

# Commonly Ignored Elements in Policymaking\*

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Policymaking has five elements which are especially repugnant to “scientific” study, in the narrow sense in which that word is generally used. In consequence these elements are commonly ignored. This is possible, because examples can be chosen where these difficulties are minimal. Such examples are favored by scientists because they can use their skills on them more confidently in theoretical analysis. They are also the kind of example for which policymakers are likely to hire experts, because they are more likely to get value for their money. Furthermore, they are examples more easily found in business than in the public sector; and business has more money to spend than government on systems analysis and operational research. All these factors have combined to concentrate most of the money and the brains on the periphery of the problem, whilst its center is not only starved but ignored and may easily be lost to view or even denied. Our journal should, I think, combat this natural but dangerous trend.

Very briefly, the five elements I have in mind are these:

1. *Endurance through time.* All major policies are concerned with the maintenance of relations through time, rather than with the attainment of goals which can be attained once for all. Such “goals” are only means to new opportunities for continuing relations, whether in personal or in public office. To get the job and marry the girl are “goals” which make sense only because doing the job and living with the girl are regarded as desirable forms of ongoing relation. Local governments are concerned to balance sewers and sewage, roads and traffic, schools and schoolchildren *through time*. To avoid confusion with the narrower concept of goal seeking, I will call these continuing standards norms and will subsume under that term all the incidental goals.

2. *Management of conflict.* All norms conflict in that they compete for limited resources of men, money, materials, time and attention. Some also conflict inherently, while others are complementary. No policy can completely reconcile such conflicts. They are not evidence of penury which affluence can alleviate. On the contrary, the burden of choice mounts with the growth of possibilities. Though ingenuity can

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suggest countless ways of securing different mixes of disparate satisfactions, none can offer complete satisfaction of all. So policy problems are by their nature unlike scientific or technological problems in that they admit of no solution which can be proved to be right or even to be the best. Policymaking is the choice between a host of alternative partial solutions. Its essence is the management of conflict between these.

3. *Value adjustment.* It follows that policy problems are solved by adjusting the thresholds of what for each norm should be deemed to be the acceptable. It is thus an exercise in value-adjustment and plays an important part in value-creation, as is evident from the historical study of any field of public policy. Policymaking is in fact the adjustment of the value system to the reality system through time, as well as the designed adjustment of the reality system to the value system.

4. *Modelling historical process.* The temporal process which policymaking seeks to regulate is irreversible and non-repetitive. The policymaker represents this process to himself by some kind of model, from which he draws tentative conclusions both about the causes of the current course of events and about its possible and probable future course and the probable effect of his possible interventions. But such a model can be neither used for prediction nor validated by prediction to the extent or even in the way that is possible with models of processes which can be treated as nonhistorical.

5. *Modelling the "artificial."* The difficulties of predicting or understanding historical processes are multiplied when they contain a significant element of what Herbert Simon recently called "the artificial," as distinct from those natural processes which would be as they are even if men were not here to observe them. The process which policymakers seek to regulate is as it is because of human intervention, not least when the result of that intervention is remote from that intended. The human future is in part predictable, in part controllable and in part neither predictable nor controllable by those within the process. And in so far as it is predictable, it is so largely because the successful enforcement of policy has made it so. What Simon calls the "sciences of the artificial" are different from our knowledge of the natural (though I personally think it may be somewhat different from and greater than that described by Simon in his book of that name).

These familiar facts seem to me to present a challenge, both theoretic and practical, to those concerned with the scientific study and practice of policymaking. The theoretic challenge is to understand the nature of the mental processes involved, a challenge which should, I think, produce a more serviceable epistemology than we now possess. The practical challenge is to improve the working of the process without distorting or over-simplifying it.