The Public Policy Process

WEEK 11: POLICY IMPLEMENTATION, POLICY FAILURE, AND POLICY LEARNING
What is implementation?

- The process by which policies are put into effect.
  - A policy is generally useless if it isn’t implemented.
  - Implementation battles are also where significant power and debate come in.
A History of the Study of Implementation

- The first generation: case studies
  - Martha Derthick’s *New Towns in Town*
  - Pressman and Wildavsky’s *Implementation*

- Lessons
  - Need commitment in the executive branch
  - Consider local needs and preferences in policy design
  - Consider and adapt to local conditions
  - There is no “one” policy
  - The complexity of joint action
The second generation: attempts at theorizing

- Systems like models of implementation
- Bottom up and top down models
- Strengths: first attempts at creating some kind of unified theory of implementation
- Weakness: top down, roles of actors underspecified.
Synthesis: top down and bottom up models of implementation

- **Top down**—start from the highest level policy maker and design a policy to influence the lowest level actor (target or implementer)
- **Bottom-up**—starts from the perspective of the target or implementer
  - How can policy be designed to induce implementer compliance/enthusiasm?
A third generation (Malcolm Goggin et al.)

- Synthesis: top down and bottom up models of implementation
- Implementation is communication between policy makers and implementers
- Propositions:
  - Clear messages sent by credible officials and received by receptive implementers who have/are given sufficient resources and who implement policies supported by affected groups lead to implementation success
  - Strategic delay on the part of states, while delaying the implementation of policies, can actually lead to improved implementation of policies through innovation, policy learning, bargaining and the like.
Reasons for implementation conflict

- Agreement about the goals; differences on methods
- Pre-enactment opposition becomes post implementation conflict
Is implementation technical, or political?

- The old idea: administration simply does the will of the legislature (Woodrow Wilson)
- The modern view: politics matters in administration
Who implements?

- The executive branch
- The legislative branch
- The judicial branch
- Other levels of government
- Private actors
Why Public Policies May Not Work

- Inadequate resources
- Policies may be administered so as to lessen their potential effect.
- Public problems are often caused by a multitude of factors, but policy may be directed at only one or a few of them. Why?
Why Public Policies May Not Work

- People may respond or adapt to public policies in a manner that negates some of their influence.
- Policies may have incompatible goals that bring them into conflict with one another.
- Solutions for some problems may involve costs and consequences greater than people are willing to accept.
Why Public Policies May Not Work

- Many problems simply cannot be solved, or at least not completely
- New problems may arise that distract attention from a problem
- Many national problems and policies are actually implemented by state and local agencies, and are sometimes designed at the local level
Responses to these problems

- Adjustments in enforcement
- More money is put into the program
- Challenge to legality or constitutionality
- The program is simply ignored
- The program is left to locals to improve on and pursue
- The program is actually repealed
How do we define policy failure?

“Success and failure are slippery concepts”

Ingram and Mann ask “Is there an objective measure of success acceptable to all conflicting value positions?”
Why failure is difficult to define

- Some problems may be tentative first steps toward resolving a broader social problem.
  - Medicaid, for example is successful in helping pay medical costs for old people, but was a failure at addressing all the medical needs of this group or society generally.
Why failure is difficult to define

- Would the “do nothing” option have been any better?
  - Urban renewal programs were by wide admission a failure
  - Yet, doing something, “may be evidence of a political system that responds to problems, even if knowledge may be limited and appropriate policy tools unavailable.”
Why failure is difficult to define

- Changing circumstances may turn success into failure
- Policies are interrelated
  - One policy that seems like a failure “may facilitate another higher priority policy venture” (such as immigration and relations with Mexico).
Why failure is difficult to define

- **Excessive policy demand**
  - Constant demands on the part of the public for government to do “something” may actually make more failures inevitable as more policy with more complexity fails to meet expectations.
  - Government may fuel this demand by claiming to have the resources and tools available to implement policy that may be technically infeasible.
Why failure is difficult to define

- **Realizable policy expectations**
  - We may reach too far in expecting that government can solve a problem
  - Example: speculative argumentation in the Clean Air Act
  - But if we make progress, is that failure? Even if it doesn’t meet the exact goals of the policy?
Failure is often the product of a poor causal theory

- This can make things worse
- The choice of tools influences whether policies succeed or fail
- All the problems we discussed under implementation can influence policy success or failure.
Policy failure can be related to the quality of our political institutions

- The breakdown of parties → no institutions to package politics and policy proposals to create commitments
  - Is this still true? Do the parties play a role now?
- Voters have abandoned parties and vote on the appeal of candidates
  - Is this also true?
- Distrust between the branches makes policy evaluation more ideological, more contentious, and more likely to look like failure
- Is extreme partisanship part of the problem? Does it even exist?
Policy Failure and Learning

- Can policy makers and others learn from the successes and failures of policy?
- What do we mean by learning?
  - Changing behavior in response to feedback
  - Accumulating information for decision making
  - Sharpening skills to help do particular tasks better.
- Who learns? What would learning look like if it happens?
  - Single loop learning: about performance
  - Double loop learning: about values and assumptions.
What sort of things promote learning?

- Learning by example: other states, cities, agencies.
- Learning by experience
- Learning through careful scanning and observation.
How can organizations promote learning?

- Promotion of a good policy analysis function for good information.
- Seek to preserve “institutional memory”
- Knowledge management
- This is all harder than it looks.
Problems involved with learning, or trying to learn.

- All the problems of policy analysis
- Lack of institutional memory because organizations are not unitary actors.
- The effects of interactions with other members of the policy community?
What is behind the urge to learn lessons?

- **Improve performance and outcomes**
  - Internally, within an organization
  - In the policy process more broadly

- **Normative expectations**
  - We believe that governments and policy makers *should* learn
  - They believe this too
    - After-action reports
    - “Lessons learned” documents
How then are lessons drawn (i.e., put into effect?)

- Copying
- Emulation
- Hybridization
- Synthesis
- Inspiration
To what extent does policy change or innovation reflect learning?

Innovation or change, is sometimes just mimicking or copying
Two broad types of learning

- Policy Learning
  - Instrumental policy learning (single loop)
  - Social learning (double loop)
- Political learning