

Public Policymaking, Heuristics, and Policy Outcomes

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Abstract

Public Policymakers are sometimes overwhelmed with significant and insignificant public policy decisions. Understanding how policymakers arrive at their choices is an intellectual process that has received attention. Researchers have developed theories to explain how policymakers make public policy decisions, and some of the factors that influence present and future policymaking process. Thus, there have been studies on heuristics to better understand the policymaking process. Certain factors influence public policymaking. These factors, including historical experiences (Juliussan, Karlsson, & Gärling, 2005), intellectual prejudices (Stanovich & West, 2008), stage of development and individual norms (Bruin, Parker, & Fischhoff, 2007), level of self-confidence (Acevedo, & Krueger, 2004), and an increase in commitment, these factors influence the choices policymakers make. Understanding these factors is vital to understanding how public policy decisions are made. Specifically, factors that influence the policymaking process may impact the outcomes.

Keywords: Policymaking, Policy, Outcomes, Heuristics, Public, Decisions, Impact, Ground-breaking

Introduction

Public policymakers make public policy decisions about many things. They make political decisions; financial decisions, cultural decision, social decisions, and healthcare decisions, this may also include other types of decisions and judgments. Quite often, the policymaking process is fairly specific to certain decisions being made. Some choices are simple and seem straight forward, while others are complex and require multi-faceted approach to arrive at a policy decision.

Heuristics provide a framework in which satisfactory public policy decisions are made swiftly and relative effortlessness (Shah & Oppenheimer, 2008). Researchers have established various types of heuristics to help explain the policymaking process; essentially, policymakers work to decrease the effort they expend in making public policy and heuristics offer policymakers a general guide to follow, thereby reducing the effort they exert. Collectively, heuristics and factors influencing public policymaking are significant facets of critical thinking (West, Toplak, & Stanovich, 2008). Researchers believe that it can be taught, which would benefit potential policymakers learning how to make appropriate and outstanding public policy decisions in various situations (Nokes & Hacker, 2007).

This paper explores public policymaking, in the context of types of decisions public policymakers make, factors that influence policymaking, some heuristics research that can be utilized in the policymaking process. Further, the paper explores the effects of public policy decisions, as well as how existing public policy decisions impact future behavior and future policymaking processes.

Literature Review

Issues that Impact Public Policymaking

There are numerous important issues that influence public policymaking. Noteworthy issues include historical experiences, numerous intellectual biases, an increase commitment and defeated outcomes, individual differences, including stage of development and individual norms age and financial status, and an increase in commitment. These things impact public policy and the policymaking process.

History can impact future policymaking decisions. Juliussan, Karlsson, and Garling (2005) indicated that historic public policy decisions influence future public policymaking decisions. It stands to reason that when something positive results from a policy decision, public policymakers are more likely to decide in a similar way, given a similar situation. On the other hand, policymakers tend to avoid repeating historic mistakes (Sagi, & Friedland, 2007).

This is significant to the extent that future policy decisions made based on historical experiences are not necessarily the best policy decisions. In economic policy decision making, highly successful public policymakers do not make economic decisions based on historical failed outcomes, rather by examining choices regardless for historic experiences; this method conflicts with what some policymaker may think (Juliussen et al., 2005).

Furthermore, with regards to historical experiences, there are numerous intellectual biases that influence policymaking decisions. Intellectual biases are thinking patterns grounded on observations and oversimplifications that may lead to memory errors, erroneous judgments, and defective judgement (Evans, Barston, & Pollard, 1983; West, Toplak, & Stanovich, 2008).

Intellectual biases include, but are not constrained to: belief bias, which involves extreme dependency on historical knowledge at arriving at public policy decisions; hindsight bias, public policymakers tend to eagerly elucidate an occurrence as unavoidable, when it happened; omission bias, usually, they tend to overlook information perceived as dicey; and confirmation bias, in which they perceive what they assume in observations (Marsh, & Hanlon, 2007; Nestler. & von Collani, 2008; Stanovich & West, 2008; see also West et al., 2008).

In policymaking, intellectual biases influence policymakers by causing them to excessively rely or give more credibility to anticipated observations and previous knowledge, while dismissing information or observations that are seem ambiguous, without viewing at the wider picture. While this influence may lead to scanty policymaking decisions sometimes, intellectual biases enable policy makers to make efficient decisions with support of heuristics (Shah & Oppenheimer, 2008).

In addition to historical experiences and intellectual biases, policymaking decisions making may be influenced by an increase of obligation and failed outcomes, which are irreversible costs. Juliussen, Karlsson, and Garling (2005) concluded that public policymakers make decisions based on an irrational increase of commitment, that is, policymakers invest large number of hours, finances, and effort into a public policy decision to which they feel committed; further, policymakers may tend to continue to make risky public policy decisions when they feel responsible for a failed costs, time, money, and effort spent on a venture. Consequently, policymaking may at times be influenced by 'how far in the hole' the policymaker feels he or she has gotten (Juliussen et al., 2005).

Public policymakers' perspectives may also influence policymaking decisions. Research has shown that stage of development, financial status, and intellectual abilities influence policymaking decisions (de Bruin, Parker, & Fischhoff, 2007; Finucane, Mertz, Slovic, & Schmidt, 2005). Finucane et al. established a significant difference in policymaking decision across stage of development; that is, as intellectual functions decline as a result of stage of development, policymaking decisions performance may decline as well. In addition, the more experienced policymakers may be more overoptimistic regarding their ability to make decisions, which inhibits their ability to apply strategies (de Bruin et al., 2007). Finally, with respect to stage of development, there is evidence to support the notion that more experienced policymakers prefer fewer choices than less experienced policymakers (Reed, Mikels, & Simon, 2008).

Public policymaking experience is merely one aspect that influences policymaking decisions. According to de Bruin et al. (2007), policymakers in lower echelon of policymaking process may have less access to information and resources, which may make them more susceptible to make less informed public policy decisions, due to circumstance beyond their control; consequently, public policymakers with inadequate budget may make public policy decisions based on historic information.

Beyond historic experiences, intellectual biases, and public policymakers' differences; an additional link to public policy making is the belief in individual significance. When public policymakers believe what they introduce matters, they are more likely to introduce more public policy issues. Acevedo and Krueger (2004) explored the participation level of individuals within a giving setting, they concluded that individuals are eager to participate when they assume their participation is emblematic of the attitudes of the masses, as well as when they attach some level of regard for their own importance in the outcomes. Public policymakers dedicate their time and effort when they believe their time and effort counts. Acevedo and Krueger pointed out this participation phenomenon is ironic; when more people participate, the individual participation countless, in the overall participation mathematics.

Public Policymaking Heuristics

Generally, heuristics are policymaking strategies public policymakers use that are based on little information, yet very often correct; heuristics are intellectual bypasses that reduce the intellectual burden associated with public policy making (Shah & Oppenheimer, 2008). Shah and Oppenheimer argued that heuristics decrease workload in public policymaking in numerous ways. Heuristics offer the policymakers the ability to monitor few signals and/or alternative choices in policymaking process.

In addition, heuristics minimizes the work of recovering and storing information in memory; streamlining the policymaking process by minimizing the amount of unified information necessary in identifying a public policy choice or judgment (Shah & Oppenheimer, 2008).

As a result of studies and theories, scholars have delineated a host of heuristics policymakers use in public policy making. Heuristics span from wide-ranging to very precise and serve numerous functions. The value heuristic, in which policymakers' critic higher valued items to have higher quality than lesser valued things, is specific to user patterns; while the horror heuristic, in which policymakers consider how contemptible illegal is when deciding on the punishment (Shah, & Oppenheimer, 2008). According to Shah and Oppenheimer three vital heuristics are the availability, representative, and anchoring and adjustment heuristics.

In public policymaking, policymakers rely on a host of heuristics for convenience and speed. One significant heuristic is the representative heuristic, which is an exhaustive financial heuristic (Pachur, & Hertwig, 2006). In the event that few things are identifiable, policymakers will tend to choose the identifiable things; applying or arriving at public policy decisions with minimal effort or information (Goldstein & Gigerenzer, 2002; Hilbig & Pohl, 2008). Hilbig and Pohl explained that it is tough to study and answer absolutely if a policymaker is using the representative heuristic alone, or if the policymaker is using other information in drawing a conclusion.

As a result, the study on the representative heuristic is mixed (Goldstein & Gigerenzer, 2002; see also Hilbig & Pohl, 2006). Goldstein and Gigerenzer provided seminal research on representative heuristic. They argued that recognition memory is perceptive, dependable, and more precise than chance alone; they argued less recognition leads to more correct decisions. Conversely, according to Hilbig and Pohl, policymakers often use additional information when utilizing representative heuristic; that is, they do not rely solely on recognition along in policymaking. Further, Hilbig and Pohl concluded that even when sound recognition was established, policymakers use additional information, in conjunction with the representative heuristic.

Another vastly studied heuristic is the availability heuristic. With this heuristic, policymakers are motivated to recover information that is most readily available in policymaking decisions (Redelmeier, 2005). Interestingly, this heuristic is significant, as it is the basis for many of policymakers' judgments and decisions (McKelvie, 2000; Redelmeier, 2005). To illustrate, when policymakers are asked to read a list, then identify issues from the list, often, the issues identified are important public policy issues already in the books, with which the policymakers are familiar (McKelvie, 2000). Within the medical field, Redelmeier argued that missed health diagnoses are often attributable to heuristics, the availability heuristic being one of those responsible. Redelmeier wrote heuristics are beneficial as they are intellectually reasonable, but advised practitioners need to recognize when heuristics need to be given more weight in favor of more comprehensive approaches.

Utilizing anchoring and adjustment heuristic is the foundational policymaking heuristic in situations where some estimate of value is required (Epley, & Gilovich, 2006). In this particular heuristic, policymakers first use an anchor, or some general estimate that surfaces initially, and adjusts their estimates until a satisfactory answer is reached. As an illustration, if a policymaker were asked to answer the question, "In what year did Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was killed?" the anchoring and adjustment heuristic would be used. The policymaker may start with a known date, such as the date he gave I have a dream speech, August 28, 1963; then make an estimate based on the known information (Epley, & Gilovich, 2006).

The practical application of the anchoring and adjustment heuristic is in negotiations; policymakers make counter offers based on the anchor that is provided to them. Epley and Gilovich argued often policymakers tend to make approximations which tend to move towards the anchor, where actual values tend to be farther away from the anchor initially situated. Further, anchoring requires effort; such work is vital in avoiding anchor bias.

Subsequent to Public Policymaking

Subsequent to public policymaking process, policymakers experience a variety of reactions. Thus, current public decisions influence future policymaking process. Several of the outcomes that may result from policymaking are regret or satisfaction; both of which influence future public policy decisions.

Remorse, feelings of disappointment or displeasure with a choice made is one potential outcome of policymaking decision. Remarkably, remorse may shape the policymaking process. According to Abraham and Sheeran (2003), expected remorse is the belief that the policy decision will be a result of indecision. Expected remorse may prompt behavior; that is, when policymakers indicate they will do something, such as exercise, they may follow through with their proposed choice, to avoid remorse.

Once the public policy decision is made, the impact of the policy decision, if compunction is experienced, will influence future decisions. Policymakers can often get overwhelmed with exploring the other options that were available; the track ignored (Sagi & Friedland, 2007).

Sagi and Friedland (2007) wrote that policymakers feel compunction in accordance with how the policy decision was made; remorse may be dependent on the number of options that were available during the policy decision process; and how varied the options were may impact how regret is experienced after the public policy process. Through a series of experiments, Sagi and Friedland concluded that policymakers feel regret because they feel they were able to make better policy choice by looking at more information, previously disregarded, and carefully weighing the advantages and disadvantages of each choice. Additionally, compunction is magnified when policymakers revisit the other available options and consider what fulfillment the other option would have achieved.

Curiously, policymakers who are dissatisfied with their policy decision usually feel obligated to embrace the policy decision, as a means to reducing anxiety regarding the quality of the policy result (Botti & Iyengar, 2004; see also Gilbert & Ebert, 2002). To illustrate, when a potential applicant does not get hired, s/he may restructure their experience, and find many reasons that explain why s/he did not want to work for the organization.

In addition to compunction, policymakers may also experience satisfaction with their policy decisions. Satisfaction refers to how pleased the policymaker is with the outcome of the policy decision. There are variety of things that impact levels of satisfaction. Botti and Iyengar (2004) observed policymakers prefer to make their own policy decisions and believe they will be more satisfied with their choices; however, when policymakers are given only undesirable options, policymakers are less satisfied than those who have had the choice made for them. Botti and Iyengar argued that the explanation for this phenomenon is that the policymaker assumes responsibility for the public policy made. Consequently, if the available choices are bad, the policymaker may feel as though s/he is responsible for making poor choices.

Also enthralling, apart from heuristics, an important policymaking strategy is assessing positive and negative aspects of the policy choices. Kim et al. (2008) discovered that when less experienced policymakers and more experienced policymakers use this strategy, the more experienced policymakers tend to list more positive and fewer negative aspects of each choice, and more experienced policymakers register more satisfaction with their choices when they use this evaluative strategy. One interesting finding was when the policymaker did not evaluate the options by listing the positive and negative features; there was no experience level difference in satisfaction (Kim et al., 2008).

As discussed earlier, prospective policymaking decision is based on historic policy decisions, as well as levels of satisfaction or compunction (Abraham & Sheeran, 2003; Juliusson, Karlsson, & Garling, 2005; Sagi & Friedland, 2007). Even though there is evidence to support this notion, in many cases, particularly when the policy decision may be overturned, policy decisions may be based on the reversibility factor (Gilbert, & Ebert, 2002). Significant to policymakers' satisfaction is that policymakers are willing to pay a premium for the opportunity to change their minds at a later date (Wood, 2001). Hence, online shoppers procure items using a two-step process; first they decide to procure the items, then once the items arrive, they decide if they want to keep them. Gilbert and Ebert explored whether policymakers prefer making policy decisions that are reversible. They concluded that policymakers do prefer to have the option to change their minds; although policymaker's ability to change their minds actually inhibits their ability to be satisfied with their policy choice.

A Ground-breaking Policymaking Approach

Policymaking is a critical aspect to feeling successful and happy in the public policy arena; policymaking is at the core of all policymakers do. It is important to develop effective policymaking skills and strategies. Problem solving strategies include, but are not limited to brain storming, cost benefit analysis, written remediation plans, and an examination of possible choices (Wester, Christianson, Fouad, & Santiago-Rivera, 2008).

The policymaking process can be complicated and overwhelming. As a result, it is valuable for policymakers to learn a specific model to follow, that may be applied to everyday public policy decisions, as well as life transforming choices. Krantz and Kunreuther (2007) said that a goal and plan based policymaking model is an effective and sound approach to take in public policymaking decision; in this model, the policymaker is encouraged to focus on goals, not happiness or usefulness. According to Krantz and Kunreuther, plans are designed to meet one or more goals. That is, policymakers make plans to unconsciously or consciously meet the goals they have. And, some plans satisfy several goals. To illustrate, individuals who attend a gathering with a friend may be satisfying several goals; friendship and camaraderie, emotional stimulation from one on one interaction, and potentially useful social knowledge gained from being in the gathering. In this model, goals are context dependent and plans are based on their ability to meet the goals.

Essentially, in the goal/plan-based model, the context provides the backdrop for the decision that needs to be made; goals and resources, influenced by the context, contribute to the development of plausible plans; while the policymaking rules are implemented and influence the plan that is ultimately chosen. Krantz and Kunreuther apply this concept to certain for-profit business, but imply the concept may be appropriately applied to a variety of contexts.

Analysis

Intellectual policymaking process is a significant area of study in public policymaking process. Understanding the policymaking process by which policymakers make decisions is important to understanding the policymaking process. There are several factors that influence public policymaking. Those factors are historic experiences, intellectual biases, age and individual variances, belief in individual significance, and an increase commitment. Heuristics are intellectual bypass that take some of the intellectual burden off policymakers. There are many kinds of heuristics, but three are important and commonly used: representative, availability, and anchoring-and-adjustment. After policymakers enact policies, there are several differing outcomes, including regret and satisfaction. Policy decisions that are reversible are more desired and policymakers are willing to pay a premium for the ability to reverse decisions; though reversibility may not lead to positive or satisfactory outcomes. Researchers have developed many policymaking models, which explain the process by which policymakers effectively make public policy decisions. One groundbreaking model is based on goals and planning. There is yet a lot of studies to be conducted on public policy decision making, which will enable policymakers and educators to positively influence peoples' lives.

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