

COMPARATIVE POLICY ANALYSIS

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I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this special issue of *Policy Sciences* is to provide a representative sample of work dealing with public policy issues from cross-national perspectives. The participating authors are among those especially adept at such comparative analysis. These two criteria, that the essays be comparative in nature and high quality, are the only ones which have been established. Our goal is to present work as it is currently being done in policy studies, without imposing artificial boundaries on this broad field of inquiry. We have not, for example, limited contributions to a particular region of the globe or set of issues.

Comparative Policy Analysis

A central motivation for this special issue is our impression that comparative analysis has received too little attention. Most of the scholars identified with the field of policy studies appear to have a

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domestic orientation. To be sure, political scientists can point to an enormous range and variety of studies dealing with comparative politics. Normally, however, these do not examine the policy process itself in a focused or detailed manner.¹

It is important to put this general observation in context. Public policy study is most accurately viewed as a movement or trend among a variety of scholars and other professionals and not as a formal academic discipline. Those most prominently identified with the field represent a range of disciplinary backgrounds; the varied methodological approaches employed reflect this diversity. The fairly clear and precise boundaries of subject matter and techniques associated with established academic disciplines cannot be applied to policy studies except in an artificial and misleading fashion. The most important consistent element among policy analysts is their concentration upon the processes by which public policies are identified, initiated, and carried through to completion or frustration. Nevertheless, with this proviso clearly in mind, it is possible to observe and generalize about the characteristics of most, if not all, contemporary policy analysis.

At least three major factors have contributed to the relative dearth of comparative studies. First, comparative research is particularly difficult to conceptualize, organize, and implement. When more than one nation is studied, problems associated with gathering and analyzing data are greatly increased. The sheer costs of doing research, human as well as financial, can quickly become so enormous that they frustrate any efforts to undertake cross-national work. Approaching comparative research

in terms of straightforward examination of differences between policies and their outcomes does not begin to address the sorts of problems which may appear. Often it is virtually impossible to determine whether different policy outcomes are due to variations in the specificities of policies themselves, in the character of the problems they seek to mitigate, in the general cultural milieus in which they operate, or some combination of these. Similar questions apply from the viewpoint of the structures of policies rather than their outcomes. Policies in two different countries directed at generally the same concerns may differ so greatly in approach and tactics that any effort to analyze them in comparative terms could be self-defeating. The contrasts in policies may themselves result from basic cultural, or more specific administrative and political, differences between the countries, and the relative weights of these two types of influence are not always apparent. Whether focusing on policies or outcomes, comparative analysis faces an intellectual thicket.

The point may be strengthened by a more specific reference. Is it, for example, instructive to analyze generally similar social service policies in two nations, or is it an exercise replete with frustration? The policies may be based on quite different conceptions of the most pressing social service needs and of the best ways to attack those needs. They might employ contrasting tax and benefit schemes; they might operate in environments where there are differing relationships between public and private benefit programs or between national and subnational levels of government. In such situations, variables may be so numerous and diverse

that it becomes very difficult to isolate one or two critical ones, thus rendering the translation of a policy from one context to another problematic.

A second factor which may discourage comparative work is the reputed role of public policy as a successor to the public administration tradition. Public administration developed near the turn of the century in reaction to the corruption and machine rule then strongly entrenched in American politics. Although there have been attempts to extend public administration's international and comparative scope, the discipline remains based largely upon American government experience.² As a result, it is not surprising that the study of public policy, which in many ways is built upon the intellectual and professional heritage of public administration, has failed to develop a strong comparative aspect. It largely continues to reflect public administration's proclivity for working within the context of American government and politics.

In recent years, developments within the federal government have had a decided effect in reinforcing this tendency in public policy studies. Over the last several decades, governmental responsibilities and activities have mushroomed. In response, agencies at the federal level assumed an increasing interest and involvement in methodologies associated with policy studies, including systems analysis, program budgeting, and systematic program evaluation.³ Robert McNamara's introduction of systems analysis and especially Planning Programming Budgeting (PPB) into the Department of Defense in 1961 was a major milestone in the process.⁴ President Johnson's 1965 Executive order to disseminate similar methods

of analysis throughout the federal bureaucracy marked another. Since the latter half of the 1960's, there has also been increasing interest in applying these methodologies to guide policymaking within state and local governments. At the same time, appreciation of their shortcomings has been growing. These new techniques have been refined and proliferated, but with this has come a more sophisticated appreciation of their limitations.⁵

Policy studies can therefore be seen as continuing public administration's attention on American government. However, they have moved beyond the predecessor field to become deeply involved in the development and application of new policy analysis techniques. However important this new emphasis might be, it has served to continue the focus of policy research on American issues. We will argue in the following section that comparative policy analysis is a potentially important area of study. Yet, like comparative administration, it has been a distinct but lower priority category within the broader field.

A third, more explicit, reason for the lack of attention to comparative work is the professional training orientation of public policy programs. A major incentive for the burgeoning interest in the field has been the failure of public administration to become the central profession for supplying government administrators. In a study completed in 1959, high-ranking (GS-14 and above) federal career employees were found to have backgrounds primarily in law, engineering, and the physical and biological sciences generally.⁶ There is little indication that the conclusions of this study have been altered by developments in the intervening

years. Public policy specialists have viewed this failure as one of the most important arguments for pursuing efforts to depart from the training and approaches of the older field. In recent years, a variety of public policy graduate and undergraduate degree programs have been established at major universities and other institutions around the country. Uniformly, the new schools have been created to train primarily practitioners rather than scholars.

There is no necessary reason why comparative analysis should be neglected by programs to train public sector staff and line specialists. Indeed, we argue below that comparative policy studies are extremely valuable for the instruction of future practical decisionmakers and analysts as well as for the academic insights they provide. Rather, the point is that comparative work is not as central or pragmatic to professional education, and therefore does not receive the weight of attention. This practical, professional orientation of public policy training combines with the difficulty of comparative work and the traditional biases of public administration to encourage an American emphasis and a concomitant lack of comparative work.

The Case for Comparative Policy Analysis

For reasons discussed above, expanding the analytical horizon from one nation to two can easily more than double the difficulties involved. Nevertheless, comparative work also holds considerable promise for both the academician and the policymaker. The opportunities it provides are roughly related to the qualities which make it difficult. From the

broadest perspective, comparative analysis raises the possibility of much richer insights concerning the influence of cultural milieu, political competition, and governmental structures themselves on the characteristics of public policy. While comparative analysis requires a deft touch and an ability to manipulate much more complex and diverse information, it may lead to more stimulating and incisive conclusions on both the specific and general policy levels. At the very least, it will provide a sense of the national limitations of generalizations about policy.

Second, on a more narrow point, there is the possibility of gaining specific policy payoffs from the study of analogous programs in other countries. Cultural differences and the tendency to generalize from limited data are two of a number of dangers which can hamper efforts to learn from one nation for the benefit of another. However, with these caveats in mind, the possible insights to be gained from pertinent experience in other environs should not be ignored. Comparative analysis, in this sense, can thus be viewed as a relatively inexpensive social experiment. Often these lessons will be negative rather than positive. For instance, Theodore Marmor and his collaborators, Wayne Hoffman and Thomas Heagy, provide persuasive evidence in their essay below that the Canadian experience should encourage modesty regarding the likely benefits to be derived from innovations in health care programs currently being proposed in the United States.

Finally there are important implications in contemporary international relations for the domestically-oriented field of policy study.

It is now commonplace to observe that matters of domestic policy within nations have increasingly important political repercussions between them. This interdependence magnifies the need for the coordination of national policies. The disarray of the industrialized nations in the face of the Arab oil cartel in 1974 offers vivid evidence to this need. Problems associated with these issues of international coordination include, but are hardly limited to, trade and monetary instabilities, internationally transmitted inflation, high commodity prices combined with threatened shortages, and environmental pollution. Even the closest of allies can suffer debilitating lapses in their policy coordination. Neustadt's account of Anglo-American differences over the Suez (1956) and Skybolt crises demonstrates that both governments suffered from a profound ignorance of the other's policy mechanisms.⁷ Managing these problems will require multinational mechanisms and greater knowledge about the policy processes within different nations.⁸

The Essays

The dominant impression given by the following collection of essays is one of considerable variety. They differ not only in the types of policy discussed, but also in the degree to which authors are expansive or microscopic in policy areas included in their studies. Marmor et al. address one relatively specific aspect of social policy, health services, in two countries, Canada and the United States. The other authors have adopted much more general policy and geographical perspectives. David Caputo statistically explores the relationships among different categories

of government expenditure in four industrial democracies. Hugh Heclo discusses broad problems of harmonization of welfare state policies in West Europe and the United States. Albert Hirschman undertakes a reflective examination of general issues of policy analysis and policy processes in Latin America.

There are some substantial methodological contrasts among the authors. Hirschman, stimulated by a retrospective consideration of his 1963 book, *Journeys Toward Progress*, provides impressionistic, sensitive, and subtle distinctions between different types of motivation for addressing policy issues. He is primarily interested in the environment and ambience which surround policymaking. He differentiates explicitly between subjects which are forced upon decisionmakers and those which are selected with relative freedom (pressing and chosen problems), and between those issues which are given great attention and those which are quite marginal (privileged and neglected problems). He also examines the importance of the relationship between different incentives for taking up a problem (understanding its components as opposed to motivation to attack it). In contrast, Caputo focuses on longitudinal correlations among various public spending categories, government expenditures as a whole, and national income. Instead of impressions based on long immersion in the culture of a particular region, he relies on quantitative data and methodology to discuss nations with similar political systems and levels of economic development.

Heclo and Marmor may be seen as occupying methodological positions somewhere between the two extremes represented by Caputo and Hirschman.

Both Heclo and Marmor are interested in relatively specific subjects, i.e. different aspects of the welfare state. This contrasts with Caputo's concern with various explicit policy categories and Hirschman's with the overall style of making policy in Latin America. The former authors use quantitative evidence, but fall short of Caputo's preference for statistical analysis. Rather like Hirschman, they rely heavily on impressions of the politics and culture of the regions they are examining. Their specific points about policies are linked to general images of the social and political systems of nations in Western Europe and North America.

It is also possible to trace some broad and important similarities among all the authors included here. At a relatively general level of interest and theme, the diverse pieces join in a unity of outlook. The essays all emphasize the complex character of the policy process. The authors are acutely aware that policy goals are difficult to reach in the best of circumstances and that serious barriers lie in the path of almost any effort at significant reform. At times, this perception lends a tone of fatalism and near-irony to analysis. Hirschman, for example, is impressed by the compulsion of Latin American political leaders, once they have assumed power, to repudiate the policies of previous regimes, with a resulting emphasis on starting all over again "from scratch." He regards the phenomenon of constant declaration of failure important enough to have coined a new term--"fracasomania"--to describe it. This sensitivity to the barriers which impede new policies may be one of the most significant characteristics of policy analysis in general, single-nation as well as comparative.

The general impression of complexity in the policy process breaks down into a number of more specific elements discussed by some or all of the authors. First, there is keen awareness of the interdependence of policies. Heclo describes the manner in which social service programs, especially in the United States, have proliferated in a haphazard, unplanned way, with no general effort at coordination even though they can and often do have significant impacts on one another. From a wider perspective, it is possible to see important mutual and generally unplanned influences, or "spillovers," among government income and social policies. Caputo is likewise interested in interdependence and explicitly in the relationships between defense and important social policy categories of public expenditure. He presents forceful evidence that, contrary to conventional impressions, there appear to be no direct trade-offs between military and welfare state spending while there is actually some positive correlation between defense and health expenditure increases.

A second, related, point is that unplanned consequences occur not only in the relationships between policies, but within the context of a single policy area. Marmor et al. note that national health insurance in Canada has led to rising costs despite various efforts to hold them down. To some extent, the rises have been due to difficulties in implementing control policies, which have resulted in the government turning to the simple strategy of restricting the number of hospital beds. Another reason why program costs have gone up, however, is that physicians' incomes have markedly increased under the new program. This has occurred because bad debts have been virtually eliminated and doctors have been

able to establish rather high uniform fees to replace their earlier, more informal, variable fee structures.

Hirschman adds a wrinkle to the phenomenon of unanticipated consequences when he discusses the problem of policies being undermined by effects which were not apparent to the initiators. At the same time, however, he warns that it is important not to become carried away by the dangers of such developments. He contends there has been a tendency in parts of Latin America to exaggerate the unhappy side-effects of reform efforts at the price of underestimating the degree to which they have achieved their intended purposes. He particularly identifies this attitude with left-wing intellectuals in Latin America, who oppose any reforms short of total ones; he sees their counterparts in Europe and the United States among conservatives who are skeptical about the capacity of any government-initiated social program to do more good than harm.

A third theme in the essays is the importance of politics in the development of policy. The authors make a number of acute observations about the results of political considerations and influence. Heclo points out that policies that are inconsistent when considered in administrative terms may nevertheless be politically useful precisely because they are able to satisfy a variety of constituencies. As a result, what should be fairly easy changes in order to harmonize policies may run into enormous political barriers. Marmor and his co-author focus on the manner in which important political factors can fatally handicap efforts to control hospital costs. For example, hospitals are almost never allowed to fail, even when there are persuasive economic reasons for closing them. Hirschman,

as noted above, is impressed by the tendency of new regimes automatically to abolish the policies of their predecessors. Caputo's essay is in one sense the most removed from politics and the interplay among competing interest groups, government agencies, and other centers of power and influence. Nevertheless, along with introducing data which dispute conventional assumptions about policy trade-offs, he stresses the requirement for thorough analysis of close attention to the political context of policies.

Fourth, all of the authors show awareness of the impacts of cultural and social environments on policy. Their studies cross national, but not basic cultural, boundaries. Marmor et al. observe that the many similarities between the U.S. and Canada in political, economic, social, and cultural characteristics make the comparison of the health programs of the two nations especially appropriate. However, they are equally skilled in pointing out how dissimilarities might distort the seemingly direct policy insights from one nation to the other. Hirschman takes a somewhat different approach to basically the same issue of the importance of context. Concerned that similar policies may have a quite different significance and impact from one Latin American country to another, he decided to compare different policies. He relies on his general experience and expertise concerning the region and the fact that his was an individual rather than a group research project to provide insights and useful connections between subjects studied.

Fifth, the essays have a concern with domestic rather than foreign policy issues. Once again, this appears to be representative of a more

typical characteristic of policy analysis. While a large number of important foreign policy studies have been done by historians and political scientists, this concern apparently has not yet become equally widespread among policy specialists. In an earlier period, three social scientists, Richard Snyder, H. W. Bruck, and Burton Sapin, attempted to outline a formal decision-making approach to foreign policy analysis, but for methodological reasons, their approach did not attract a following.⁹ Graham Allison's important study of the Cuban Missile Crisis achieved quick and justifiable prominence because of his novel approach of employing organizational and bureaucratic analyses, perspectives which are common enough in other subject matters, to explain foreign policy behavior.¹⁰ If foreign policy work has not been prominent among policy specialists, comparative foreign policy work is even more neglected. Richard Merritt has observed that, "One notable gap...is a blurring of any truly comparative perspective... However well developed analyses of American foreign policy processes may be, the more general field of foreign policy decision-making, which is necessarily comparative and non-parochial, remains essentially inchoate, reliant upon anecdotal evidence, and neglected."¹¹ Here again, we may be witnessing the influence of the professional training bias of so much policy works; i.e., the foreign service is quite separate from the civil service, with a very distinctive professional culture and style of recruitment. The new policy studies centers are unlikely to have a major impact on recruitment patterns into the former.

A sixth common element is a strong awareness of contemporary limitations on resources. Hecló argues that in the future policy frontiers will

be internal ones of "policy harmonization" rather than external ones of expanding the reach and scope of programs. Marmor, Hoffman, and Heagy stress the growing concern in Canada and the U.S. over escalating costs of medical care; they emphasize the need to hold down the expansion of services and facilities and instead to focus on restructuring the existing systems. Caputo, at the conclusion of his essay, observes simply that industrial nations must examine more closely the relationships between defense and welfare spending, because there are "precious few resources to waste." Hirschman, on the other hand, writes about nations which do not yet have such long experience with elaborate Western governmental structures to make and implement policy; he is concerned with the sort of abstract psychological barriers which block the spirit and will--powerlessness, dependence, familiarity with defeat and failure.

These points about the similarities and contrasts among the essays in this special issue suggest a final general observation. At this stage, comparative policy studies, like other policy studies, are useful principally for the specific insights they provide rather than for any automatic or easily constructed cumulative value. The growth of interest in policy studies is a recognizable development, but the defining characteristics of the field itself are not altogether clear. It is particularly true here, therefore, that such studies are likely to be most useful in themselves without necessarily serving as building blocks for a larger intellectual edifice.

This final reservation should not be misconstrued as an argument that public policy is a less promising area of intellectual endeavor than

other aspects of the social sciences. Rather, the inclusive and relevant nature of the subject and its issue areas makes it relatively easy to confront problems which plague the social sciences generally. Very little of what is produced in any social science field is directly cumulative. A number of works have been enormously influential and remain quite stimulating. Good studies are suggestive to scholars and inspire, as they were inspired by, other good work. In this general sense, there is progress within and among disciplines. On the other hand, social science is replete with studies that describe themselves and are seen by others as the first step down a long road of further analysis, a road which is seldom followed in a direct manner and to a destination rarely reached. This observation obviously transcends comparative policy studies, but is particularly clear and imperative when applied to them.

Conclusion

As editors, we would be remiss to submit that insufficient comparative policy analysis has been done without making explicit suggestions for further avenues of research. One critical concern is that the comparability of data remains a major hindrance to comparative work. This, in turn, leads into the need for a larger inventory of careful cross-national case studies and primary data sources. Although significant advances have been made in data collection and analysis in recent years, these have occurred primarily in areas where quantification is relatively easy, such as economic and demographic statistics.¹²

Two related specific avenues for further research are suggested by reflections on the current limits of comparative analysis. First, more conceptual work based in solid methodology is needed if policy studies are to deal with complexities involved in comparative efforts. As part of this, theoretical constructs must be matched with carefully derived data and evidence, both quantitative and qualitative. As Lasswell has noted, the vitality of the comparative method will depend on "whether the expansion of the stock of 'facts' accepted as relevant is accompanied by 'methodological' changes that render facts indispensable" to the understanding and management of the policy process.¹³ Second, more work should be done to explain and expand upon cultural variables. As this task is addressed in more detail, we should be better able to appreciate the effects of cultural factors on the policy process.

In conclusion, it is especially appropriate to reassert the value of comparative analysis, at a period when the policy sciences appear to be at a critical juncture.¹⁴ From both the domestic and international perspectives, the growing appreciation of cross-national policy research and policy impacts underlines the need for comparative analysis. It is clear that the interest in and importance of policy studies have grown in recent years, but the borders of the constituency remain vague. Efforts to delineate and refine the outlines of the field will almost surely increase. We think that this essay and the ones that follow argue strongly for the inclusion of the comparative dimension.

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NOTES

1. A possible exception is Frank B. Horton, II, Anthony C. Rogerson, and Edward L. Warner, III, eds., *Comparative Defense Policy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1973), especially the essays by Paul Y. Hammond and Arthur J. Alexander on force posture and weapons development policies, respectively.
2. In more recent decades, a substantial literature which is highly self-critical in nature has been produced by scholars in public administration. Nevertheless, these observations about the shortcomings of the field may still be applied to most public administration training programs.
3. See Alice M. Rivlin, *Systematic Thinking for Social Action* (Washington, D. C.: The Brookings Institution, 1971).
4. These are referred to as the "intellectual technologies" by Daniel Bell, *The Coming of the Post-Industrial Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1973). The classic exposition of these analytic modes is Charles J. Hitch and Roland N. McKean, *The Economics of Defense in the Nuclear Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960).
5. One good example of local government application is Harry P. Hatry and John F. Cotton, *Program Planning for State, County, City* (Washington, D. C.: State Local Finances Project of the George Washington University, January 1967); for an evaluation, see C. F. Bales, "The Progress of Analysis and PPB in New York City Government," in R. S. Rosenbloom et al., *New Tools for Urban Management* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971).
6. Information on career patterns of federal civil servants is taken from the comprehensive 1959 study of Lloyd Warner et al., *The American Federal Executive* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 257.
7. Richard E. Neustadt, *Alliance Politics* (New York Columbia University Press, 1970).
8. Social scientists have been paying more attention to transnational processes and organizations. See, e.g., Samuel P. Huntington, "Transnational Organizations in World Politics," *World Politics*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (April 1973), pp. 333-368; and Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., eds., *Transnational Relations in World Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972).
9. Richard Snyder, H. W. Bruck, and Burton Sapin, *Foreign Policy Decision-Making* (New York: The Free Press, 1962). A detailed account of the development of decisionmaking studies in international relations as well as a cogent criticism is provided by the one-time enthusiast, James N. Rosenau, "The Premises and Promises of Decision-Making," in James C. Charlesworth, ed., *Contemporary Political Analyses* (New York: The Free Press, 1967) pp. 189-211.

10. Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1971).
11. Richard L. Merritt, "Foreign Policy Studies," *Policy Studies Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Winter 1974), p. 127, respectively.
12. See, e.g., Bruce M. Russett et al., *World Handbook of Political and Social Indicators* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964).
13. Harold D. Lasswell, "The Future of the Comparative Method," *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (October 1968), p. 5. Although Lasswell is concerned with the study of comparative governments, his comments, especially those treating his delineation of the policy process, are relevant to comparative policy analyses. Also, see Harold D. Lasswell, *A Pre-View of Policy Sciences* (New York: American Elsevier, 1971).
14. Garry D. Brewer, "The Policy Sciences Emerge: To Nurture and Structure a Discipline," *Policy Sciences*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (September 1974), pp. 239-244.

