



Policy, Politics and Political Science

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ABSTRACT

Political scientists are increasingly studying public policy in interdisciplinary environments where they are challenged by empirical and normative agenda of other disciplines. Political science has unique perspectives to offer, including a stress on the political feasibility of policy in an environment of power differentials. Our contributions should be informed by the insights of cognitive psychology and we should focus on improving governance, in particular the competence and integrity of decision makers. The discipline's stress on legitimacy and acceptability provides a normative anchor, but we should not over invest in the idea that incentives will achieve normative goals. Creating decision situations that overcome cognitive deficiencies is ultimately the most important strategy.

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In 1976 Richard Simeon published in the *Journal* an important article entitled “Studying Public Policy.” It was one of several synthetic pieces written in the 1970s signaling an interest on the part of political scientists in making a systematic contribution to understanding public decision making and program development. Many political scientists had assumed, until then, that these topics were managed under the rubric of public administration, but a new generation of policy students were beginning to break new ground by focusing on the content of policy, the networks that were created to develop and sustain policy, and the organization of policy work inside the state.

Simeon’s comprehensive assessment helped shape the study of public policy by political scientists, but he described the state of policy analysis in the mid-1970s in quite discouraging terms. “We have not really advanced very far in increasing understanding of how government policies are to be explained or understood,” he wrote (1976: 548), and there is “precious little in the way of explanation.” We could not even settle, it seemed, on our dependent variable: what it is we wanted to explain. Simeon suggested that we focus on patterns of policy and avoid too much investment in case studies, which have a vexing habit of resisting generalization.

He also urged that we avoid the danger of investing in the idea of a “policy science.” This project, closely associated with Yezekiel Dror and Harold Lasswell, would, according to Simeon, satisfy a natural inclination to be “relevant” but at the expense of compromising what should be our principal interest, namely the role of politics in the policy process. Submerging our discipline’s explanatory project for the sake of being useful to policy makers would be a mistake if only because the “broad forces” that shape policy were bound to be ignored and with them politics itself.

Thanks to Richard Simeon and the many policy scholars of that generation it can be fairly argued that political scientists know more about the comparative policy process—how policy is constructed in different environments—than any other discipline. But much has changed. For one thing, trust in the capacity and motivation of governments has declined in all advanced industrial systems (Nye 1997), and, while vigilance is one

of the by-products, so is cynicism and contempt. Politics is in dire need of defence, especially in the policy process. In addition, public policy is no longer, if it ever was, the preserve of political science. The schools of public policy and public administration that existed in the 1970s have expanded and new ones have appeared. All of them employ political scientists, although our discipline is by no means the dominant one. The multi-disciplinary character of policy schools, the applied content of the curriculum found there, and close contact with governments, obliges anyone working in this environment to think beyond empirics, as important as they are.

Policy, after all, is the realm in which the positive and the normative are worked out. Economics has always distinguished between its normative and its positive dimensions and never abandoned the latter, although its normative commitment often consists of a one-dimensional focus on maximizing economic surplus. For the most part, economists have been content to achieve this objective using cooperationist strategies that take as given the current distribution of income and power.

Political scientists are more attuned to the power differentials in society and the constraints they create (Moe 2005). These power differentials are among the normative considerations that draw many to the study of policy in the first place. Political scientists are also more attuned to the demands of democracy beyond the aggregation of votes. We bring to the study of policy sensitivity to what is politically feasible, and in interdisciplinary settings we find ourselves insisting that political feasibility is at least as important as economic feasibility.

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If we propose to study public policy as political scientists, but in an interdisciplinary environment, let us appreciate the implications. First, we need to set aside the idea that the study of public policy must be divorced from the need to improve the policy process. Whereas Simeon argued (1976: 580) that political scientists should focus primarily on describing and explaining, rather than recommending solutions to policy problems, policy schools are heavily oriented toward problem solving. Similarly, the fact/value distinction that social science hued to for decades, is not part of the catechism in policy schools. Policy scholars are inclined to agree with contemporary philosophers that facts and values are deeply entangled (Putnam 2012). Value judgments are on display in every corner of the policy process where they are treated as genuine judgments—ethical, epistemic and aesthetic—and not simply expressions of feeling or ideology.

Second, while grand narratives still command a great deal of attention in political science departments, as they should (Levi 2013), in policy schools there is a strong focus on decision making. The clash of civilizations, the path dependent character of development, and the institutional formulae for economic success are all topics to which political science has made significant contributions. And all of them have policy implications. But to adequately draw out these implications requires translating sweeping patterns into active choices. There is a long-run equilibrium, as Keynes famously pointed out (“in the long run we are all dead”), but he also emphasized that there are many ups and downs on the way. Coping with those ups and downs—the real problems of the day—is what policy is all about. Besides, not every equilibrium is to be equally treasured, as Sen (1985) reminds us. Choosing the desired outcome, or creating environments that make such choices possible, is the preoccupation of policymakers.

Third, it is no longer clear that the best way to ensure a strong place for politics in the study of public policy is to reject the Lasswell project of a “policy science.” Lasswell argued for a problem-oriented approach based on a commitment to human dignity, albeit with an emphasis on policy scientist as hero (Farr, Hacker and Kazee 2006). Whatever the limitations of his vision, it is to problems that policy students are naturally drawn, and whether our values are rooted in human dignity or human capabilities

or some other transcendent values, I doubt that many of us believe that policy problems can be resolved by reducing them to questions of efficiency and effectiveness. To be sure, no policy school has openly embraced the “policy science” project, but the problem orientation that Harold Lasswell extolled characterizes much of the policy work done in schools of public policy.

What do political scientists working in policy schools, or in programs devoted to training policy students, have to offer? First and foremost, we bring theoretical and practical knowledge of the public policy process in a host of countries. We have become experts in connecting how policy is made to the resulting policy patterns. But that is no longer enough. What we require, as well, is a normative agenda centred on models of good governance that shows an appreciation for the frailties of decision making and a commitment to improving public policy consistent with the demands of politics in the policy process. Put another way, political science needs to return to the subject of political feasibility and offer its own version of how to organize politics to achieve policy goals. If good public policy is a valuable and necessary component of a civilized society, we need to consider how it can be improved.

GOOD POLITICS, BAD POLICY

In policy schools and in departments of political science it is impossible to ignore the good politics, bad policy narrative. In this narrative public policy is the direction in which expertise and evidence urge us to go; politics distorts intention, delays action, and encourages the extraction of rents. In its journalistic version, the constant competition for power distorts policy by rewarding demagoguery, promoting special interests, hiding real costs, and encouraging meretricious credit claiming. Couched in this way the formula “good politics, bad policy” is a rule of thumb explanation for why bad things happen in the public realm. If you Google “good politics, bad policy,” you will find countless entries, most of them journalistic accounts of how episodes like the American experience with the fiscal cliff or Canada’s investment in stiffer criminal penalties illustrate how the political process distorts sound policy. According to these accounts, whatever politicians may say, they actually care very little about policy analysis and a great deal about personal gain.

The other side of this formula—bad politics, good policy—does not get as much press, presumably because observers see much less of it. Politicians, it is assumed, will not sacrifice their political interests (commit bad politics) even for good policy. So this discussion takes place in the absence of good policy, somewhere in the realm of unrealized opportunities. For example, the European Union could have solved the deficit crisis if only its political leaders had not pandered to the forces of austerity in search of winning coalitions. Or governments would have dismantled supply management systems in Canada if it were not for concentrated constituencies in Québec and Ontario that would exact political revenge. Either way—the dearth of good policies or the prevalence of bad ones—politics is the corrupting influence.

When public policy is studied in an interdisciplinary environment, political scientists are obliged to confront the proposition that good policy can only be achieved by avoiding politics altogether. Inside government good public policy is mostly what economists say it is. Drawing on the traditions of welfare economics, the central normative intuition of economics is the concept of a social welfare function, which is a combination, or aggregation, of individual welfare functions. Public policies are sound when they improve our collective well-being, which they typically do when they encourage economic growth and a distribution of wealth consistent with freedom of choice (Friedman 1962). Growth, in turn, relies on improved efficiency, the touchstone of evaluative criteria.

While politics plays little or no role in this formulation, economists are not so naïve as to imagine that the struggle for power can be banished by supposing a politically frictionless world. But for many within the economics profession the answer is not to embrace the reality of politics but to constrain it such that it does minimal harm to good policy. Thus, while political scientists study political institutions to understand their effects, many economists study them to discover how these effects might be minimized and the role of government reduced to the absolute minimum (Becker 1995). From this perspective, the most straightforward way of controlling the political class is to reduce the scope for politics; the best way to reduce rent seeking is to reduce the number of rent seekers. And in case anyone thinks that this is merely a

theory, from term limits to fixed election dates to fiscal rules, the last twenty years has seen a host of refinements on the idea that politics should be limited, tamed, and hemmed in.

An alternative approach to the politics-policy conundrum is to focus on reducing transaction costs and encouraging the negotiation and enforcement of mutually beneficial contracts. This strategy recommended by institutional economics gives rise to the principal-agent theory that currently dominates economic modeling of political relationships. The essential idea is that properly constructed institutions can reduce the ability of public officials (whether elected or unelected) to plunder resources, suborn opponents, or ignore the need to provide public goods. The ultimate goal is to allow markets to operate effectively, and markets only function well in the presence of good politics. Creating good politics and achieving good government depend on reducing opportunism by agents and generating credible commitments on the part of principals (Dixit 1996). Good economics is good politics.

This kind of thinking, coming mostly from economics, has inspired a revival of the idea that policy and politics can be mutually reinforcing in systems characterized by good governance. Of course, good governance is by no means a settled ideal. Decades after the institutional turn in political science, hardly anyone would object to the idea that good governance involves institutions that allow predictable, patterned and inclusive decision-making while ensuring that public decisions are enforced according to the rule of law. In the international literature, the concept of good governance is closely linked to political and economic institutions that reduce corruption, install the rule of law, and provide the opportunity for what the World Bank describes as “voice and accountability.” Attention has shifted away from the building of a strong centralized state toward the development of a wide variety of economic and political institutions that can stifle corruption and deliver economic growth.

Actually achieving good governance, however, is no simple matter. At the macro level the debate has concentrated on the relative importance of economic versus political institutions and the causal sequences that link property

rights, democratic elections, and the rule of law to good economic outcomes, especially income growth. These are pattern issues of the highest order to which many of the best political scientists are appropriately drawn. These empirically informed debates reveal, however, that no matter what institutions we construct or inherit, none of them guarantee good governance. Good governance is ultimately about the behaviour of people who populate and operate these institutions. Institutions set the stage, supply the constraints, and distribute the resources, but at the heart of good governance is good leadership, and at the heart of good leadership is good judgment.

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Judgment, leadership and good governance are enduring questions of political theory. They are topics about which psychologists and political scientists have had a lot to say. They are not subjects about which other observers of public policy, economists in particular, can claim much knowledge, although that is beginning to change. In a series of papers over the last ten years, Timothy Besley, among other economists, has made the case that, institutions aside, good governance requires politicians who are competent and have integrity (Besley 2006). For economists, the main concern is how democratic electorates can avoid adverse selection and separate out those who have competence and integrity from those who do not.

Political scientists working on public policy have the more difficult, and arguably more important, task of defining competence and integrity and showing how they can be improved. This task begins by identifying the various ways in which competence and integrity are threatened. It concludes by suggesting ways to improve decision-making capacity in a manner that respects the political character of the policy process.

Politically driven public policy is a maddeningly open-ended process, subject to reversal and defiant of final solutions. It can be practiced well or practiced poorly. If it is to be practiced well, then the overarching imperative for political scientists studying public policy is to understand how political judgments are made, why they often go wrong, and how they might be improved. This mission will require strengthening our patchy behavioural theories and experimenting with complementary institutional arrangements that improve decision outcomes. As Herbert Simon pointed out years ago, decision-making is a product of environment and cognition. Good governance likewise depends on both.

GOVERNING COMPETENTLY

Let us start with competence, which we can define in the ordinary sense: the possession of requisite skills, knowledge and capacity to perform a function. Competence is a standard well suited for democratically elected politicians and most other public decision makers. It does not presume the wisdom of Job or the insights of philosopher kings. Most of all, competence does not imply any extraordinary abilities, such as those required to maximize one's expected utility. This is a good thing because we have come to appreciate, since Simon (1955) published his path-breaking article on bounded rationality, that human beings do not have the cognitive architecture to engage in canonical rational decision making, that our motivations are considerably more complicated than simply maximizing our assets, and that the decision environment for public policy is deeply complex.

As Simon's signal contribution to the idea of rationality in decision making was being absorbed in economics, two others, the psychologist Daniel Kahneman and the mathematician Amos Tversky, were revealing decision making's irrational side. Employing a set of simple experiments in which respondents were presented with identical probability situations expressed in different language, they found significant reversals of preference based on how decision situations were framed. Kahneman and Tversky showed, in particular, that in a decision situation in which we believe gains are possible, we adopt a conservative, risk-averse decision strategy; if we are in a situation construed as one of imminent loss, we are much

more willing to contemplate risky choices. This is the heart of prospect theory and it directly contradicts the standard rational decision-making model.

The “framing effects” that Kahneman and Tversky identified are now familiar to social scientists, and political science has used these insights to understand how choices are influenced by the language used to frame them (Druckman 2004). It turns out that minor variations in the presentation of situations and tasks lead to significant differences in judgment and choice (Einhorn and Hogarth 1981). But the models depicting public policy decision making have not been adjusted very much (Callender 2013). Most policy analysts are aware that as information processors people are more theory driven than data driven (Nisbett and Ross 1980); they sort through information looking for confirming evidence and they ignore data that contradicts their beliefs. But the tendency has been to depict these as constraints on optimizing capabilities rather than alternative models of thinking.

In the case of Simon, the theory of bounded rationality has not been adapted into decision models even though it is a clear and persuasive alternative to rational choice depictions of decision making (Jones 2003). Bendor’s (2003: 443) explanation is that Simon analyzed the lone decision maker, whereas political scientists are typically more concerned with settings with multiple players. There is probably some truth in this, although Simon made it crystal clear that the decision environment is a crucial contributor to any policy choice.

The insights of Tversky and Kahneman have made limited gains in foreign policy but have otherwise failed to capture the imagination of policy theorists (Mercer 2005). James Q. Wilson (1974) mentioned the loss aversion phenomenon as early as the 1970s, but he did not draw out its full policy implications or suggest ways of overcoming it. Textbooks on public policy nod in the direction of bounded rationality and pass over prospect theory quickly before reverting to familiar rational, linear depictions of the policy process (e.g., Howlett, Mishra and Perl 2009).

By largely ignoring the cognitive research program of the last forty years, students of public policy have deprived themselves of the opportunity to make a larger contribution to political judgment and good governance.

It is increasingly obvious that as much as policy is about patterns of behaviour it is also about systematic errors of judgment (Baron 1998). Politicians, professional public servants, and citizens are all susceptible to a status quo bias, loss aversion, overconfidence bias, confirmation bias, my-side bias and recency bias (to name a few). These are biases, not random errors. Citizens and leaders look for evidence that confirms positions they already hold, place a higher value on their current positions than is objectively justifiable, and overweight the evidence most recently obtained. Like the rest of us, policy makers look for reasons to believe their initial hunches are correct, and reverse preferences depending upon how options are presented.

In addition, we draw conclusions based on personally evocative but statistically dubious evidence. People are subject to what has been called “probability neglect” (Brest 487), ignoring low probability risks while expressing alarm and overreacting to moderate risk. In uncertain situations, the realm of so-called “wicked problems,” matters are worse since there are no known underlying distributions to represent complex interactions, so it is not possible to draw reliable inferences even if we were so inclined. Instead, we either overestimate the likelihood of conjunctive events, which leads to unwarranted optimism regarding the success of complex planning exercises, or we underestimate the likelihood of failure in a complex system because we are misled in thinking that the low probability that any individual component will fail means a low probability of overall failure (Tversky and Kahneman 1974: 1129).

It seems likely that our susceptibility to these types of errors in judgment is at the root of some chronic public policy problems, such as our stunning inability to accurately predict the costs of infrastructure projects. These projects are often inherently risky, use non-standard designs and count on the collaboration of multiple actors. These features make them intrinsically challenging, but our management of them is made significantly worse by the premature “lock-in” of project concepts, unwarranted optimism, the ad hoc adjustment of aspiration levels, and insufficient allowance for unplanned events (Flyvbjerg 2009).

Similarly, the mishandling of crises such as BSE can be traced to an unwillingness to ignore sunk costs combined

with a propensity, predicted by prospect theory, to double down on strategies that are demonstrably failing (Beck, Asinova and Dickson 2005). Our errors extend to choosing policies because they worked in some jurisdictions, largely ignoring the local policy context. As Kurt Weyland shows, when the supply of policy alternatives is limited, policy makers will borrow from other jurisdictions at significant risk, allowing heuristics like representativeness and availability, combined with wishful thinking, to substitute for designing their own solutions from scratch (Weyland 2005).

In spite of all these cognitive pitfalls and examples of public policy mistakes, it would be unfair and inaccurate to suggest that public policy decision makers are routinely incompetent. To the degree that competence is reflected in the ability of policy-makers to respond to the shifting demands of citizens, mounting evidence suggests that, at least in some policy realms, policy adjusts over time to public opinion (Soroka and Wlezien 2004), albeit with occasional lurches and policy punctuations (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). And while dissatisfaction with the political process is well documented, there is less evidence of chronic and widespread dissatisfaction with policy outputs (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). In short, politicians and their advisors often succeed in overcoming the cognitive obstacles that are put in their paths. How do they do this?

Part of the answer lies in appreciating that decision makers intend to be rational. They are not inherently stupid. Bounded rationality shows through in part because of how the brain operates, specifically how it processes information. To explain, psychologists have taken to invoking a dual process model of cognition (Stanovich and West 2000) in which reasoning is governed by two systems. System 1's operations are fast, automatic, and difficult to change; System 2's are slower, effortful and deliberately controlled (Kahneman 2003; 2011). Both are rule governed, but in the case of System 1, the much older system in evolutionary terms, the rules are based on impressions and heuristics. This system is vastly more influential than the slow, serial reasoning associated with System 2.

The implications of the deficiencies in System 2 and the predominance of System 1 are profound. As I argue below, our response has been to overinvest in improving the rationality of decision-making processes. To be sure, System 2 needs to be involved in evaluating data, testing the logic of arguments and considering the ramifications of choices. At the same time, the practical judgment so prized in the policy system cannot exist without the emotive qualities and the intuitive value judgments that System 1 brings. Reason only gets you so far. Whether we like it or not, it is the intuitive and non-inferential elements of decision-making that make the decisive contribution to judgment (Thiele 2006: 8). And when public policy works, as it often does, it is these elements that are at the forefront. Nowhere are they more important than in the actual process of policy making in which the failure to govern with integrity does far more damage to the role of politics than the failure to deliver the expected policy outcomes.

GOVERNING WITH INTEGRITY

If the competence of decision makers is sometimes compromised by deficient cognitive capacity, their integrity is threatened from the same quarter. Leadership integrity can be defined as a willingness to act in ways that are consistent with the sovereign people's interests, regardless of whether doing so endangers a leader's political or personal interests. Policy makers do not make value decisions for themselves alone; they make them on behalf of others and in accordance with the expectations of office. To govern with integrity means to reconcile the conflicting values that policy always exhibits in ways that can be openly justified. This ethic has deep roots in political thought and represents the classical means of achieving both good politics and good policy. Good politics does not mean politics without interests or loyalties, but the ethic of leadership integrity requires public office holders to treat the duties of office as more compelling than any other, including loyalties based on friendship and kinship.

Abiding by the strictures of leadership integrity requires intellectual effort. As long as moral reasoning is understood as an intentional and controllable process, -- a process governed by System 2 -- it is possible to imagine

enlightened decision-makers making ethical decisions by reasoning in principled terms and sifting through compelling claims. However, an increasing number of psychologists maintain that principled reasoning plays a relatively insignificant role in determining ethical judgments (Greene and Haidt 2002). Of much more importance, they argue, are the rapid and unconscious processes of System 1 (Bargh and Chartrand 1999), and these typically engage egocentric cognitive frames.

In some instances, this egocentricity translates directly into self-interest: “moral reasoners consistently conclude that self-interested outcomes are not only desirable but morally justifiable, meaning that two people with differing self-interests arrive at very different ethical conclusions” (Epley and Caruso 2004: 172). But egocentrism is also consistent with advancing the interests of an ethnic group, political party, professional organization, or nation at the expense of the requirements of the office (Atkinson and Fulton 2013). People tend to frame the responsibilities of office as consistent with the interests of groups or individuals to which they owe a debt or feel an obligation (Chugh et. al., 2005: 76). This feeling of debt or loyalty seems natural since a large amount of time or psychic energy has often been devoted to the group’s goals.

Political scientists will recognize this phenomenon as a big part of what constitutes politics. Politics, and in particular political competition, is not an individual pursuit; politicians require colleagues and supporters on whom they can rely without constantly negotiating the terms of loyalty. Besides, every politician has a path to power. It would be ahistorical to imagine that politicians actually forget this path, and politically naïve to urge them to ignore their supporters’ requests for special attention. Possibly nothing will separate leaders from followers faster than the propensity of the former to deal exclusively in high-minded universalism.

At the same time, leadership integrity implies an ability to know the moment when public duties and private interests need to be separated. Being politically loyal is only a virtue if loyalty does not trump the duties of office. Being partial is acceptable only if partiality can be justified in terms of open conflict over public goods. It is acceptable to lobby for an airport in your riding, to help someone to get a

passport, or to defend the rights of veterans, all of which are political acts grounded in the expectations of office. It is not acceptable to alert relatives to the possibility of financial gain from the airport, to help only personal friends obtain a passport, or to seek assistance only for veterans who have contributed to your political campaign.

It is theoretically possible to draw on the reasoning forces of System 2 to sort out these questions, but loyalty has an emotional, even irrational, element to it that is hard to reason away (Philp, 2007: 122). Commitments that arise from loyalty are seldom the product of a careful weighing of options. Loyalty transcends calculation even though it frequently generates feelings of indebtedness. At the extreme, loyalty consists of unconditional partiality, which means intense attachments that admit of no compromise (Philp, 2007: 136; Sabl, 2002: 23). These emotional attachments can trump reflection, judgment, and commitment to other values, including procedural justice.

In the policy process, unconditional partiality shows up in a tendency to discount the future and over weight the immediate gains associated with satisfying the demands of friends and favourites. Little or no attachment to the health of the policy process, little interest in weighing the “judgment of history,” and no capacity to resist fleeting opportunities to reward supporters are all by-products. Unconditional partiality can also be expressed in moral disengagement, the refusal to acknowledge that a decision situation has any ethical content at all. In this case, the cognitive frame selected to manage conflict is one that denies the existence of value conflict in the first place and therefore the need to reconcile competing claims (Moore 2008, 134).

Perhaps most frustrating is the resistance of judgment to correction. It is possible to argue that even biased, automatic judgments can be corrected or adjusted by dispassionately examining the evidence (Steinberger 1993: 239). Research suggests, however, that ethical decisions made within cognitive frames are strongly resistant to change. Because these decisions are made extremely rapidly and do not feel subjective, they leave an impression of competence and correctness that resists revision (Epley and Caruso, 2004: 172). The search for the ethically justifiable response to policy conflict often turns out to be a little more than a search for evidence that supports

pre-existing positions (Kundra and Sinclair 1999: 13). And when revision of initial ethical judgments occurs, the resulting corrections are often insufficient to avoid compounding the original errors (Gilbert and Gill 2000; Tversky and Kahneman 1974).

It is little wonder then that many of our political leaders seem to stagger from one integrity crisis to the next. And while it's not easy to agree on how to measure integrity lapses, in a world of Facebook, celebrity journalism and constant surveillance, it would be foolhardy to predict or expect a decline, if only because citizens are using standards of probity that extend well beyond adherence to the law (Atkinson 2011).

GOOD GOVERNANCE: IMPROVING COMPETENCE AND INTEGRITY

As we become more aware of the imposing obstacles to competence and integrity, in it is natural to consider ameliorating tactics directed at cognitive shortcomings. With better knowledge of biases might it be possible to improve the quality of judgment and of leadership by nurturing the development of practical wisdom? As I've already suggested, those of us whose programs train future public servants are tacitly committed to just such a project. It consists chiefly of strengthening System 2 capabilities and confining the use of heuristics and other cognitive shortcuts to the situations to which they are well suited. Cass Sunstein (2013), for example, has argued for a much more rigorous approach to cost-benefit analysis in which we set aside our misgivings and convert nonmonetary values into dollar equivalents so that judgments about risks can be correspondingly strengthened.

With better knowledge of biases might it be possible to improve the quality of judgement and of leadership by nurturing the development of practical wisdom?

The idea that good governance can be achieved by improving the quality of information and analysis that is available to decision-makers is an ancient one, associated with what Diane Stone has called the "rationality project" (1988: 4). Its modern version extends as far back as PPBS and includes some of the managerial enthusiasms associated with New Public Management. Its adherents usually believe in our collective capacity to improve instrumental rationality by recruiting the best available knowledge. This version of good governance is consistent with enthusiasm for evidence-based, knowledge-based, or evidence-informed analysis. In the words of a recent federal report (Townsend and Kunimoto 2009: 6), evidence-based policy "leverages the best available objective evidence from research...so that policies can be crafted by decision-makers that will deliver desired outcomes effectively, with minimal margin of error and reduced risk of unintended consequences." Good governance, by this measure, is a product of the empiricist's commitment to evidence and the analyst's commitment to testing and retesting in an attempt to discover "what works."

It is worth noting that the demand for evidence-driven policy is closely connected to the demand for more policy capacity within the state. The idea that governments may be overwhelmed by "deep complexity" and an environment populated by "wicked" or "insoluble" problems (Hoppe 2011) is in wide circulation in both academic and broader policy communities. What better response than to reinvest in lost analytical capacity. "Analysis" in this case refers to everything from a government's commitment to basic research to the use of statistical tools, applied modeling techniques, the sophisticated deployment of environmental scanning, trend analysis and forecasting methodologies (Howlett 2009: 164). For this kind of analysis to work, you need to improve the quality of public sector policy workers, recruiting, retaining and developing the "best and brightest" (Aucoin and Bakvis, 2005).

It is revealing that governments are ambivalent about this route to good policy. The UK Labour Party began its mandate in 1997, by expressing a strong desire to infuse its policy work with the research and knowledge gained using social scientific methods. "Government policy ought to be informed by sound evidence," said the Secretary

of State for Employment and Education. “Social science research ought to be contributing a major part of that evidence base. It should be playing a key role in helping us to decide our overall strategies” (Blunkett 2000). However, as Ray Pawson (2006: 167), an advocate of evidence-based policy, describes it, “the polity’s appetite for evidence, any evidence, is meager.”

One reason why evidence makes less of an impact than might be anticipated is that politicians are convinced that their own hard won ability to make sound political judgments is a better guide to decision making than what interpretivists are fond of calling “naïve empiricism.” Politicians who hold this position could, if they wished, cite a host of political philosophers in their defence. Ever since Aristotle, theorists have focused on worldly experience as the principal, if not the only, route to good judgment. “Implicit cognition,” the unconscious acquisition of the knowledge and skills required to govern, has always been deemed to be far more important than reason and deliberation (Theile 2007: 14).

This argument finds confirmation among those who have evaluated the efforts to improve judgments by directly strengthening System 2. Training, like the training we provide in policy schools, helps. But even when decision-makers are provided with clear warnings of decision pitfalls, for example, or sufficient feedback to make inferential adjustments, the result is, at best, a moderate improvement in decision-making capacity (Milkman, Chugh and Bazerman 2009). No better example exists than Robert MacNamara, an iconic technocrat whose analytical gifts were not enough, by his own admission, to avoid tragic errors of judgment. A better grasp of mathematics and inferential statistics undoubtedly helps decision makers, but these “try harder” techniques are only effective for those who are motivated to engage in time consuming study in which errors of judgment are profiled and alternative scenarios constructed. This does not describe most politicians or even most senior public servants.

An alternative strategy to improve decision making involves using System 1 to combat the deficiencies of System 2. Knowing, for example, that all of us are inclined to discount the future using hyperbolic rather than exponential algorithms, Thaler and Sunstein (2008) have

suggested that policies be designed to provide hints to guide decisions or default positions that make it easier for individuals to either act rationally in their own interest, or rationally in the interest of others. Organ transplants have increased as a result of these default techniques, so have pension contributions. Using these prompts or “nudges,” choice architects are increasingly bringing the salient features of a decision to the attention of citizens and urging, but not compelling, them to make a rational choice (Thaler and Sunstein 2008; Thaler, Sunstein and Balz 2013).

These techniques have not, however, been adapted for the benefit of public policy leaders themselves. Far more common is the use of incentives that make a brute appeal directly to reason. These include high-powered incentives, such as performance pay and low-powered incentives such as ethical codes. Research on the effects of both is not very encouraging. Too often decision makers ignore incentives and interpret codes in overly permissive ways.

If you think that these are blunt and ineffective instruments that sometimes do more harm than good, the alternative is to concentrate on changing the context of decision-making. Herbert Simon’s scissors metaphor portrayed cognition and context as the two blades of decision making. Organizational context is the second the blade and Simon believed that organizations in many cases could assist decision-makers to be more rational.

It is ironic, however, that political science and sociology have more often than not taken us in the other direction, portraying organizations as the source of cognitive error (Bendor and Hammond 1992). Of course, there are many examples to justify such an indictment. Since Merton (1936) observed that any organized system of activity produces unintended, and often negative, side effects, sociologists have made a tradition of describing the “dark side of organizations” (Vaughn 1999). Groupthink, cooptation, and goal displacement are familiar examples of the “routine nonconformity” that organizations are said to nurture. Compared to the tendency of organizations to amplify small deviations and resist learning from their errors, the stultifying routines of bureaucracy seem like a mild irritation.

Yet the organizational character of public policy decision-making is a more promising avenue of reform than the interior cognitive architecture of most decision makers. If we want competence and integrity, we need to become much more familiar with the ways an organization can ameliorate the errors to which individual decision makers are prone. Research, not much of it done by political scientists, has shown that techniques such as deliberately adopting an outsider's perspective helps to mitigate excessive optimism (Kahneman and Lovallo 1993) while adopting formal evidentiary rules militates against the tendency to rely too heavily on a single source of information (Brest 2013: 485). Similarly, changing the pattern of decision making to require the simultaneous consideration of options rather than their sequential assessment reduces the tendency to focus on personal outcomes relative to others (sometimes called "bounded self interest") rather than optimal outcomes for everyone (Bazerman, White and Loewenstein 1995).

These contributions to decision theory by social psychologists and behavioural economists are by no means the only efforts made to improve competence and integrity. The contribution of political science has typically been at the macro level where the argument for mixed government and a balance of interests within the state is a core part of the tradition of constitutionalism. In recent years, emphasis has shifted to the idea of creating institutions premised on the idea of impartiality. Bo Rothstein and his colleagues have argued that impartiality—defined as the practice of treating as irrelevant any decision criterion not stipulated in advance—is a basic procedural norm that militates against favouritism, clientelism, patronage, nepotism and other threats to integrity (Rothstein and Teorell 2008; Holmberg and Rothstein 2012). In this formulation, whatever particular combination of macro institutions a political system has inherited, good governance can only be supplied as long as at least some of these institutions are committed to the impartial, universal, and impersonal application of rules.

If impartiality is the key to good governance, then Canadians are well on their way. There is no shortage, for example, of prominent political scientists eager to defend the value of a professional and impartial public

service (Peters and Savoie 2012; (Julliet and Rasmussen 2008), and, since the 1970s, Canadians have been regulating the political arena as never before. The legal recognition of political parties, the passage of election expenses legislation, the creation of electoral boundaries commissions, and the determination of politicians' pay by external bodies, all testify to the appeal of impartiality within the political world. Since 2004 an officer of Parliament has been responsible for overseeing the ethical conduct of ministers, members of parliament and other public officials. In a burst of enthusiasm for sound financial management, the Conservative government even made provision in its Accountability Act for a Parliamentary Budget Officer who would supply independent assessments of the quality and implications of budgetary commitments.

Institutions premised on the virtues of impartiality take direct aim at the problems of competence and integrity in government by removing the element of partisan competition. But not every aspect of governance is amenable to the magic of impartiality. Politics involves competition to exercise public authority; there is nothing impartial about it. The temporary resolution of value conflict is public policy. And because policy is devised and defended by those who have survived the struggle for power, any investment in impartiality needs to be matched by an equal commitment to democratic values, in particular the requirement that policy decisions be acceptable to the democratic electorate.

Acceptability and legitimacy—these are the values that political science brings to the policy process to match the economist's emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness. For economists the institutional package that provides efficiency and effectiveness consists of competition, information, and the internalization of externalities (i.e. getting the prices right). The achievement of legitimacy is not so straightforward. Legitimacy is the quality that attaches to a policy decision if it is deemed to be deserving of support based on how it was made and who made it (Tyler 2006, 337). This is what politicians and their advisers care about when they consider what is politically feasible.

Feasibility is a matter of political judgment: to what extent do the current constraints—institutional, bureaucratic,

resource or partisan—limit the field of possibilities? It involves more than an estimation of the likelihood of success. To be politically feasible, a decision must have sufficient legitimacy to avoid engendering unacceptable political costs (May 1986). Competence and integrity are required to make these decisions. Simply endorsing the efficient outcomes prescribed by economic advisors is far from sufficient. It may make economic sense, for example, to reduce the distortion effects of unions or dissolve crown corporations, but the political costs in terms of legitimacy can be substantial. As Giandomenico Majone (1989: 77) points out, “the transition from a non-efficient to an efficient situation need not be efficient, since some members of the community will probably be damaged by it and compensation may be politically infeasible.” In a recent paper, Acemoglu and Robinson (2013) affirm that the economic rationale for policy choices, with its emphasis on efficiency, can reinforce power inequities and undermine political equilibria that have been developed over decades. Deciding on the feasible course requires the sound practical judgment—competence and integrity—to recognize what is required under different conditions or in different contexts.

I have emphasized the built-in dangers to competence and integrity that face all public policymakers as they make judgments about political feasibility. As a discipline we have made our biggest investments in accountability mechanisms that show how mistakes are punished and good judgments rewarded. High on the list of these accountability mechanisms is democratic competition with its presumed ability to secure fidelity to the wishes of the electorate (Wittman 1995). Those who seek accountability of political authorities between elections have made the case for numerous institutional requirements that would oblige policy makers to justify their decisions in public forums and face the prospect of sanctions for poor performance. There are sound behavioural reasons for investing in these mechanisms. Tetlock (1985) found, for example, that those who know, in advance, that they have to supply a justification for their choices are more resistant to biases in the assessment of evidence.

But accountability is a retrospective requirement, and it is easy to overdo reliance on rules and incentives to achieve it. The incentive approach, which owes its contemporary

salience to principal-agent theory, imagines a rationally self-interested decision maker guided by a crude behaviourist psychology. It also imagines a world in which hierarchy is the main organizing principle and sanctions are readily available for non-compliance. This is the world of government, and political science has shown that it is either rapidly slipping away, or at least being joined by multi-level governance, blurred boundaries, multiple principals and high levels of organizational and personal interdependence. In the new world of governance, legitimacy does not emerge directly or solely from the exercise of state authority, and public policy is not the preserve of political elites.

None of this means that rules are unimportant. In fact, it is probably more important than ever to appreciate the value of having rules for navigating an increasingly complex policy environment. But the rules we need in this environment are unlikely to take the form of incentives to be more rational. For the most part these incentives are actually an encouragement to be more self-interested (Schwartz 2011). Tacit skills and intuitive capacities are far more important resources in public policy environments. Drawing on the right intuitions in the right circumstances is the challenge. Rules help by shielding decision makers from some of the biases discussed above and by requiring them to engage in substantive justifications of policy choices. But what we really require are routines and practices that focus the limited attention of decision makers on developing well-structured problems that resist prepackaged solutions (Jones 2003: 407-408).

Political science has much to contribute to this effort if we begin by capitalizing on a vastly improved understanding of the cognitive architecture of decision-making and using that knowledge to devise decision situations that help avoid the most egregious errors of judgment. Older categorizations of policy, such as incremental versus rational, are unlikely to help, nor is it likely that we will contribute much by adding to the litany of case studies of decisions gone bad. We can, however, design policy discourse situations that improve the competence and integrity of decisions by focusing on their legitimacy (Montpetit 2008). In some cases that will mean rules that encourage a culture of impartiality and tools that promote the objective assessment of evidence. In other cases, we

will need rules that foster empathetic understanding of diverse interests (Delli Carpini, Cook and Jacobs 2004). Many organizational situations could be significantly improved by rules that place limits on organizational loyalty and encourage actors to widen the criteria used in assessing options (Jones 1999: 309). To the extent that we succeed in matching decision situations to the cognitive capacities of decision-makers, political science can make a direct contribution to improving the competence and integrity of governance.

CONCLUSION

It may occasionally feel as if political science has been treading water for years as the study and practice of public policy becomes increasingly interdisciplinary and normative. I have argued here that in the schools of public policy that now populate our campuses, as well as the programs of public administration that our departments manage, the pressure is on to show how our discipline can contribute to improving the quality of public policy decision making. Improving the competence and integrity of governance is something we are well equipped to do, although not on our own.

With some exceptions, political science has not engaged with the cognitive research agenda that has been driving our understanding of decision making for decades. We need to show a greater interest in, and appreciation of, the implications of that agenda. In particular we need to understand why decisions are often so full of errors and lead too often to lamentable results. Status quo bias, overconfidence, confirmation bias are all contributors to bad governance and a better understanding of these decision deficiencies is required to design situations in which they can be ameliorated. A commitment to evidence-based decision-making and the addition of more analytical capacity will not be enough. We need to spend some time designing the decision situations in which policies are constructed and implemented.

This endeavor is decidedly normative in orientation and empirical in practice. The normative portion is supplied largely by democratic theory. In a way we all need to become theorists of democracy, appreciating in particular the qualities of leadership and practical

judgment that allow democracies to work well, as well as the sensible limitations that can and should be placed on our decision makers. At a time of increasingly complex problems, challenges to the primacy of the state, and distrust in government, political science needs to become re-rooted in reality and devoted once more to improving government and the lives of citizens.

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