then you are probably a political scientist. As a discipline, we have been plagued for years by what Ted Lowi has termed a "fission and confusion in theory and research."¹ In spite of this (or perhaps because of it), the teaching of political science has been characterized by an obsession with being "authoritative" and "comprehensive"--two qualities, Lowi notes, not conducive to searching inquiry in the classroom.² Thus, many of us end up by burdening ourselves and our students with dull, neverending texts and even duller, seemingly neverending lectures. This does little more than convince our detractors that we are quite capable of creating boredom out of excitement, irrelevant abstractions from the morning's headlines, and inconsequential busywork out of potentially instructive assignments. Many of the articles in this symposium and much of the work accomplished through (or promoted by) professional organizations³ indicate a growing disenchantment with traditional modes of political science education. They also reflect the substantial efforts currently underway to guarantee that policy studies education will not fall into the same mold.

One such effort is the focus of this article: the work of Elinor Ostrom and her colleagues at Indiana University. Ostrom has developed a teaching strategy which can prove useful for those bothered by the usual overreliance on texts, lectures, and some of the more empty "innovations" in instruction techniques. It concentrates on the analysis and comparison of policy alternatives, but not to the necessary exclusion of concerns for policymaking or policy impacts.⁴ Nor is the approach severely limited in application, for it has demonstrated applicability in any number of substantive policy issues and on both graduate and undergraduate levels. Much of what follows is derived from her approach as described and reported on in several sources as well as my own experience in attempting more limited applications in a variety of courses and contexts.

POLICIES AS ALTERNATIVE PREMISES. Basic to the strategy is the obvious (yet little utilized) contention that policy decisions reflect choices among competing policy premises as well as alternate conclusions. Policy choices are (more often than not)

made from among several explicitly stated programs of policy action, each competing with the others for endorsement and adoption. The debate generated by the presence of several policy possibilities is usually substantial, especially in matters where an issue's salience for society is relatively high. This debate tends to create a "literature" of its own ranging in form and quality from simplistic editorial diatribes to sophisticated scholarly treatises. A characteristic common to these writings is the "advocacy" position assumed by authors who seek to convince, persuade, and otherwise "sell" their policy position to a given audience. Advocates of policy positions are thus, by necessity "rationalizers"; that is, they intentionally undertake to posit a "reasonable" argument on behalf of their policy choice and counter to opposed or competing positions. In so doing they invariably express (sometimes overtly, but oftentimes covertly) the "theory" underlying their proposed "solution" to a given policy problem. This "theory," once made manifest in a clear and logical form, explicates the policy proponent's understanding of the issue environment, the problematic situation involved, and the specific factor or factors upon which a solution is contingent. Thus, a policymaker's choice not only involves adoption of a particular policy action (i.e., conclusion), but also acceptance of the "theoretical" underpinnings of that specific alternative.

There is nothing new or unique in this view, for policy advocates have always been open to challenge on grounds that their premises and assumptions are questionable. As a foundation for policy research, however, this approach has come into its own only in recent years,⁵ particularly in the work of "public choice" analysts. On a very general level, Vincent Ostrom's discussion on the paradigmatic roots of traditional public administration demonstrates how extensively the premises of a given "theory" can dominate an entire "field,"⁶ let alone the policies advocated by practitioners who follow that tradition. On more specific policy grounds, Robert L. Bish and Vincent Ostrom apply the search for underlying assumptions to various schools of metropolitan government reform,⁷ as have Elinor Ostrom and others who have based numerous research endeavors on the results.⁸

THE CRITICAL EXPERIMENT APPROACH. Since the teaching mode discussed below is based on this analytic approach, a very brief sketch of the latter will be helpful in understanding the tasks students are asked to accomplish. Philosophically this approach owes much to the work of John Dewey,⁹ but methodologically it traces its roots back further. Credit is given to geologist T. C. Chamberlin who, in an 1890 article in Science, posited the "method of multiple working hypotheses." In applying this method, the "effort is to bring up into view every rational explanation of new phenomena, and to develop every tenable hypothesis respecting their cause and history." Having accomplished this task, the investigator has "tentatively neutralized the partialities" which would otherwise accompany the adoption of a particular theoretical contention. Thus, neutrality established and alternative hypotheses arrayed against each other, the analyst

proceeds with a certain natural and enforced erectness of mental attitude to the investigation, knowing well that some of his intellectual children

will die before maturity, yet feeling that several of them may survive the results of final investigation, since it is often the outcome of inquiry that several causes are found to be involved instead of a single one.¹⁰

The "investigation" consists of devising "crucial" or "critical" experiments which posit and test the competing hypotheses. The hoped for result: a finding which offers more credence for one contention than for others.¹¹ Vincent Ostrom expresses the utility of this approach for analyzing the competing theoretical assumptions of public policies.

Where we have two theoretical explanations that reach contradictory conclusions, empirical research can be propitiously conducted to test the empirical warrantability of the two competing explanations. If evidence derived from empirical research consistently supports the conclusion derived from one explanation as against the contradictory conclusion derived from another explanation, then we would appear to have a basis for supporting the use of one language system as supplying the better set of intellectual tools.¹²

While there are many problems with the actual application of this methodology (especially in the "soft" social sciences), its value for instruction in policy analysis is potentially quite high. The principle ingredient in the approach is student access to the literature generated by a debate over a given public policy issue. As might be expected, Elinor Ostrom uses the issue of metropolitan government reform, with special emphasis on the institutional form of police services in urban areas. In a study guide developed by Professor Ostrom, students are presented with a variety of materials ranging from a short brochure advocating consolidation for Multnomah County (Portland), Oregon to a lengthy report issued by an Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations.¹³ There are, of course, no restrictions on the issues to which this approach can be applied: health care delivery;¹⁴ environmental and consumer protection; government regulation of business; energy production and conservation policies; anti-inflation and anti-unemployment policies; poverty policies; and so on. In short, there is a wealth of "raw material" available for use with this approach.

STEPS IN THE METHOD. Given a particular issue area, the instructor will find it advisable to select three or four articles representing contending positions for use in student assignments. Without such pre-selection, the search for appropriate articles becomes time-consuming and wasteful of efforts which are more appropriately expended on analyses of the competing positions themselves. Having provided the essential raw material for student assignments, the following steps should be followed:¹⁵

(1) After carefully reading a pamphlet, brochure, editorial, or article advocating a certain policy position, the student is asked to reread the piece, but this time to find specific phrases, sentences, or paragraphs used by the author to justify the proposal being presented. The student should transcribe that justification on a separate sheet, making sure to note the statement's source to facilitate future reference.

(2) Next, the student converts those transcribed statements into propositional "if...then" form. This step presumes, of course, that the student understands the nature and format of propositions which assert relationships among independent, intervening, and dependent variables. Consider the following examples derived from a recent article highly critical of the U.S. health care delivery system.¹⁶ In a space of several paragraphs, the following statements were noted:

1. "The faults of American medicine do not lie primarily in inadequate medical technology but in the fact that health care is a commodity that must be purchased...."
2. "...no capitalist society has ever started from the premise that medical care is a right. In some capitalist countries a strong labor movement has won the right of medical care.... The American ruling class, however, has been able to impede the development of a labor party.... The oft-cited paradox of the richest country in the world having such backward social welfare programs is no paradox at all. Such is the logic of capitalism...."
3. "The American medical system remains relatively unmodified by concessions to the working class.... The overwhelming majority of medical services are for sale to the highest bidder. Most physicians operate on the 'fees-for-service' principle."

From those three statements a student can deduce the following propositions:

1. Treating health care as a commodity is positively related to problems of the American health care system.
2. a. The more capitalist the society, the greater the treatment of health care as a commodity.
b. The stronger the labor movement within a capitalist society, the less likely health care will be treated as a commodity.
3. The more capitalist the society (where health care is a commodity), the more service is provided to the highest bidder, the more likely a 'fee-for-service' system will be in force.

A major attraction of this instructional approach is its demand that students know and be able to undertake the critical task of uncovering and explicating hypotheses from statements where such propositions are frequently well hidden. This is not a talent often stressed in courses and texts on political science methods, despite its obvious value for generating research topics.

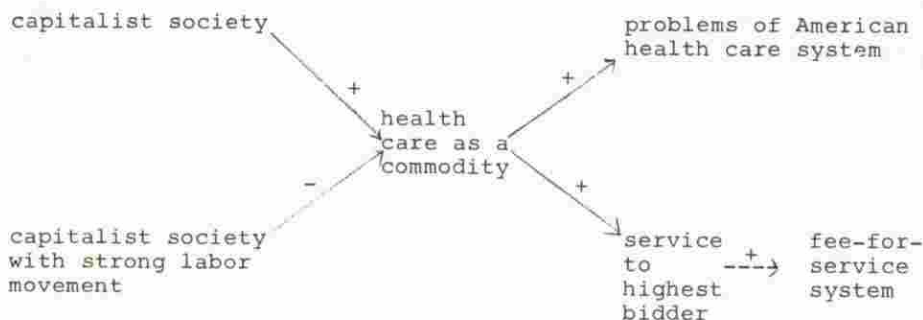
(3) Having thus completed a "propositional inventory" of a particular policy position statement, the student is next asked to "link" the various propositions, thereby making explicit the logical form or "theory" underlying an advocate's proposal. Often this linking process is a simple matter of finding variables which "overlap" in two or more statements. At other times linkages are implicit and must be "reasoned" from a

careful reexamination and analysis of the inventory. In my use of this approach, this task has proven to be the most challenging and exciting for most students. In a sense, they are asked to bring together parts of a "puzzle" for which they have found and cut the various pieces. The thrill of "fitting" the parts together soon becomes part of the process.

The entire procedure is greatly facilitated if the student is able to express propositional linkages graphically, i.e., in "flow chart" form. Using the health care propositions explicated above, each can be shown graphically as follows:

- | | | | | | | | |
|------|---|---------------------------|---|---------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. | health care as
a commodity | ----- ⁺ -----> | problems of
American health
care system | | | | |
| 2.a. | capitalist society | ----- ⁺ -----> | health care as
a commodity | | | | |
| b. | capitalist society
with strong labor
movement | ----- ⁻ -----> | health care as
a commodity | | | | |
| 3. | capitalist
society | -- ⁺ --> | health care as
a commodity | -- ⁺ --> | service to
highest
bidder | -- ⁺ --> | fee-for-
service
system |

This graphic representation provides a foundation for the linking which can result in the following flow chart:¹⁷



In this way the student is able to develop a comprehension of the logical underpinnings of particular policy alternatives. Again, this is not an activity stressed in courses on research methods, thus leaving the task demonstrating flow chart construction to the instructor.¹⁸

(4) Repeating steps (1) through (3) for other assigned articles, students will eventually have propositional inventories and flow charts representing the assumptions and premises underlying several alternative policy choices. This material provides the basis for comparisons which would highlight points of agreement and disagreement among the competing "theories." For an example, in the metropolitan reform literature analyzed by the Ostroms there are several schools of thought, the most

prominent being the "consolidationists" who favor the merging of smaller, overlapping governmental units into a larger, single jurisdiction. Basic to the consolidation position are the assumptions (i.e. hypotheses) that larger jurisdictions produced more efficient urban service delivery and that fewer jurisdictions within a given area will do the same. These fundamental tenets are challenged by other reform positions which adhere to the assumptions of "community control" and public choice" perspectives. The opposition on these and other specific points among those competing policy perspectives is evidenced in the comparisons students make by carefully analyzing their flow charts. In a similar fashion, students also find points of agreement, e.g. government efficiency is positively associated with lower per capita tax burdens by all three schools of thought. There are several ways for such comparisons to be expressed, and the instructor might consider assigning an essay topic that will have each student compare and contrast two specific policy proposals on the basis of propositions and logic derived to this point.

(5) At this juncture there are several options open to instructors. While some may choose to stop, others may wish to extend the assignment by having students design and carry out formal research projects testing the empirical warrantability of competing hypotheses susceptible to critical experiments. If Elinor Ostrom's experience is any indication, the massive commitment of time and other resources needed to support such a project are well worth the effort.¹⁹ While few of us have such resources, it is still possible for a class to develop a research design which might be useful if the opportunity arose. Going through the steps of breaking down propositions into their component parts, operationalizing the resulting variables, determining if the operationalized relationship will be empirically testable, developing a sampling frame and specific measures for each variable, considering rival hypotheses and planning methods for examining their impact or controlling for their effects, and selecting modes of analysis to be applied²⁰ --these are tasks which can be contemplated and discussed in the classroom as well as carried on in the field.

CONCLUSION. As both a research method and teaching strategy, the comparison of policy alternatives through propositional inventories and crucial experiments has much in its favor. Its use in the classroom demands considerable effort from both student and instructor, but the results are well worth the time and preparation involved. Besides the immediate payoff in terms of an in-depth familiarity with alternative policy proposals for a specific issue, the student learns through experience how to contend with a policy choice situation. In addition to facilitating "reasoned choice," there are other benefits to be derived: students find the techniques for developing propositional inventories and reconstructing the logic of an argument extremely valuable in other courses where critical analysis is called for; their ability to generate interesting research questions also increases, as does their capacity and willingness to undertake formal research in the social sciences; most important, however, is the payoff derived from the fact that the policy studies classroom becomes a place for "searching inquiry," not just a location for marking time and accumulating credit hours.

- ¹Theodore J. Lowi, "American Government, 1933-1963: Fission and Confusion in Theory and Research," APSR, LVIII (No. 3), September 1964: 589-599.
- ²Ibid., p. 592.
- ³For instance, the APSA's Division of Education Affairs and International Studies Association's Consortium for International Studies Education have been active in developing and advertising innovative instructional material and strategies for several years.
- ⁴Ostrom's work, for example, posits the institutional form of policymaking systems as an issue and regards the consequences of policy choice in that matter to be a rationale for (and evaluative measure of) that decision. In this manner she links the three focal points of policy studies: policy substance, policymaking, and policy impact.
- ⁵The dominant form of policy analysis, of course, concentrates on comparisons of policy conclusions and their consequences. For instance, compare the "public choice" methodology with the more frequently applied benefit/cost analysis technique.
- ⁶See his The Intellectual Crisis in American Public Administration, revised edition (University, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1974).
- ⁷Robert L. Bish and Vincent Ostrom, Understanding Urban Government: Metropolitan Reform Reconsidered (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1973).
- ⁸Elinor Ostrom, "Metropolitan Reform: Propositions Derived from Two Traditions," Social Science Quarterly, 53, December 1972: 474-493; also Elinor Ostrom et al., Community Organization and the Provision of Police Services (Beverly Hills, Ca.: Sage Publications, 1973).
- ⁹See Dewey's The Public and Its Problems (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1927) and Liberalism and Social Action (New York: Capricorn Books, 1935), esp. Chapter III.
- ¹⁰This 1890 article, "The Method of Multiple Working Hypotheses," was reprinted in Science, 148, 7 May 1965: 754-759, and is included in the appendix of Elinor Ostrom's Urban Policy Analysis: An Institutional Approach (Washington, D.C.: AAAS, forthcoming).
- ¹¹On critical experiments, see John R. Platt, "Strong Inference," Science, 146, 16 October 1965: 347-353 (also reprinted in Ostrom, Urban Policy Analysis); Arthur L. Stinchcombe, Constructing Social Theories (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1968), pp. 24-28; Imre Lakatos, "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes," in Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge, eds., Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970/74), pp. 91-196; and James C. McDavid, "'Crucial Testing' for the Study of Complex Institutions," in Problems of Theory in Policy Analysis, ed., Phillip M. Gregg (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1976), pp. 137-147.
- ¹²Vincent Ostrom, "Language, Theory and Empirical Research in Policy Analysis," in Problems of Theory in Policy Analysis, p. 16.
- ¹³E. Ostrom, Urban Policy Analysis.
- ¹⁴See Mel Dubnick, "Three Approaches to Health Care," a L.A.P.S.S. module currently under development for APSA's Division of Educational Affairs. The initial proposal for that module can be found in DEA News, No. 13, Spring 1977, p. 13.

- 15 Much of what follows is drawn from E. Ostrom, Urban Policy Analysis; Elinor Ostrom, "Public Policy Analysis," DEA News Supplement, Spring 1975, pp. s/2-s/6 and s/9-s/11; and Dubnick, "Three Approaches to Health Care."
- 16 This example is from Stephanie Coontz, "You Can't Afford to Get Sick," in Life in Capitalist America: Private Profit and Social Decay (New York: Pathfinder Press, Inc., 1975), pp. 69-102.
- 17 For a complete analysis of this and two competing health care reform proposals, see Dubnick, "Three Approaches to Health Care."
- 18 See G. David Garson, Political Science Methods (Boston: Holbrook Press, Inc., 1976), chapter 5; also Nan Lin, Foundations of Social Research (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1976), chapter 2.
- 19 See William R. Grant, "Applying Political Theory," Change, 8 (No. 6), July 1976: 64-67 for an interesting look at Elinor Ostrom's courses at Indiana University.
- 20 See E. Ostrom, Urban Policy Analysis.

Guided Design

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Guided Design is a new instructional method that may prove very useful for teaching policy studies. It was developed at West Virginia University in the early 1970's by Charles Wales and Robert Stager who felt that lectures and labs were especially weak in teaching young engineers how to solve open-ended problems and manage many complex decision situations which would confront them upon graduation.¹ What was needed, they reasoned, was a method for guiding students through open-ended problem-solving experiences. The method had to be systematic yet flexible enough to insure a genuine experience. Too much guidance (overly systematic) could stifle experiential learning while too little guidance could make the learning experience somewhat haphazard.

SYSTEMATIC GUIDANCE. The Guided Design method assumes that effective problem solving requires one to:²

1. identify the problem;
2. understand the basic objective;
3. comprehend various constraints, assumptions and facts;
4. generate possible solutions;
5. establish criteria and select a solution;
6. analyze the chosen solution;
7. synthesize;
8. evaluate;
9. report findings and make recommendations;

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