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STUDYING PUBLIC POLICY:

Policy Cycles
and Policy Subsystems

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Chapter 9

Policy Evaluation— Policy Analysis and Policy Learning

CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

Once the need to address a public problem has been acknowledged, various possible solutions considered, and some among them selected and put into practice, the government often initiates an assessment of how the policy is working. At the same time, various interested members of policy subsystems and of the public are engaged in their own assessment of the workings and effects of the policy in order to express support for or opposition to the policy, or to demand changes to it. The concept of policy evaluation thus refers broadly to the process of finding out about a public policy in action, the means being employed and the objectives being served. How deep or thorough the evaluation is depends on those ordering its initiation and/or those undertaking it.

Policy evaluation almost always involves bureaucrats and politicians within government dealing with the policy in question, and it usually involves non-governmental members of policy subsystems as well. It may also involve members of the public, who will have the ultimate say when they vote at elections.¹ The sites of policy evaluation are broader than often presented in the literature, which tends to concentrate overwhelmingly on evaluation by bureaucrats and private consultants hired by them.

After a policy has been evaluated, the problem and solutions may be rethought completely, in which case the cycle may swing back to agenda-setting or some other stage of the cycle, or the *status quo* may be maintained. Reconceptualization may consist of minor changes or fundamental reformulation of the problem, including terminating the policy altogether.² How evaluation is conducted, the problems the exercise entails, and the range of results to which it typically leads are the concerns of this chapter. It then outlines the patterns of policy change to which policy evaluation typically leads.

The study of policy evaluation is dominated by those whom we described as rationalists in Chapter Two. For them, policy evaluation consists of assess-

ing whether a public policy is achieving its stated objective and, if not, what could be done to eliminate the hurdles in the way. David Nachmias, an influential figure in the discipline, defines policy evaluation as 'the objective systematic, empirical examination of the effects ongoing policies and public programs have on their targets in terms of the goals they are meant to achieve'.³ Discerning readers will have no difficulty detecting the rationalist orientation of this definition. It specifies explicitly that the examination of a policy's effects on the achievement of its goals should be objective, systematic, and empirical. However, as we have mentioned before, goals in public policy are often not stated clearly enough to find out if and to what extent they are achieved. The possibilities for objective analysis are also limited because of insurmountable difficulties in developing objective standards by which to evaluate government success in dealing with subjective claims and socially constructed problems.

Developing adequate and acceptable measures for policy evaluation is a difficult and contentious task, as many authors have noted.⁴ Analysts often resort to such fuzzy concepts as success or failure to conclude their evaluation. But, as Ingram and Mann caution,

the phenomenon of [policy] failure is neither so simple nor certain as many contemporary critics of policy and politics would have us believe. Success and failure are slippery concepts, often highly subjective and reflective of an individual's goals, perception of need, and perhaps even psychological disposition toward life. The old story about asking two individuals how much milk is in the bottle and receiving two replies that appear to reflect their different approaches to life—one says half-full and the other half-empty—seems relevant.⁵

The same condition can be interpreted very differently by different evaluators, and there is no definitive way of determining who is right. Which interpretation prevails is ultimately determined by political conflicts and compromises among the various actors.

Policy evaluation, like other stages of the policy process, is a political activity. It is naïve to believe that policy evaluation is always designed to reveal the effects of a policy. In fact, it is at times employed to disguise or conceal certain facts, facts which it is feared will show the government in poor light. It is also possible for governments to design the terms of evaluation in such a way as to lead to conclusions that would show it in a better light. Or, if it wants to change or scrap a policy, it can adjust the terms of the evaluation accordingly. Similarly, evaluations by those outside the government are not always designed to improve a policy, but often to criticize it to gain partisan political advantage or reinforce ideological postulates.

That is not to suggest that policy evaluation is an irrational or a completely political process, devoid of genuine intentions to find out about the functioning of a policy and its effects. It is rather to caution against undue reliance upon formal evaluation for drawing conclusions about a policy. To get the most out of

policy evaluation, the limits of rationality and the political forces that shape it must clearly be recognized.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of policy evaluation is not the direct results it generates but the process of policy learning that accompanies it.⁶ Policy actors learn constantly from the formal and informal evaluation of policies they are engaged in, and are led to modify their positions. The lessons they draw from their evaluation, based on both objective facts and subjective interpretations of the facts, lead to conclusions about both the means and the objectives of public policy. An integral part of this process is the discussion, debate, argument, and persuasion that occur constantly among policy actors.⁷

TYPES OF POLICY EVALUATION

At a general level, policy evaluations can be classified in three broad categories—administrative evaluation, judicial evaluation, and political evaluation—which differ in the way they are conducted, the actors they involve, and their effects.

Administrative Evaluation—Managerial Performance and Budgeting Systems

Administrative evaluation is the focus of many published academic studies on policy evaluation. It is undertaken within the government, occasionally by specialist agencies whose only task is evaluation of policies, but more often by financial, legal, and political overseers attached to existing government departments, specialized executive agencies, legislatures, and judiciaries. Private consultants may also be hired by the various branches and agencies of the government to conduct evaluation for a fee.

Administrative evaluation is usually, though not always, restricted to examining the efficient delivery of government services and attempting to determine whether or not 'value for money' is being achieved while still respecting principles of justice and democracy. It is intended to ensure that policies are accomplishing their expected goals at the least possible cost and with the least possible burden on individual citizens. This concern for efficiency lies behind managerial performance and personnel reviews, as well as the conduct of annual audits and the creation of budgeting systems that attempt to match goals and expenditures. Administrative evaluation requires collection of precise information on program delivery and its compilation in a standardized fashion to allow comparisons of costs and outcomes over time and across policy sectors. As such, these efforts are quite technical and increasingly sophisticated, although the increase in complexity is not necessarily matched by a similar increase in usefulness.

Administrative policy evaluations come in a variety of forms and differ widely in levels of sophistication and formality. Those undertaken by

government agencies in the effort to minimize costs are generally of five different types: 1) Effort Evaluation; 2) Performance Evaluation; 3) Adequacy of Performance Evaluation; 4) Efficiency Evaluation; and 5) Process Evaluation.⁸

Effort evaluation attempts to measure the quantity of program inputs, that is, the amount of effort which governments put into accomplishing their goals. The input may be personnel, office space, communication, transportation, and so on—all of which are calculated in terms of the monetary costs they involve. The purpose of the evaluation is to establish a baseline for data which can be used for further evaluations of efficiency or quality of service delivery.

Performance evaluation examines program outputs rather than inputs. Examples of the output may be hospital beds or places in schools, number of patients seen or children taught. Performance evaluation's main aim is simply to determine what the policy is producing, regardless of the stated objectives. This type of evaluation produces data which are used as inputs into more comprehensive and intensive evaluations mentioned below.

Adequacy of performance evaluation (also known as *Effectiveness evaluation*) involves more complexity than simply adding up the program inputs or outputs; it is intended to find out if the program is doing what it is supposed to be doing. In this type of evaluation, the performance of a given program is compared to its intended goals in order to determine whether the program is meeting its goals and/or whether the goals need to be adjusted in the light of the program's accomplishments. On the basis of the findings recommendations for altering or changing programs or policies may be made. While this type of evaluation is most useful to policy-makers, it is also the most difficult to undertake. The information needs are immense and the level of sophistication required to carry out the process is higher than is generally available.

Efficiency evaluation attempts to assess the costs of a program and judge if the same amount and quality of outputs could be achieved more efficiently; that is, at a lower cost. Input and output evaluations are the building blocks of this form of evaluation, which is of great significance in the present climate of budgetary restraint. The difficulties involved in the more comprehensive effectiveness evaluation means that policy-makers must often content themselves with efficiency evaluations.

Finally, *process evaluations* examine the organizational methods, including rules and operating procedures, used to deliver programs. The objective is usually to see if the processes can be streamlined and made more efficient.⁹ Towards this objective, implementation of a policy is usually broken down into discrete tasks, such as strategic planning, financial management, or clients' claim evaluation, and then one or more of the tasks is evaluated for efficiency, effectiveness, and/or accountability.

These different types of administrative evaluation of public policy have generated a variety of techniques. In the 1970s and 1980s these included such systems as the Program Planning and Budgeting System (PPBS) first developed at the Ford Motor Company and then adopted by the US Depart-

ment of Defence and ultimately the entire US federal government; Zero-Based Budgeting (ZBB), a variant of PPS which was implemented in the US and in many other countries; and Management by Objectives (MBO), a PPS substitute developed at the Xerox Corporation and adopted by the Carter administration in the US.¹⁰ These techniques have been utilized to varying degrees by different governments around the world. In addition, different countries and governments developed their own evaluative systems. Thus in Canada, for example, in the 1980s a new Policy and Expenditure Management System (PEMS) was established at the federal level, along with a new Office of the Controller General (OCG) mandated specifically to carry out evaluation research, while the federal Treasury Board tried to introduce a new government-wide Operational Performance Measurement System (OPMS).¹¹

While much effort has been put into developing these techniques of policy evaluation, they have largely failed to overcome the limitations innate to realist analysis.¹² The prerequisites for its success are too steep to be met in the rough-and-tumble world of public policy. Any emphasis on examining the extent to which policy objectives are accomplished by a program must contend with the reality that policies usually do not state their objectives precisely enough to permit rigorous analysis of whether they are being achieved. Moreover, the same policy may be directed at achieving a variety of objectives, without indicating their relative priority, thus making it difficult to find out if a particular objective is being achieved.¹³ Social and economic problems tend to be enormously inter-related, and it is virtually impossible to isolate and evaluate the effects of policies directed at them. Relatedly, each policy has effects on problems other than those intended, which a comprehensive evaluation must consider but which may make the task unmanageable. The difficulties involved in gathering reliable and usable information further aggravate the problem.

The limitations faced by administrative evaluation—and we have noted only a few—increase with the level of sophistication and comprehensiveness expected of them. Thus effectiveness evaluations, which would clearly be of most use to policy-makers, are the most difficult to undertake. Considering the difficulties, the enthusiasm for rational administrative evaluation has been on the wane in many industrialized countries since the early 1980s. Frustration with the difficulties involved in administrative evaluation, for example, led the Auditor-General of Canada to conclude in his 1983 Annual Report that 'a significant proportion of evaluation assessments did not form an adequate basis for sound advice'.¹⁴ This is a polite way of saying that the evaluations were next to useless. Ten years later, the Auditor General's review of Program Evaluation in the Canadian federal government found numerous changes in form but little in substance. According to the Report, evaluations are:

less likely to be an important source of information in support of program and policy decisions addressing questions of continued relevance and cost-effectiveness. Evaluations are more likely to provide information for accountability purposes but are often partial. The most complete information available is related to operational effectiveness, the way a program is working.¹⁵

In order to broaden administrative evaluation, many governments have experimented with promoting public participation in the evaluation process. The intention is to head off challenges to policies on the grounds of a 'lack of consultation' with interested or affected members of the public. But usefulness and/or the legitimacy of public forums has been challenged on the grounds that only those capable of affording the costs of preparing briefs and travelling to the hearings can meaningfully participate, and that the hearings are more concerned with legitimizing conclusions already reached by the government than altering their content on the basis of input from the public.¹⁶ These concerns have led in some consultations to the provision of funding to the participants. As sounding boards for discontent, these consultations can be an effective means of administrative evaluation.

Judicial Evaluation—Judicial Review and Administrative Discretion

A second major type of policy evaluation is not concerned with budgets, priorities, efficiencies, and expenditures, but with the legal issues relating to the manner in which government programs are implemented. Such evaluations are carried out by the judiciary and are concerned with possible conflicts between government actions and constitutional provisions or established standards of administrative conduct and individual rights.

The judiciary is entitled to review government actions either on its own initiative or when asked to do so by an individual or organization filing a case against a government agency in a court of law. The grounds for review differ considerably across countries but usually extend to the examination of the constitutionality of the policy being implemented, or whether its implementation or development violated principles of natural rights and/or justice in democratic societies. That is, the judges assess whether the policy was developed and implemented in a non-capricious and non-arbitrary fashion according to principles of due process and accepted administrative law.¹⁷

In many countries such as Canada or Britain, judicial courts concentrate on whether or not an inferior court, tribunal, or government agency has acted within its powers or jurisdiction. If it has, and if it has also abided with key principles of natural justice and has not acted in a capricious or arbitrary fashion, then its decision will stand subject to any existing statutory appeal provisions. Stated simply, judicial reviews in these two countries focus on issues or errors in

law.¹⁸ Since administrative courts in these countries do not review cases on the facts specific to the case, it means that as long as administrative agencies operate within their jurisdiction and according to principles of fundamental justice and due process, their decisions are unlikely to be overturned. American courts, on the other hand, have a very different constitutional role and are much more active, willing to consider errors of fact as well as errors of law in their evaluations of administrative behaviour.¹⁹

Political Evaluation—Consultations with Policy Subsystems and the Public

Political evaluation of government policy is undertaken by just about everyone with any interest in politics. Unlike administrative and judicial evaluations, political evaluations are usually neither systematic nor necessarily technically sophisticated. Indeed, many are inherently one-sided and biased. This does not undermine their significance, however, because their objective is rarely to improve the government's policy, but rather to support or challenge it. Political evaluations attempt to label a policy a success or failure, followed by demands for continuation or change. Praise or criticism at this stage can lead to new iterations of the cycle as governments attempt to respond to criticisms, or carry over lessons from past experiences into new or reformed policies.

While political evaluation is on-going it enters the policy process only on specialized occasions. One of the most important occasions in democracies is at election time, when citizens get their opportunity to render judgement on the government's performance. Votes at elections or referendums express the voters' informal evaluations of the efficiency and effectiveness of governments, their programs and policies. However, in most democratic countries, referendums or plebiscites on particular policies are relatively rare. While elections are held regularly, by their very nature they involve a range of issues which makes it inappropriate to draw conclusions about the voters' opinion on individual policies. When citizens express their preferences and sentiments at elections, the evaluation made is usually an aggregate judgement on a government's record rather than about the effectiveness or usefulness of specific policies. Nevertheless, public perceptions of the ineffectiveness or harmful effects of government activities can and do affect voting behaviour, a reality governments ignore at their electoral peril.

A more common type of political policy evaluation involves consultation with other members of the relevant policy subsystem. There are many mechanisms for such consultations, including setting up administrative forums for public hearings or establishing special consultative committees and task forces for consultation purposes. These can range from small meetings of less than a dozen participants and lasting several minutes, to multi-million dollar inquiries which hear thousands of individual briefs and can take years to complete.²⁰

These political mechanisms for policy evaluation are usually capable of ascertaining the views of the members of the policy subsystem and affected public on specific policy issues. However, it is not certain that simply because these views have been made known, they will be reflected in the revision of government policy. Effectiveness often depends on whether the views heard are congruent with those of the government,²¹ which in turn depends on the criteria utilized to assess success or failure of a particular policy or program.

POLICY EVALUATION—POLICY LEARNING

Fundamental to policy evaluation is its impact on effecting changes to the policy in question. After all, the implicit purpose of policy evaluation is to change the policy if it is deemed necessary as a result of undertaking the exercise. To understand the nexus between policy evaluation and policy change, we need to comprehend the larger process of learning.²² From a learning perspective, public policy evaluation is conceived as an iterative process of active learning on the part of policy actors about the nature of policy problems and the solutions to them.²³

Like other concepts in the policy science, there are different interpretations of what is meant by the term 'policy learning'.²⁴ Peter Hall adopts an instrumental definition of learning and argues that in the realm of public policy, learning serves the purpose of better goal attainment by governments. As he puts it, learning is a 'deliberate attempt to adjust the goals or techniques of policy in the light of the consequences of past policy and new information so as to better attain the ultimate objects of governance'.²⁵ Hugh Heclo, on the other hand, suggests that learning is a less conscious activity, often occurring as a government's response to some kind of societal or environmental stimulus. According to him, 'learning can be taken to mean a relatively enduring alteration in behaviour that results from experience; usually this alteration is conceptualized as a change in response made in reaction to some perceived stimulus'.²⁶ Learning, in Heclo's view, is what governments do in response to a new situation on the basis of their past experience.

The two definitions describe the nature of the relationship between policy learning and policy change, but differ substantially in their approach to the issue. For Hall, learning is a part of the normal public policy process in which decision-makers attempt to understand why certain initiatives may have succeeded while others failed. If policies change as a result of learning, the impetus for change originates within the formal policy process of the government. For Heclo, on the other hand, policy learning is seen as an activity undertaken by policy-makers largely in reaction to changes in external policy 'environments'. As the environment changes, policy-makers must adapt if their policies are to succeed. These two contrasting conceptions raise the critical theoretical question, whether policy learning occurs endogenously or exogenously. That is, whether learning is a process imposed upon policy-makers from outside the

policy process, or whether it originates within the process as policy-makers attempt to refine and adapt their policies in the light of their past actions.

It is our contention that the use of similar terminology has somewhat disguised the fact that at least two separate aspects of policy learning should be clearly distinguished. The characteristics of these two different types of learning are set out in Figure 14.

Figure 14.

Exogenous and Endogenous Concepts of Policy Learning

	Endogenous Learning	Exogenous Learning
Subject of Learning	Small, Technically Specialized Policy Networks	Large, Publicly Participative Policy Communities
Object of Learning	Policy Settings, or Policy Instruments	Perception of Problem, or Policy Goals

SOURCE: Adapted from Colin J. Bennett and Michael Howlett, 'The Lessons of Learning: Reconciling Theories of Policy Learning and Policy Change', *Policy Sciences* 25, 3 (1992): 275-94.

Endogenous learning takes place among small, focused policy networks; its objective is to learn about policy settings or policy instruments. In contrast, exogenous learning occurs in broad policy communities and may involve questioning the interpretation of the problem or the goal of the policy designed to address it.

The first type of endogenous learning, following Richard Rose, can be referred to as *lesson-drawing*.²⁷ This type of learning originates within the formal policy process and affects the choice of means or technique employed by policy-makers in their efforts to achieve their goals.²⁸ These lessons are likely to concern practical suggestions about different aspects of the policy cycle as it has operated in the past—for example, which policy instruments have 'succeeded' in which circumstances and which have 'failed', or which issues have enjoyed public support in the agenda-setting process and which have not.

Following Hall, the second refers to a more general type of learning, known as *social learning*. It originates outside the policy process and affects the constraints or capacities of policy-makers to alter or change society. The second form of learning is about the goals themselves. This is the most fundamental type of learning, which is accompanied by change in the thinking underlying the policy. The move in many countries in the 1980s towards privatization, and consideration of inflation as a more serious problem than unemployment, are instances of this second type of learning.²⁹

Policy evaluations can involve either type of learning. Administrative evaluations virtually by definition occur within the established administrative institutions of government and tend to take the form of *lesson-drawing*—in both

the negative and positive senses of the term. Both judicial and political evaluations are much more susceptible to changes in social values and mores and thus are means by which the lessons of social learning can be brought into the administrative process.

In the cases of both exogenous and endogenous learning, however, whether or not any lessons will be learned by policy-makers depends on their capacity to absorb new information. As Cohen and Levinthal have argued in the case of the private firm:

the ability to evaluate and utilize outside knowledge is largely a function of the level of prior related knowledge. At the most elemental level, this prior knowledge includes basic skills or even a shared language but may also include knowledge of the most recent scientific or technological developments in a given field. Thus, prior related knowledge confers an ability to recognize the value of new information, assimilate it, and apply it to commercial ends. These abilities collectively constitute what we call a firm's 'absorptive capacity'.³⁰

In a complex organization such as a firm or government, this implies that learning is a cumulative process and that the existing store of knowledge largely determines what will be done with any new information that flows into the organization. Critical in this regard are 'boundary-spanning' links between the organization and its environment, links receptive to new information and capable of disseminating it within the organization.

In the case of policy-making, this implies that the two relevant variables affecting the potential for evaluations to lead to learning and hence to some form of policy change are (1) the organizational capacity of the state, including especially its expertise in the subject area, and (2) the nature of the policy subsystem, especially whether and to what extent links exist between its state and societal members. Taken together, the two variables set up further relationships between policy evaluation and policy learning (see Figure 15).

Figure 15.

A Model of Policy Evaluation and Learning Propensity

Links Between State and Societal Actors in Policy Subsystem		
State	High	Low
Administrative	High	Social Learning
Capacity	Low	Formal Evaluations
		Informal Evaluations

SOURCE: Adapted from Wesley M. Cohen and Daniel A. Levinthal, 'Absorptive Capacity: A New Perspective on Learning and Innovation', *Administrative Science Quarterly* 35 (1990): 128-52.

In this model, a state must have a high administrative capacity for any true 'learning' activity to take place. If the state is the dominant actor, then a form of endogenous lesson-drawing can be expected to occur. If societal actors dominate the policy subsystem, then the conditions for social learning may be present. If, on the other hand, state administrative capacity is low, then one would expect simpler forms of formal and informal evaluations to occur without the necessity for any learning to actually occur within the state itself.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has set out the different forms of evaluation—administrative, judicial, and political—that take place in the public policy process. The literature on the subject, however, concentrates overwhelmingly on developing, criticizing, and refining the techniques of administrative evaluation. In the process, the limits of rational methods are often forgotten. Policy evaluation, like other stages of the policy cycle, is an inherently political exercise and must be recognized explicitly as such.

Analysts who do take the politics underlying policy evaluation into account see policy evaluation both as a continuation of the struggle over scarce resources or ideologies occurring in the political arena and as part of a process of learning in which policies develop and change largely on the basis of conscious recognition of past successes and failures and conscious efforts to emulate successes and avoid failures. This conception not only helps make sense of policy evaluation and removes it from the narrow technocratic concerns characteristic of administrative evaluation, but also helps to highlight the significant role played by all forms of evaluation in the ongoing policy process. Somewhat less obviously, this reconceptualization of policy evaluation as part of a process of policy learning also helps to clarify how and why policies change. This question of policy change is addressed more fully in Chapter Ten.

NOTES

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- 26 Hugh Heelo, *Modern Social Politics in Britain and Sweden: From Relief to Income Maintenance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974): 306.
- 27 Richard Rose, 'Comparative Policy Analysis: The Program Approach' in M. Dogan (ed.), *Comparing Pluralist Democracies: Strains on Legitimacy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988): 219-41; Richard Rose, 'What is Lesson-Drawing?' *Journal of Public Policy* 11, 1 (1991): 3-30.
- 28 We tend to think of learning chiefly across time, within the confines of domestic historical actions; thus 'learning from experience' implies 'learning from one's own experience'. This is the dominant, possibly exclusive, meaning in oft-cited studies by Heelo and Hall. A recognition that has taken somewhat longer to affect the research of policy analysis is that states may not only learn from their own experiences, but also from the actions of other states. Various concepts have been employed to depict how policy makers from one country 'emulate', 'imitate', or 'draw lessons from' their counterparts abroad. As Rose points out, in any effort to reduce dissatisfaction, 'policymakers have three alternatives: to turn to their national past; to speculate about the future; or to seek lessons from current experience in

other places.' Richard Rose, 'What is Lesson-Drawing?' *Journal of Public Policy* 11, 1 (1991): 21. Learning in this sense can be both positive and negative. That is, learning is both about what to do, and about what not to do, so the same program can act as a model or exemplar for one country, and exactly the reverse for another. Colin Bennett and Michael Howlett, 'The Lessons of Learning: Reconciling Theories of Policy Learning and Policy Change', *Policy Sciences* 25, 3 (1992): 275-94. Yet, obviously, drawing negative lessons is very different from 'nonlearning'; the former denotes that policy-makers in one country examined the policy lessons of another, and decided to avoid that program of action; the latter suggests that they never knew about it. Hugh Heelo, *Modern Social Politics in Britain and Sweden: From Relief to Income Maintenance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

- 29 Peter A. Hall, 'Policy Paradigms, Social Learning and the State: The Case of Economic Policy Making in Britain', *Comparative Politics* 25, 3 (1993): 275-96; M. Howlett and M. Ramesh, 'Patterns of Policy Instrument Choice: Policy Styles, Policy Learning and the Privatization Experience', *Policy Studies Review* 12, 1 (1993): 1-21.
- 30 Wesley M. Cohen, and Daniel A. Levinthal, 'Absorptive Capacity: A New Perspective on Learning and Innovation', *Administrative Science Quarterly* 35 (1990): 128-52.

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