

THE  
OXFORD  
HANDBOOKS  
OF  
POLITICAL  
SCIENCE

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≡ The Oxford Handbook of  
**PUBLIC POLICY**

P A R T II

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INSTITUTIONAL  
AND HISTORICAL  
BACKGROUND

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## CHAPTER 2

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# THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF THE FIELD

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PETER DELEON

### 1. INTRODUCTION

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By most accounts, the academic discipline generally referred to as the study of public policy grew out of the approach called the policy sciences.<sup>1</sup> The policy sciences approach has been primarily credited to the work of Harold D. Lasswell, writing in the late 1940s and early 1950s, most prominently articulated in his essay, “The policy orientation,” which was the opening chapter to Lasswell and Daniel Lerner’s *The Policy Sciences* (1951a; also see Lasswell 1949, 1971).<sup>2</sup> The policy sciences orientation was explicitly focused on the rigorous application of the sciences (hence, the plural usage of “sciences”) to issues affecting governance and government. As Fischer (2003: 3) has recently observed:

Specifically, Lasswell wanted to create an applied social science that would act as a mediator between academics, government decision makers, and ordinary citizens by providing objective solutions to problems that would narrow or minimize...the need for unproductive political debate on the pressing policy issues of the day.

<sup>1</sup> One must immediately acknowledge that this reference, and indeed much of this essay, is “American centric,” in that it mainly addresses the contemporary study of public policy in its American context. This emphasis in no way is intended to minimize the contributions of public policy scholars in European and Asian nations, who have made important contributions to the study of public policy.

<sup>2</sup> While this acknowledgement is generally accepted, its recognition is by no means universal; Beryl Radin traces the development of policy analysis in *Beyond Machiavelli* (2000) without mentioning Lasswell; rather, she singles out Yehezkel Dror (see Dror 1971) as the principal early contributor to the field.

In addition, Lasswell and his colleagues (e.g. Lasswell and Kaplan 1950) articulated a clear understanding of the necessity of overlaying the approach with the democratic ethos and processes, or what he defined as the “policy sciences of democracy,” which “were directed towards knowledge needed to improve the practice of democracy” (Lasswell 1951a, 15). The distinctly democratic orientation grew directly out of Lasswell’s animus towards the totalitarian regimes that were present in the world community during the interwar period (see Lasswell 1951b).

But if the rigorous study of public policy within the academy to provide advice to policy makers has a relatively short lineage, the concept has a lengthy history. Rulers have been the recipients of advice—often solicited—since at least the recording of history, a veritable cottage industry (see Goldhamer 1978 for details). At times ritualized—a priesthood grew around the prophetic rituals of the Greek Oracle at Delphi—and, more usually, personal or idiosyncratic—European diplomats during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were remarkably cosmopolitan in their allegiances—advisers to whomever was in power were rarely lacking. However, there is a clear distinction between the earlier purveyors of policy advice and the policy sciences, namely that policy advice to rulers rarely relied on extensive research, invariably was not recounted in policy memoranda (nor memoirs), nor subjected to protocols of “scientific” enquiry. A major exception, of course, was the remarkable Italian Renaissance diplomat Niccolò Machiavelli, but even *The Prince* (1500/1515) was more of a generalized set of observations than recommendations to any specific ruler or context. A more modern precursor might have been the “brains trust” assembled by President Franklin Roosevelt to help his administration counter the 1930s Great Depression, but this could easily be attributed to the unique confluence of conditions and personalities.

The turn of the twentieth century saw the beginnings of academic study of issues of public salience within the disciplines of political science and public administration, which some (e.g. Heineman et al. 2002) have suggested were the precursors of public policy studies. Later, political science and public administration perspectives rather naturally were directly extended into the public arena, as were relevant aspects found in the disciplines of law, history, sociology, psychology, public health (for instance, in the field of epidemiology), and anthropology. However, the policy sciences approach and its authors have deliberately distinguished themselves from these early academic contributions by posing three defining characteristics that, in combination, transcend the contributions ascribed to the individual disciplines:

1. The policy sciences are explicitly *problem oriented*, quite consciously addressing public policy problems and recommendations for their relief, while openly rejecting the study of a phenomenon for its own sake; the societal or political question of “so what?” has always been at the heart of the policy sciences’ approach. Likewise, policy problems are seen to occur in a specific context, a context that must be carefully considered in terms of both the analysis and subsequent recommendations. For these reasons,
2. The policy sciences are distinctively *multidisciplinary* in their intellectual and practical approaches. The reasoning is straightforward: almost every social or

political problem has multiple components that are tied to the various academic disciplines without falling clearly into any one discipline's exclusive domain. Therefore, to gain a complete appreciation of the phenomenon, many relevant orientations must be utilized and integrated. Finally,

3. The policy sciences' approach is consciously and explicitly *value oriented*; in many cases, the central theme deals with the democratic ethos and human dignity.<sup>3</sup> This value orientation, first argued during the emphasis on behavioralism, i.e. "objectivism," in the social sciences, recognizes that no social problem nor methodological approach is value free. As such, to understand a problem, one must acknowledge its value components. Similarly, no policy scientist is without her or his own values, which also must be recognized, if not resolved, as Amy (1984) has discussed.<sup>4</sup> This realization will later surface at the heart of the post-positivist orientation.

Moving the policy sciences from the halls of academe to the offices of government largely occurred on the federal level during the 1960s (see Radin 2000), such that by the 1980s, virtually every federal office had a policy analysis branch, often under the title of a policy analysis and/or evaluation office. Since then, many states (including those with memberships in interstate consortia, such as the National Conference of State Legislatures) have moved in a similar direction, with the only constraints being financial. In addition, for-hire "think tanks" have proliferated seemingly everywhere (and of most every political orientation). Every public sector official would seemingly agree that more pertinent information on which to base decisions and policies is better than less. As such, there has seemingly been a widespread acceptance of the public policy approach and applications.

Concomitantly, virtually every American university has developed a graduate program in public affairs (or retooled its public administration program) to fill the apparent demand for sophisticated policy analysts. Yet the turn of the twenty-first century has hardly ushered in a Golden Age of Policy Advice. With every nook and cranny of government engaged in policy research and evaluation, why do policy scholars often voice the perception that their work is not being utilized? Donald Beam has characterized policy analysts as beset with "fear, paranoia, apprehension, and denial" and states that they do not "have as much confidence... about their

<sup>3</sup> H. D. Lasswell and Abraham Kaplan (1950, pp. xii, xxiv) dedicate the policy sciences to provide the "intelligence pertinent to the integration of values realized by and embodies in interpersonal relations," which "prizes not the glory of a depersonalized state of the efficiency of a social mechanism, but human dignity and the realization of human capabilities."

<sup>4</sup> A moment should be set aside to distinguish "policy analysis" (and the policy analyst) from the "policy sciences" (and its analogous policy scientist). Many (e.g. Radin 2000; Dunn 1981; Heineman et al. 2002) prefer the former. DeLeon (1988, 9; emphasis added) indicated that "Policy analysis is the most noted derivative and application of the tools and methodologies of the policy sciences' approach... [As such], policy analysis is generally considered a more discrete *genus* under the broader umbrella of the policy sciences *phylum*." For the purposes of this chapter, they are largely interchangeable. Fischer (2003, na. 1 and 4, pp. 1 and 3, respectively) is in agreement with deLeon in this usage.

value in the political process as they did 15 or 20 years ago” (Beam 1996, 430–1). Heineman and his colleagues (2002, 1, 9) are equally distressed in terms of policy access and results:

despite the development of sophisticated methods of inquiry, policy analysis has not had a major substantive impact on policymakers. Policy analysts have remained distant from power centers where policy decisions are made . . . . In this environment, the values of analytical rigor and logic have given way to political necessities.

We need not necessarily agree with all of these claims, but, in general, one can assert that the Lasswellian charge for the policy sciences has not been realized. This chapter attempts to understand this shortfall by tracing the political and cognitive evolutions of the policy sciences, and, in tandem, to offer some advice as to how the policy sciences might achieve some of their earlier goals. To these ends, let us first review the development of the policy sciences’ approach, followed by an understanding of the disjunction between the goals of the policy sciences and the policy world, and, lastly, indicate some ways in which the two can become more in tune with each other.

## 2. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE POLICY SCIENCES

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In general, two paths have been proposed to outline the development of the policy sciences. Although they do not stand in opposition to one another, the respective chronologies of Beryl Radin (2000) and Peter deLeon (1998) offer contrasting emphases. Radin (2000) draws upon the heritage proffered by American public administration; for instance, in her telling, policy analytic studies represent a continuation of the early twentieth-century Progressive movement (also see Fischer 2003) in the United States, in particular, its emphases on scientific analysis of social issues and the democratic polity. Her depiction particularly characterizes the institutional growth of the policy approach, metaphorically relying on the (fictional) histories of an “old school” economist cum policy analyst (John Nelson) juxtaposed with a “younger,” university-trained policy analyst (Rita Stone). Through them, she casts an institutional framework on the policy studies approach, indicating the progression from a limited analytic approach practiced by a relatively few practitioners (nominally from the RAND Corporation in California, which was the training ground for defense-turned-health analyst Nelson) to a growing number of government institutions and universities. Radin notes the emergence of analytic studies from the RAND Corporation to Robert McNamara’s US Department of

Defense in the early 1960s under the guise of “systems analysis” and the Programmed Planning and Budget System (PPBS).<sup>5</sup>

From its apparent success in the Defense Department, PPBS, under President Lyndon Johnson’s executive mandate, spread out into other government offices, such as the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in the mid-1960s. Although PPBS never again enjoyed the great (and, to be fair, transitory) success that it did in the Defense Department (see Wildavsky 1979a), the analytic orientation was soon adopted by a number of federal offices, state agencies, and a large number of analytic consultant groups (see Fischer 1993; Ricci 1984).<sup>6</sup> Thus, Radin (2000) views the growth of the policy analyses as a “growth industry,” in which a few select government agencies first adopted an explicitly innovative analytic approach, others followed, and an industry developed to service them. Institutional problems, such as the appropriate bureaucratic locations for policy analysis, arose but were largely overcome. In much the same theme, Gilmore and Halley (1994) address policy research issues as a function of intergovernmental relations. However, Radin’s (2000) analysis pays hardly any attention to the hallmarks of the policy sciences approach: there is little direct attention to the problem orientation of the activity and the normative groundings of policy issues (and recommendations) are largely overlooked. As such, her analysis describes the end product of a movement towards institutional analysis, generally portraying a very positive image of the dissemination of the profession and its practitioners.

DeLeon (1988) offered a parallel but somewhat more complicated model, in which he linked analytic activities tied to specific political events (what he terms “supply,” that is, events that provided analysts with a set of particular conditions to which they could apply their skills) with an evolving requirement for policy analysis within political circles and government offices (“demand,” which represents a growing requirement for the product of policy analytic skills). His underlying assumption was that “supply” and “demand” are mutually dependent and, if the study of public policy is to be intellectually advanced and be utilized by policy makers, both must be present. In particular, he suggested the following political events as having been seminal in the development of the policy research, in terms of “lessons learned:”<sup>7</sup>

*The Second World War*, during which the United States marshaled an unprecedented number of social scientists—economists, political scientists, psychologists, etc.—to support the war effort. These activities established an important illustration of the ability of the social sciences to focus problem-oriented analysis on urgent

<sup>5</sup> See Hitch and McKean (1960) for an authoritative explanation.

<sup>6</sup> Radin (2000, 55) traces the development of the policy orientation through six “representative” analytic offices, chosen specifically to reflect the divergence of the approach: the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation in the US Department of Health and Human Services; the California Legislative Analyst’s Office; the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities; the Congressional Research Service; the Heritage Foundation; and the Twentieth Century Fund.

<sup>7</sup> These are elaborated upon in deLeon 1988.



public issues, in this case ensuring victory over the Axis powers. In fact, Lasswell and Abraham Kaplan spent the war employed by the Library of Congress studying the use of propaganda techniques. This realization led directly to the postwar formation of the National Science Foundation (although more concerned at first with the physical sciences) and the Council of Economic Advisors, as well as research facilities such as the RAND Corporation (Smith 1966) and the Brookings Institution (Lyons 1969). However, in general, while the “supply” side of the policy equation was seemingly primed, there was little activity on the “demand” side, perhaps because of the post-Second World War society’s desire to return to some semblance of “normalcy.” As a result, the policy approach was more or less quiescent until the 1960s, and President Lyndon Johnson’s declaration and implementation of

*The War on Poverty.* In the early 1960s, largely spurred by the emerging civil rights demonstrations, Americans took notice of the pervasive, debilitating poverty extant in “the other America” (Harrington 1963) and realized that, as a body politic, they were remarkably uninformed. Social scientists moved aggressively into this knowledge gap with unbridled enthusiasm but lacking consensus, producing what Moynihan (1969) called “maximum feasible misunderstanding.” A vast array of social programs was initiated to address this particular war, with important milestones being achieved, especially in the improved statistical measures of what constituted poverty and evaluation measures to assess the various anti-poverty programs (see Rivlin 1970) and, of course, civil rights. Walter Williams (1998), looking back on his days in the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), has suggested that these were the “glory days” of policy analysis. Other OEO veterans, such as Robert Levine (1970), were more reserved, while some, such as Murray (1984), went so far as to indicate that with the advent of the anti-poverty, anti-crime, and affirmative action programs, the American poor was actually “losing ground.” At best, policy analysts were forced to confront the immense complexity of the social condition and discover that in some instances, there were no “easy” answers. DeLeon (1988, 61) later summarized the result of the War on Poverty as “a decade of trial, error, and frustration, after which it was arguable if ten years and billions of dollars had produced any discernible, let alone effective, relief.”<sup>8</sup> One reason for the noted shortcomings was that the attention of the American public and its policy makers was sorely distracted by

*The Vietnam War.* In many senses, the Vietnam War brought the tools of public policy analysis, including applied systems analytic techniques, to life-and-death combat situations, a condition exacerbated by the growing civil unrest as to its conduct of the war and, of course, the loss of life suffered by its participants. The war was closely monitored by the Defense Secretary McNamara’s office, with intense scrutiny from Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon; these analysts were, in the words of David Halberstam, “the best and the brightest” (1972). But it became increasingly obvious that analytic rigor—specified in metrics such as “body counts,” ordnance expended, and supplies moved—and “rational” decision making were not only misleading in terms of the war’s progress, but were surely not indicative of the

<sup>8</sup> For details regarding the War on Poverty, see Aaron 1978; Kershaw and Courant 1970; Nathan 1985.

growing rancor that the war generated among American citizens. Too often there was evidence that the “hard and fast” numbers were being manipulated to serve military and political purposes. Moreover, systems analysis was neither cognitively nor viscerally able to encompass the almost daily changes in the war’s activities occurring in both the international and the domestic arena. At the time, Colin Gray (1971) argued that systems analysis, one of the apparent US advantages of defense policy making, turned out to be a major shortcoming of the American war effort and was a partial contributor to the ultimate US failures in Vietnam. Finally, and most tellingly, Defense Department analysis could not appreciate the required (and respective) political wills necessary to triumph, or, in the case of this war, outlast the opponent. Frances FitzGerald’s *Fire in the Lake* (1972) foretold the imminent American military disaster as a function of the almost unlimited resources (including human lives) that the North Vietnamese were willing to expend in what they saw as the defense of their nation. In the latter years of the war, as the USA struggled to maintain its commitments, the Vietnam policies of President Richard Nixon segued unmistakably into

*The Watergate scandals.* The sordid events surrounding the re-election of President Nixon in the early 1970s, his administration’s heavy-handed attempts to “cover up” the tell-tale incriminating signs, and his willingness to covertly gather evidence on Vietnam War protester Daniel Ellsberg led to the potential impeachment of an American president, averted only because President Nixon chose to resign in ignominy rather than face congressional impeachment proceedings (Olson 2003). The overwhelming evidence of wrongdoing in the highest councils of the US government clearly brought home to the public that moral norms and values were central to the activities of government; to amass illegal evidence (probably through unconstitutional means) undermining those norms was an unpardonable political act. The Ethics in Government Act (1978) was only the most visible realization that normative standards were central to the activities of government, validating, as it were, one of the central tenets of the policy sciences. Regardless, however, few will ever forget the President of the United States protesting, “I am not a crook,” and its effect on the public’s trust in its elected government, a condition soon to be exacerbated by

*The energy crisis of the 1970s.* If the early 1960s’ wellspring of analytic efforts was the War on Poverty and the late 1960s’ was Vietnam, the energy crises of the 1970s provided ample grounds for the best analytic efforts the country could bring to bear. With highly visible gasoline shortages and record high energy prices throughout the nation, the public was inundated with multiple policy descriptions and formulas as to the level of petroleum reserves (domestic and worldwide) and competing energy sources (e.g. nuclear vs. petroleum vs. solar), all over differing (projected) time horizons; finally, as a backdrop framing these issues, hung the specter of threatened national security (for example, see Deese and Nye 1981; Stobaugh and Yergin 1979). With this plethora of technical data, seemingly the analytic community was prepared to bring light out of the darkness. But this was not to be the case; as Weyant was later to note, “perhaps as many as two-thirds of the [energy] models failed to achieve their avowed purposes in the form of direct application to policy

problems” (quoted in Weyant 1980, 212). The contrast was both striking and apparent: energy policy was awash in technical considerations (e.g. untapped petroleum reserves and complex technical modeling; see Greenberger, Brewer, and Schelling 1983) but the basic decisions were decidedly political (that is, *not* driven by analysis), as President Nixon declared “Project Independence,” President Carter intoned that energy independence represented the “moral equivalency of war” (cattily acronymed into MEO), and President Ford created a new Department of Energy (see Commoner 1979). There was seemingly a convergence between “analytic supply” and “government demand,” yet the inherent complexity of the issues effectively resolved little, that is, no policy consensus was achieved, a condition that did little to enshrine the policy sciences approach with either its immediate clients (government officials) or its ultimate beneficiaries (the citizenry).

Since these historical events were first proposed as events that shaped the development of the policy sciences (deLeon 1988), there have been more than twenty-five years in which numerous political events have occurred that, in retrospect, might have affected the development of public policy studies. These include at least three declared wars in which the United States military has invaded nations, revolutionary legislation to reform regulatory and welfare policies, and a presidential impeachment by the US Congress. While one might make cases for these and (possibly) other events, sufficient evidence and analytic “distance” need to be accumulated before these can be examined through the “supply” and “demand” metaphor.

To summarize: These larger constellations of public events have manifested themselves in a general constellation in the way in which the American people view their government and its processes and, as a result, the role that public policy research could play in informing government policy makers. From the immense national pride that characterized the victory over totalitarian forces in the Second World War, the American public has suffered a series of disappointments and disillusionments in the public policy arena, ranging from what many consider to be a problematic War on Poverty to an ongoing policy stalemate in energy policy to a failed war in South-East Asia to the resignation of a twice-elected president. Thus, there should be little surprise when scholars like E. J. Dionne write *Why Americans Hate Politics* (1991) or Joseph Nye and colleagues edit a book *Why Americans Don't Trust Government* (1997). Most damaging, of course, to the policy sciences' tradition is Christopher Lasch's pointed and hardly irrelevant question: “does democracy have a future? . . . It isn't a question of whether democracy *can* survive . . . [it] is whether democracy *deserves* to survive” (Lasch 1995, 1, 85; emphases added),

One needs to be balanced. The picture of post-Second World War American public policy hardly represents a crown of thorns. In many ways, the American quality of political life has benefited directly and greatly from public policy making, ranging from the Marshall Plan (which effectively halted the march of European communism after the Second World War) to the GI Bill (which brought the benefits of higher education to an entire generation of American men) to Medicare/Medicaid (1964) to the American civil rights movements to a flowering of environmental programs to (literally) men on the moon. However, as Derek Bok (1997) has pointed out,

American expectations and achievements have hardly produced universal progress compared to other industrialized nations, with crime, the environment, health care, and public education being only four examples. What motivated the spread of the public policy orientation was the expectation that well-trained, professional analysts, appropriately focused, would produce an unbroken succession of policy successes. As Richard Nelson (1977) wondered, if America could put a man on the moon, why was it unable to solve the problems of the urban ghetto? Nelson suggested, and the narratives above second, that the promise of the policy sciences has not been fulfilled. All of which leads one to ask a series of questions, assuming, naturally, that this promise is still worthwhile, i.e. not impossible: Why are some examples of policy research more successful than others? Or, is there a public policy “learning curve?” What does it resemble and to whom? What is its trajectory? And where is it going?

Finally, it is important to observe that political activities and results are not synonymous with the practice of the public policy or the policy sciences. But they certainly reside in the same policy space. For the policy sciences to meet the goals of improving government policy through a rigorous application of its central themes, then the failures of the body politic naturally must be at least partially attributed to failure of, or at least a serious shortfall in, the policy sciences’ approach. To ask the same question from an oppositional perspective: Why should the nominal recipients of policy research subscribe to it if the research does not reflect the values and intuitions of the client policy maker, that is, in their eyes, does not represent any discernible value added? To this question, one needs to add the issue of democratic governance, a concept virtually everybody would agree upon until the important issues of detail emerge (see deLeon 1997; Barber 1984; Dahl 1990/1970), e.g. does direct democracy have a realistic place in a representative, basically pluralist democracy?

### 3. “... MILES TO GO BEFORE I SLEEP”

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Robert Frost, in his “Stopping in the Woods on a Snowy Evening” (published in 1923), was certainly not concerned with the relevance of the public policy in general and, in particular, the institutional viability of the policy sciences. Still, in writing

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,  
But I have many promises to keep  
And miles to go before I sleep,

he does provide an allusion to what ails the contemporaneous relationship between policy makers and their would-be advisers, a relationship tempered by the history of the policy sciences and their applications, one rife with institutional complexity, with much to promise, and “miles” to go before those promises are realized. What