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In *The Policy Making Process*, Charles Lindblom and Edward Woodhouse argue that rational policy analysis is constrained by certain limitations placed on it, mainly in the forms of disagreement and uncertainty. One of the major flaws in using a purely rational model of policy making, according to Lindblom, is that humans themselves are capable of pure rationality (p.5-6). A variety of constraints affect our ability to make rational decisions. In order to understand the policy making process, we must also understand the constraints placed upon it.

The arguments Lindblom and Woodhouse present can be categorized into three categories – limits of intelligence, flawed stakeholder input, and human impairment. Each of these influences is discussed in detail below.

**Limits of Intelligence**

In discussing the limits on intelligence, Lindblom first points to analysis as a substitute for politics (p. 15). Lindblom argues that the correct form of analysis is not always used and sometimes problems are solved (or not solved) by using the wrong analytical tools. In addition, analysts often “neglect subjects that turn out to be important” (p.16). Through the political process, often new issues related to problems are articulated, offering potential solutions not considered through analysis alone.

Lindblom goes on to discuss that a major obstruction to purely reasoned agreement is that “any failures in logic by even one participant will bring the collectivity to disagreement” (p.17). In addition, access to differing information affects each participant’s perception of the problem and the potential solutions. Even if all the information is constant among the analysts, the participants must still have trust in those providing the information. This trust (or lack thereof) is crucial in bringing a group to agreement. For example, within the Technical Committee
structure utilized in my workplace, we find it very beneficial to participate a “getting to know you” session, where each of the participants can gain understanding of how the staff has formulated the policies to date. The staff must establish trust with the external participants, so that everyone at the table believes in the goal and the process. To have even one participant skeptical of the process can bring down an entire group. The most effective decision-making processes are those that are based on mutual understanding, respect, and trust. This trifecta is essential to creating the best policy outcomes, but rare to actually achieve.

Another challenge in the limits of intelligence is the inability of analysis to ever rise to infallibility. Unlike in mathematics, were we can state that one plus one equals two, in matters of policy such clarity is next to impossible. In fact, instead of leading to agreement, analysis often poses more questions, leading to even greater disagreement (Lindblom, p.17). For every policy position on a certain topic, others will be able to challenge the assumptions. Lindblom and Woodhouse take a cynical view of such analysis, perhaps to the detriment of the positive aspects of analysis. Indeed, analysis is not the answer to all policy problems. However, a rational approach is the best tool available to start the conversation.

In talking about the limits of intelligence, one must also consider the difficulty in determining the public interest. Although government is designed to serve the “public interest” there is considerable disagreement as to its definition. Such disagreement often manifests itself in the form of a conflict of values. In considering the public hearing process for making land use decisions, the governing body is charged to make decisions in the public interest, but stakeholders participating the process may disagree on what exactly this comprises. For example, in my first policy memo, the applicant posed to the governing body that development of an apartment community was in the best interest of the public, providing a variety of housing
options at a relatively low cost. The area residents however, argued that such a development was not in the public interest, as it would negatively affect their property values and bring increase crime to the area. The two groups had a basic disagreement values disagreement as to what was in the best interest of the public. Such disagreements are commonplace.

Flawed Stakeholder Input

In addition to the limits on intelligence, policy making is further hampered by a variety of flawed stakeholder input. This flawed input comes as a result of political inequality created by ambiguity in voting and in an unequal distribution of political influence.

Lindblom first discusses that while voting is the most universal way for a citizen to signal their desires to elected officials, voting is a flawed method of understanding what the citizenry wants. First, citizens are generally not particularly informed on the views of a particular candidate. Such ignorance may be the result of candidates not disclosing their policy views, limited access to information on policy positions, or lack of interest on the part of the citizen in finding out additional information. Voters often choose a candidate based on perceptions of where that candidate stands on a liberal-conservative continuum (Lindblom, p.36). This can be especially true at a state and local level where information regarding a candidate’s stand on issues has been relatively lacking.

Voting as a means of policy decision-making is also flawed in that a voter can only cast one vote which must represent that voter’s stand on a variety of issues. There is no way for an elected official to know through voting which issues are most important to his constituents. This makes agenda setting even more complicated as the elected official must make a determination based on flawed voting input as to which issues are most deserving of attention. As Birkland
discusses in *An Introduction to the Policy Process*, an issue must move through a series of agenda levels in order to reach a prominence in which it can be acted upon (p.171). In order to move from one level to another, elected officials must receive signals as to which issues are most deserving of action. Voting is a way to signal such movement, but as discussed above, a single vote is difficult to use as a basis to understand position on a variety of issues.

A second source of analytical limitation is in the unequal distribution of political influence. Lindblom argues that interest groups and especially business interests wield a disproportionate influence over political agenda setting and decision making. In the case of interest groups, their ability to organize, fundraise, and influence elections. Such groups can be considered both a benefit and a necessary evil in the political process. On the one hand, interest groups are able to rally like minded individuals around a common cause and can bring issues to the notice of elected officials in ways historically difficult for the individual voter. However, interest groups can also be coercive, perhaps bringing issues to prominence at the expense of other arguably equally important issues. For example, in Hanover County, interest groups representing environmental protection have historically been well organized and vocal in the local planning process. As a result, many initiatives supporting such protections have been implemented. While such policies create positive outcomes for this group of citizens, individuals supporting greater property rights have found it difficult to gain equal influence due to a lack of organization. With the rise of the Tea Party over the past few years, Hanover citizens supporting greater property rights have found a voice. I would expect that the rise of this new interest group will begin to influence policy making in Hanover County in the coming election cycles.
While I agree that interest groups have historically held greater sway over policy making than the individual, Lindblom fails to discuss the influence of technology on policy formulation. Granted, *The Policy Making Process* was last updated in 1993, prior to the spread of the internet. However, as we have discussed in class, advancements in technology are rapidly changing how citizens interact with and influence government policy. Movements such as Occupy Wall Street are heavily reliant upon the spread of information through technological means. Birkland differentiates between social movements and interest groups by pointing out that social movements have the ability to create coalitions of interest groups (pp.136-137). The ability to organize diverse interest groups into common a common goal is facilitated by easy access to information. As more and more citizens utilize the internet for information gathering, I believe social movements will continue to gain influence in the political arena. Technology as a method to influence public policy is sure to be much studied in the coming years.

Lindblom pays special attention to the role business plays in the formulation of public policy. Businesses are well positioned both structurally and economically to influence public decision making. Lindblom notes that the “leadership role that business has in the economy gives executives of large corporations an unusual kind and degree of influence over governmental policy making” (p.91). Government officials are well aware that a strong economy is vital to a stable government and therefore work with business groups to ensure continued stability in a way that benefits businesses. Lindblom is rather harsh upon the effect of business influence, but notes that changes required to significantly limit business in political decision making is politically infeasible at this time (p.145). While I agree that business does enjoy a privileged position within governmental decision making, Lindblom’s assessment that such influence needs further curbs is somewhat contrary to the framework of the U.S.
governmental system. Our government is organized around principals of capitalism, rather than principles of socialism. As such it is appropriate that business interests have a greater share of policy making power.

Human Impairment

Lindblom’s last major argument on the limits of analysis is based on human impairment. Lindblom argues that humans are constrained both biologically and socially when performing analysis. From a biological standpoint, humans are incapable of processing all possible information on a given topic. Lindblom posits that a “basic discrepancy exists between humans’ mental capacities and the complexity of policy problems” (p.5). From this viewpoint, analysis can never be complete, simply because humans are incapable of processing it fully. While I agree that humans are severely limited in their capacity to process information, from a biological standpoint the human brain is continually evolving. Our mental capacity today is greater than thousands of years ago and we continue to improve as a species. By continuing to push ourselves to greater analytical capability as a species, over time our capacity to process information will increase.

Lindblom also believes that the construct of our social systems also inhibits our ability to analyze. Lindblom places much of the blame on our educational system, which is used as a means of control, rather than a means of teaching inquiry skills (p.115). While I can appreciate Lindblom’s point of view – education in the United States is highly structured – an argument that the entire system is designed to enforce compliance and obedience seems to over-reach. As with any policy meant to advance the public interest, education is a series of tradeoffs. In order to provide a basic level of education to all, structural constraints are necessary. It would be
impossible to ensure that everyone received the same level of education if the method by which such learning is disseminated is left to the individual teacher. In addition, our economy is designed based upon the provision of certain skill sets, including deference to authority. If the citizenry was educated to question every piece of information provided to it, it would be difficult to achieve any progress. While increasing inquiry skills is certainly valuable for the advancement of policy, it may create unintended consequences in other areas.

Contributions to Policymaking

Lindblom and Woodhouse have provided an interesting perspective on the limitations of rational analysis in the policy making process. Not content to ascribe to either rationalists such as Sabatier, or to narrative advocates such as Deborah Stone, Lindblom seeks to explain that analysis still has a place and is a valid method of policy-making, as long as we understand its limitations. Lindblom is a true believer in bounded rationality and the use of incrementalism (Birkland, p. 256). By highlighting the limitations of analysis, Lindblom and Woodhouse have provided the framework by which policymakers can begin to consider ways to account for the constraints. Identifying a problem is the first step towards solving it. By highlighting the deficiencies in both the structure of our political system as well as the human constraints, policymakers have been given a map to overcome these deficiencies. It is unlikely (if not impossible) to overcome fully the obstacles to analysis. Still analysis forms a valid basis for policy-making and minimizing the limits is a worthy effort.

Birkland and Lindblom disagree on utility of the practice on incrementalism. While Lindblom argues that decisions are most often made in small steps, Birkland points out that some problems require the implementation of major change and others cannot be solved through
incremental change (p. 256). An excellent example of such a problem is the reaction to the September 11th attacks. The United States needed to act quickly and decisively to secure our borders and protect our interests in the wake of the attacks. An incremental approach would not have been appropriate and in fact, may have led to further attacks.

Birkland roots public policy in the scientific realm and argues that scientific method is superior to methods rooted in narratives, such as Deborah Stone’s method. Still, Birkland does not rule out narratives. In this he agrees with Lindblom that such anecdotes do influence analysis. Where Lindblom and Woodhouse would label it as a limit on analysis, Birkland considers it more of an influence.

Conclusion

The Policy Making Process provides an excellent framework for understanding the many influences which effect public policy making. While the text is becoming somewhat dated, especially with regard to the influence of technology, the authors nonetheless offer sound arguments as to why bounded rationality exists. Although I do not agree completely with all of Lindblom and Woodhouse’s assertions, the book has provided valuable insight into the many complexities affecting public policy making in the United States.
Bibliography
