15 Comparing Policy Alternatives

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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 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, never-ending texts and even duller, seemingly never-ending lectures. This does little more than convince our detractors that we are quite capable of creating boredom out of excitement, irrelevant abstractions from the mornings'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 organizations[3] 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

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 preselection, 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 "fees-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, that is, in "flowchart" form. Using the health-care propositions explicated above, each can be shown graphically, as in Figure 15-1 (see page 164). This graphic representation provides a foundation for the linking which can result in the flowchart shown in Figure 15-2 (see page 164).[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 flowchart construction to the instructor.[18]

(4) Repeating steps (1) through (3) for other assigned articles, students will eventually have propostional inventories and flowcharts 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 (that is, 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

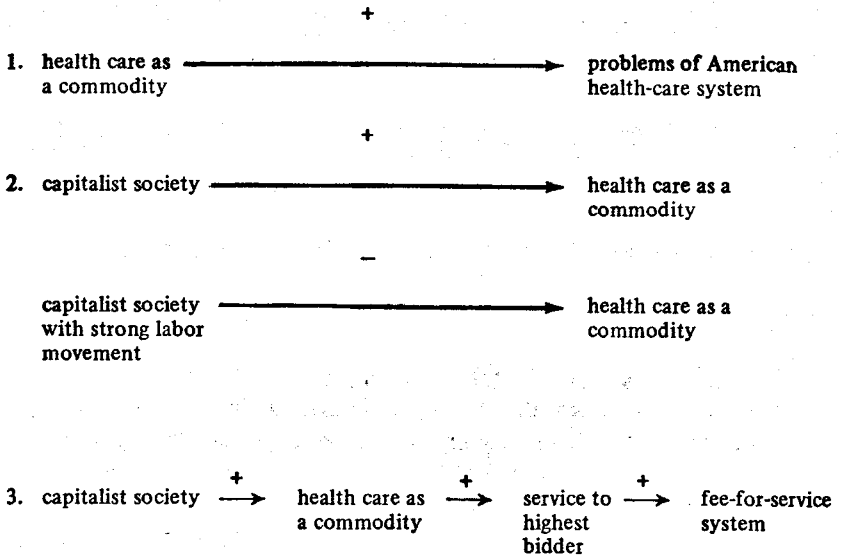

Figure 15-1. Examples of Individual Propositions

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, for example, 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.

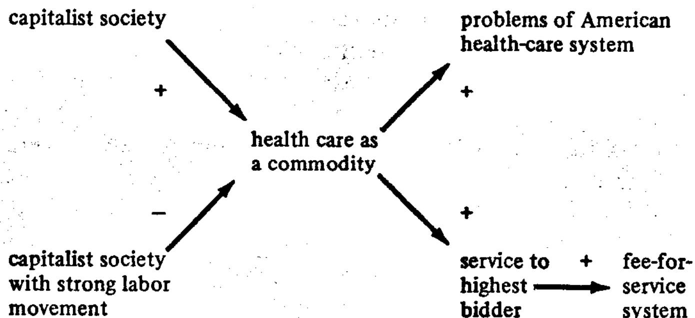

Figure 15-2. Completed Flowchart

(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 commitments 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 applied[20]–these are tasks which can be contemplated and discussed in the classroom as well as carried on in the field.

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.

Notes

1. Theodore J. Lowi, "American Government, 1933-1963; Fission and Confusion in Theory and Research," *ASPR*, LVIII (September 1964):589-99.

2. Ibid., p. 592.

3. For 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.

4. Ostrom'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.

5. The 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.

6. See his *The Intellectual Crisis in American Public Administration*, revised edition (University, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1974).

7. Robert L. Bish and Vincent Ostrom, *Understanding Urban Government: Metropolitan Reform Reconsidered* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1973).

8. Elinor Ostrom, "Metropolitan Reform: Propositions Derived from Two Traditions," *Social Science Quarterly*, 53(December 1972):474-93; also Elinor Ostrom et al., *Community Organization and the Provision of Police Services* (Beverly Hills, Ca.: Sage Publications, 1973).

9. See Dewey's *The Public and Its Problems* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1927) and *Liberalism and Social Action* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1935), especially chapter 3.

10. This 1890 article, "The Method of Multiple Working Hypotheses," was reprinted in *Science* (148, 7 May 1965, pp. 754-59) and is included in the appendix of Elinor Ostrom's *Urban Policy Analysis: An Instructional Approach* (Washington, D.C.: AAAS, forthcoming).

11. On critical experiments, see John R. Platt, "Strong Inference," *Science*, 146 (no. 3642), 16 October 1965, pp. 347-53 (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, D.C. Heath and Company, 1976), pp. 137-47.

12. Vincent Ostrom, "Language, Theory, and Empirical Research in Policy Analysis," in *Problems of Theory in Policy Analysis*, p. 16.

13. E. Ostrom, *Urban Policy Analysis*.

14. See Melvin 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):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*.