

U.S. Policy: Beyond Slogans

Contributed by Howard M. Unger
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Is democracy inherently bad at articulating large policy objectives?

Presidents have had wars on poverty, drugs, and terrorism. They have tried to "save Social Security" and "end welfare as we know it."

In addition to fighting a "global war on terror," the current administration likes to strengthen government programs. According to the White House Web site's "issues" pages, President George W. Bush is "strengthening" Social Security, Medicare, health care, small business, and early childhood learning.

But do Americans know what these policies are? More importantly, do they even care? Many experts argue that American policy-making has become a hodgepodge of catch phrases and umbrella policies. Policy makers blame the 24-hour news networks, the year-round election cycle, big government or short attention spans, depending on the issue.

A deluge of ideas

"It used to be that you would read the Wall Street Journal or the New York Times, and that's all you needed to know," says former Delaware Gov. Pete duPont. "Now there's talk radio and the Internet. You can get millions of ideas every day. The President now puts forward a vision instead of focusing on the individual issues."

Former Labor Secretary Robert Reich says America may be better off without broad, overarching policy objectives. "We tend to do better with narrowly tailored policies with clear objectives," says Reich, who oversaw the implementation of the rather straightforward Family and Medical Leave Act. "The danger is that the public won't pay enough attention, and the policy will be captured by an interest group with its own agenda. That's the tradeoff—either big policies that get the public's attention, at least for a time, but are not sufficiently specific to guide public officials, or specific and well-tailored policies that provide clear objectives but aren't big enough to be monitored by the media and hence the public.

"Democracy is very bad at articulating large policy objectives. Too many different views, values, voices," Reich says. "Most people don't have time or sufficient attention span to get into policy details. The media is uninterested because such policy discussions don't sell papers or TV time. We have to rely instead on experts who can translate detailed 'how' policies into language and format the public can understand."

According to duPont, unless it's an issue like the war in Iraq or one that personally affects individuals, Americans are rarely engaged in policy-making. "There's a lot of debate on Iraq. A lot of it is political, but a lot of it is substantive. A lot of it is understood and followed by Americans. Government spending, however, doesn't seem to be of interest to anybody," duPont says.

While wars tend to mobilize most citizens, even if it's the "war on Christmas," there are some Americans who take an interest in policy-making, says Scott Keeter, director of survey research for the PewResearch Center for the People & the Press.

"Research suggests that the public is neither brilliant nor ignorant," says Keeter. He says about 20% of Americans pay attention to policy-making all of the time—about the same percentage of citizens who are disengaged from it. In between, he explains, are those citizens whose interests in policy issues come and go as they are made aware of them.

The Internet, he says, has allowed these individuals to focus on the issues they care about and help mobilize groups. Conventional journalists, he explains, work within the limits of their own medium. "If you are in TV news, you have approximately 20 minutes to report the news of the day. Therefore, the longest you can devote to any given story is two

to three minutes," he says.

The expanding bureaucracy theory

One former George W. Bush administration official says that policy debates are more complex now than during the nation's formative years because the federal bureaucracy has grown so large. "You probably see a lot more debate today than you did early on. Not only between the executive branch and the Congress, but within each branch," says Noel J. Francisco, former associate counsel and Deputy Assistant Attorney General to President Bush. "At the time of the founding, you had a much smaller executive branch and decision-making fell within the hands of a few individuals. Today, you have a proliferation of debate," he says.

As the executive branch has grown, so has the number of policy issues addressed by each administration, argues Francisco, who now practices law in Washington, D.C.. "Today, you see a proliferation of more umbrella policies and more day-to-day, nuts-and-bolts policies because the executive branch does a lot more today than it did back then," he says.

But more umbrellas, like President Kennedy's "New Frontier" or Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" (which included an "unconditional war on poverty"), have not stopped the bureaucratic deluge, according to John Samples, who directs the Cato Institute's Center for Representative Government.

"Even if you look at the Reagan Revolution, what you really see is that on the inside, it looked like an organized mess more than an organized umbrella policy," Samples says. "What we have is a large government that some describe as an administrative state hanging over from the past. Parts created for one purpose may now be serving another purpose."

Samples says that the American policy-making process, in some respects, has become a free for all. "There is some evidence that Congress does not write legislation that is very specific or relates means to ends very well," he offers. Add in the congressional budget-making process and one could argue that government was designed to make it difficult to do things, Samples says. "Government is not an instrument trying to obtain a set of objectives more than it is an ongoing struggle against factions mediated through elections."

But how does it affect me?

Echoing duPont's assertion that most Americans are not interested in policy issues that do not affect them personally, Samples says that there is little public outcry about the lack of clear policy objectives. "People focus on things that have an affect on their lives. For example, that is why it's easier to organize older seniors about issues like Medicare," he says.

The shift toward broader policy messages has led to the evolution from policy messengers to policy messages, according to a communications aide to President Bill Clinton. "In delivering the message of policy, it is now more about bundling it in ways that describe policy makers in personal characteristics rather than in policy attitudes," says Steve Rabinowitz, who produced Clinton's public events where catch phrases and mottos became platforms themselves.

Now head of a Washington, D.C., public relations firm, Rabinowitz says umbrella policies are used to define politicians more than their policies. "You want to define a lawmaker or a policy person as 'hard-working' or 'forward-thinking' or concerned about the average person," Rabinowitz says.

Supporting duPont and Samples, Rabinowitz agrees that Americans are only engaged about policy-making when it affects them. "I'm not sure constituents care about the process. They think about specific policies, but only the ones that touch them personally," he says. "With that exception, even when jobs, the economy, the war, terrorism, education or healthcare are the important issues, people are not hung up on the policy as they are with whether they think the policy maker is trying to do the right thing."

When Election Day nears, he says, they want to know whether politicians have succeeded. "When it's not election time, you want to look like you are doing something, like 'caring,' 'fighting,' or 'concerned,'" he suggests. "During election time,

it's 'We did this' or 'We passed that.'"

Dominated by short-term political calculation

Non-stop electioneering prevents meaningful policy discussions, according to P.J. Crowley, who served as Clinton's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs. "You end up with policy-making by sloganeering, as opposed to policy-making by political debate," Crowley says. "This is a problem for policy makers, but the American voter is certainly complicit in it. You end up delaying the difficulty in confronting long-term challenges and end up lurching from crisis to crisis. But when you wait, the pain will be greater and the cost will

be greater.

"Today, we sit here with an intellectual understanding that our current course with regard to education, the environment, health care, and Social Security is unsustainable," Crowley says.

"Yet we end up with a truncated and ill-

informed debate."

Crowley says that news channels like CNN, which allow for politicians to appear on television every night, favor looking at short-term issues through short-term lenses. "Unfortunately, because the political process today is dominated by short-term political calculation, the processes are becoming more political. This is brought on by the fact that government is more visible," he suggests.

Unless Americans change the way they view policy makers and the policy-making process, it will be difficult to get them engaged in important issues like Social Security and the environment, Crowley says. "The fact that there's not a real debate about many of these difficult issues feeds the frustration and the growing lack of confidence in government. It has a cascading effect. People have less confidence in government, therefore they do not want to give government the resources," he says. "I point the finger, to a large extent, to the American voter. You get what you pay for."

About Howard M. Unger

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