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PADM 602

Case Analysis II

The Role of Incremental and Radical Change in the Public Sector

Abstract

Every new politician enters office with a plan of making a difference. The public focuses much of its attention on what the federal government is up to. Presidential races and the promises of change made by presidential candidates dominate the mainstream media in American society. Recurring public concerns include, welfare reform, job creation, and issues of economic equality and stability. New presidents devise a *plan of action* that will accomplish specific goals related to these types of issues, but *often times little if any change occurs*.

There are two major reasons for a lack of radical change in public policies and organizations. The first is a *problem of logistics*. Despite politician's intentions to implement change, it is *public sector bureaucrats and agencies* that are tasked with establishing and implementing public policy (Box, 2008, p. 84). The public sector is setup to serve and maintain the status quo. Radical change is difficult to achieve in a system that is concerned with such consistency. The second major problem is one of theoretical differences and a *varying degree of interests*. Those in positions of authority are the leaders of any type of policy planning and implementation. The wealthy and powerful determine how public policy is shaped, and often their interests differ from the interests of the general public (Box, 2008, p. 83).

Marginal changes are not always counterproductive to a politician or bureaucrat's agenda though. Classic public administration theorist Charles E. Lindblom described a process known as *incrementalism*. There are different types of incrementalism but they all focus on implementing small changes versus large ones in order to solve a problem or accomplish a task (Fry & Raadschelders, 2008, p. 275). Lindblom specifically mentions the concept of *strategic analysis*, which asserts that complex policy problems can be addressed through calculated and thoughtful decision-making (Fry & Raadschelders, 2008, p. 276). Incremental change is more practical in

modern society than radical change. No matter how much the public is calling for radical change, incremental change may be the best *current* option.

Politicians and bureaucrats are tasked with serving the public good. It may sometimes be of best interest to the public to overhaul a current institutional system. Enacting such a reform in an efficient and effective manner however can be difficult. The solution lies in *small but influential decision-making*. Public administration scholar Frederick C. Thayer asserts that the greater the inclusion of stakeholders on a given public policy matter, the greater chance for *long-term cost effectiveness* (Thayer, 1981, p. 39). By implementing incremental changes in policy, a politician can be cost-effective through *long-term cost-avoidance*. Creating real change in society requires taking into consideration *all* of the stakeholders at play and as many intended and unintended consequences as possible.

The concepts of *bounded rationality and satisficing man* have taught us that it is impossible to examine all possible scenarios for a given situation (Fry & Raadschelders, 2008, p. 224). That does not mean however that it is not worthwhile to analyze the situation in depth. Greater regard for the public good can lead to incremental changes in society that are able to make a difference.

Candidates for Change

When a new president enters office, there is a transitional period. The period of transition brings with it the opportunity to implement new programs and goals, or to reform existing ones. Grover Starlings breaks down the president's initial responsibilities into three main tasks (2011). A new president must *prioritize policy goals, decide how to carry out* the decision-making process surrounding those goals, and then *appoint a staff to deal with the implementation process*

(Starling, 2011, p. 2). When current U.S. president Barak Obama was elected president in 2008, he began to formulate a plan of action that he would take with him to the White House. His plan involved forming a staff that was greatly influenced by both the Clinton and Reagan administrations (Starling, 2011, p. 1).

Formulating an administration that resembles previous ones is common practice. *Maintaining the status quo* is a central tenet of modern American politics. President Obama ran on a platform of change, and yet he still brought into office an administration made up of some of the most recent white house advisors. Woodrow Wilson's essay on *The Study of Administration* famously declared that, "administration lies outside the proper sphere of politics. Administrative questions are not political questions. Although politics sets the tasks for administration, it should not be suffered to manipulate its offices." (1887). Despite the unrealistic optimism of the politics-administration dichotomy, Wilson's point was that administration in any form should not be bothered by the game that is politics. In the case of the federal government and more specifically the executive branch, American presidents are continually playing the game of politics throughout the entire duration of their presidency. It is the president's decision to create new government agencies, reform existing ones, or even do away with existing ones. The president also has a say as to who his staff will be. Despite Wilson's ideal of the politics-administration dichotomy, the most well known political figure and administrator in our country freely enters the realm of politics every single term. There is no escaping the overlapping area of politics and administration in the United States executive branch.

There are two ways to view a president's attempts at reforming existing social programs. The first and more critical approach would be to see U.S. presidents as not wanting to shake up the system through radical reform. The second and more optimistic approach would be to view

the president as an individual politician who is attempting to implement some form of incrementalism in order to enact change. Either way, it is *the president* who plays the role of taking the first steps in any national agenda setting process. He or she is able to set the tone for the type of public policy and implementation that is to follow.

Population Size and Change

A major responsibility of the public sector is to respect public opinion in a way that is efficient (Wilson, 1887). Part of the problem of logistics when it comes to creating change however is that the United States is made up of a *very large and diverse population*. The complexities of public policies grow as the population grows (Dahl, 2006, p. 61). It is far easier to implement *successful and efficient reform* on a smaller scale.

In order to make real change happen, the president ought to start on the *organizational level*. Being that radical change on a national level is unlikely, it is practical to start implementing change in smaller political units – *bureaucratic and administrative agencies*.

The public sector is one network made up of a variety of agencies and organizations. Large-scale national change is unlikely because even if the politician has intentions of reform, conditions may have changed since he or she entered office (Thayer, 1981, p. 57). Another likely scenario that could prevent change is that the politician has become bogged down in the complexities of policy-making and implementation (Thayer, 1981, p. 56). Either way, incremental change on an organizational level can be a practical starting point for effective public policy making.

Not only are our current political systems manmade and thus changeable, but they also involve each and every individual citizen in society. Individuals may opt out of participating in

the private sector, but the public sector effects *every single* citizen whether they like it or not. *Public sector organizational level reform* can have a tremendous impact on the rest of society.

Modern society has seen public outcries for government to be run more like a business (Box, 2004, p. 22). The arguments for privatization, greater efficiency, and accountability are reflective of the public sector's failures to provide sufficient public goods and services. The so-called *change* which presidents are constantly reaching for and that the public is continually in favor of, is non-existent because *the public sector has failed to fully commit to change*. It is possible, especially in the wake of the most recent financial crisis, that the market economy and the private sector *do not hold all of the answers either*. The government does more harm than good when it tries to resemble the private sector without first asking itself why it is doing so. Public and private goods and services differ for a wide variety of reasons and often times one sector's way of doing things *will not effectively transfer* to the other.

Frederick C. Thayer claims that, "The fact that producers make profits says nothing about efficiency, only of ability to set prices high enough to come out ahead" (1973, p. A-27). The private sector is littered with corporations praising themselves for efficient production methods. In general though, their outputs are limited to simply – *profits*. Public organizations, administrators, and politicians however have to deal with a much wider range of inputs and outputs when it comes to efficiency. The private sector may be able to lend a helping hand here and there, but it is up to the public sector to determine its own primary processes.

Although consequences for negative policy making in the private sector are sparse, there is at the very least the appearance of accountability. The individuals and corporations responsible for the most recent financial crisis may not have been punished, but in the eyes of the public they ought to be held accountable. *Accountability* is a trait that the public sector must integrate into all

aspects of public service in order to create real change (Box, 2004, p. 22). If the president wants to create reform in the area of social equity, he may turn to public agencies dealing in welfare, social security, healthcare, human rights, or even economic equality. The president is then held accountable for either accomplishing *or* not accomplishing change in the area of social equity. He may in turn hold those in positions of authority in the agencies he asked to carry out the mission accountable for failure to implement change. Politics and administration should not be seen as something that either happens or it does not. If reform does not occur, *the public deserves to know why and administrative and organizational change should then occur* in order to facilitate the intended reform.

The president cannot make public policy happen by making promises to the voters. It is a process that involves the work of numerous bureaucratic agencies and interested parties. *Organizational flexibility and discretion* are essential elements of policy implementation. The organization can act as a base or a starting point for change. Agencies tasked with certain responsibilities have to be willing to adapt to unforeseen scenarios. The organizational level is a strategic point of attack for the president. Changing the structure and capabilities of an agency can determine the path of any public policy implementation. The *agenda setting* stage is a crucial part of any political process.

Technique Over Purpose

One of the major roadblocks for change in public policy is the inability for certain stakeholders to compromise with one another. The public sector, like any part of society, consists of numerous players with a wide range of interests. Atop the list of public concerns in modern society is that the *elite* have too much of a vested interest in maintaining economic inequality.

Not much has changed since *The Communist Manifesto* described the *two hostile camps* that divided society (Marx & Engels, 1848, p. 19). The history of both the public and private sector in any nation has been a history of class struggles (Marx & Engels, 1848, p. 18). The cause of the ever-growing divide between rich and poor has to do with *the elite's emphasis on technique*.

A new president comes into office and he has grand ideas. Slowly, his outlook becomes more and more pessimistic in relation to whether or not these ideas will become reality. *No change* can occur in the public sector *unless those in power allow it to happen*. Reinforcement of the status quo and a procedural emphasis on maintaining stability in society has led the United States to become a stagnant nation.

In *The Study of Administration*, Wilson wrote that, “no administration, however perfect and liberal its methods, can give men more than a poor counterfeit of liberty if it rest upon illiberal principles of government” (1887). The *purpose* behind government and the civil service has to be liberal in the sense that its main goal is to support the liberty and equity of *all* citizens. Even if modern day American society can claim that the government’s purpose is in fact to serve the public in an equitable manner, *the technique has to allow such behavior to happen*.

A president’s mission statement, goals, and future plans are nothing if the procedural processes of bureaucracy prevent any of it from happening. Technicalities, an emphasis on *standard operating procedure*, and a lack of compassion toward the public good lead the administrator and politician to serve the procedural process of the current system rather than *the intended purpose behind the system*. The private sector has aided in the reinforcement of *standard operating procedures*. Citizens are now trained by *both* the public and private sector to not deviate from the norm and the result is less discretion, flexibility, adaptation, and innovation in public policy making and implementation.

Steering versus Rowing

The concept of *steering versus rowing* is central to the public policy process. In order for a single politician or bureaucrat to succeed or even for an organization or institution to succeed, *they must steer*. Steering implies the need to search out the best possible methods required to achieve certain goals (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992, p. 35). Rowing on the other hand implies a tendency to defend *current methods* no matter what the consequences may be (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992, p. 35). In their book, *Reinventing Government*, Osborne and Gaebler contend that, “Governments that focus on steering actively shape their communities, states, and nations” (1992, p. 32). Steering provides a sense of empowerment and control to any organization. It allows the president, organization, or the government as a whole to determine his or her own political destiny. *Steering allows for real change in public policy and implementation.*

The combination of incremental strategies and an emphasis on steering will provide any leader a solid foundation for a political agenda. Government reforms are often unsuccessful because they are limited in their options. Historically, public leaders are faced with the option of either raising taxes in order to implement a program or simply saying no to the idea of the program because they cannot afford it (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992, p. 27). The public sector has to be willing to create different strategies of approach to societal concerns. Leaders who confine themselves to the procedural swamp of basing decision-making off of either raising or lowering taxes will accomplish little if any reform in modern society.

An effective leader will achieve beneficial reform through empowering the organizations on the front line. Public, private, and non-profit organizations that deal with areas of concern to political leaders are the ones with the expertise. The public sector leader, be it a president or

some type of administrator, ought to play a role of delegation and assessment when it comes to implementing public policy. Organizations should be granted the ability of discretion and flexibility from public leaders. A *steering organization* will *create and set* public policy rather than maintain current policy without rationale as to why they are doing so (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992, p. 40).

Conclusion

In the matter of public policy, the intentions of any president ought to be altruistic with the interests of the public in mind. Modern society and its safeguarding of the status quo however make *true progressive policy reform* a difficult process. Overhauling the way in which an entire political system functions seems radical because *people in positions of authority and influence oppose it*. If society wanted to overhaul or reform a political institution, all they must do is *overhaul the system*. Because modern society does not appear able to step up and complete a radical transformation, we are left with the option of *incrementalism*. On a much smaller scale, change in certain areas of public policy can be made *over time*.

Incremental practices and viewpoints have to be strategically inserted throughout the public sector in order to have an effect. The *organization or agency level* is a solid starting point for reform to occur. Less emphasis on technique and standard operating procedures and a greater emphasis on *the purpose* behind government organizations will encourage any type of altruistic policy change. Public policy creation and implementation is a complex task. But, the public sector is designed *to serve the needs of the public*, and if those needs are not being met, *change is necessary and must occur*.

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