

# Chapter 4

## Chapter Objectives

- Explain the nature of policy analysis.
- Show how policy analysis is used in the policymaking process.
- Compare and contrast the different types of policy analysis.
- Describe when certain types of analysis are needed.

**Policy for public safety.** There has been rising concern in recent years about the heightened risk of accidents associated with using cell phones while driving. The 2013 photo shows a heavily damaged car from an accident in Florida associated with texting and driving. In late May 2013, Florida Governor Rick Scott signed legislation that bans texting while driving, a position taken by the majority of U.S. states. (© Michele Eve Sandberg/Corbis/APImages)



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# Policy Analysis

## An Introduction

**O**n September 12, 2008, a rush-hour Metrolink commuter train in the San Fernando Valley northwest of downtown Los Angeles ran a red light and collided head-on with a Union Pacific freight train, killing 25 people and injuring more than 130 others, many severely. It was the deadliest train accident in Metrolink's history and the worst in the nation since 1993. Investigators discovered that the commuter train's engineer failed to brake before the accident and that he had been sending text messages on his cell phone moments before the collision. Since February 2007, engineers and drivers had been prohibited from using cell phones while operating trains and buses in Los Angeles County, but the ban was not well enforced. Within a week of the accident, the California Public Utilities Commission temporarily banned the use of all cellular devices by anyone at the controls of a moving train, noting there were no federal or state rules specifically regulating the use of cell phones by on-duty train personnel.<sup>1</sup>

California state legislators quickly proposed a ban on text messaging (reading, writing, or sending) by all drivers, an action already taken by a number of states and cities and under consideration by others. By 2014, forty-one states and Washington, D.C., banned text messaging for all drivers, and nearly all of them provide for primary enforcement; that is, one can be cited for this traffic violation alone. However, relatively few states prohibited all drivers from using handheld cell phones while driving, and no state banned all cell phone use (handheld or hands-free) for all drivers, although some imposed such a restriction for certain categories of drivers. How many people use cell phones or text while driving and would be affected by such restrictions? Quite a few, it seems. A 2010 survey by the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project reported that about 27 percent of American adults have texted while driving, and another survey in late 2011 found that nearly half of drivers ages twenty-one to twenty-four say

they text behind the wheel; over 61 percent of all drivers report having used a cell phone while driving.<sup>2</sup>

Is there a case to be made for going beyond current restrictions on cell phone use while driving? For example, should *any* use of handheld cell phones, talking or texting, while driving be prohibited for all drivers? What about use of hands-free cell phones in cars, particularly smartphones that are so widely used today, made much easier in newer vehicles that come with Bluetooth connectivity or a wired connection that can convert a cell phone to a hands-free device? This may be a distinction without a difference since studies suggest the real driver distraction is associated not with holding the phone but rather with talking on it. Studies have measured that risk as equal to driving with a blood alcohol level at the legal maximum, and the risk rises substantially if one is texting while driving.<sup>3</sup> For that matter, the infotainment systems built into many new cars, often providing access to the Internet and social networks, provide even more opportunity for taking one's eyes off of the road while driving.<sup>4</sup>

The implications of all this new technology are not lost on federal and state officials concerned with transportation safety. In December 2011, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), an independent federal agency, called for a total ban on cell phone use while driving (no calling, texting, or updating), citing the risks of distracted driving; it said that drivers should use cell phones only in an emergency. Its call was similar to one issued by the National Safety Council in 2009, but the decision to ban cell phones will be up to the states.<sup>5</sup> Also in 2011, the Obama administration's secretary of transportation, Ray LaHood, continued to press for additional restrictions on texting and cell phone use, and other forms of distracted driving. His department set up a special federal webpage on the subject to offer the public key facts and arguments ([www.distraction.gov](http://www.distraction.gov)), and President Obama used his executive authority to forbid federal employees from texting while driving.

Given these developments, would you favor the NTSB's recommendation to ban all cell phone use while driving? Should something also be done about other distractions in the car? Washington, D.C., approved a cell phone restriction in 2005 that also bans driving while "reading, writing, performing personal grooming, interacting with pets or unsecured cargo or while playing video games."<sup>6</sup> Is that going too far? Would a public education campaign be preferable to such restrictions? As drivers and citizens, everyone should ask how policymakers can ultimately reach decisions like these that are effective, fair, and reasonable. This chapter demonstrates that policy analysis may be able to help answer these kinds of questions.

Chapter 3 elaborated on the policy process model, which is useful for understanding how policy analysis contributes to government decision making. Whether in testimony before legislative committees, studies and reports on the Internet, or articles and reports, policy analysis is usually performed at the policy formulation stage. Here, policymakers search for the proposals they believe hold promise for addressing public problems. But policy analysis is also used throughout the policymaking process, starting with defining the nature of the problem right through implementing and evaluating policies within administrative agencies.

This chapter examines the nature and purposes of policy analysis, including basic steps in the policy analysis process. It also surveys the diverse ways in which analysts and research organizations engage in their work. The next two chapters go into greater detail on how we study public problems and seek solutions to them, using different methods and criteria to evaluate what might be done. No one expects these chapters to make students instant analysts; rather, their purpose is to convey the challenge of understanding and solving public problems and the need for clear, critical thinking about public policy, whether the issue is cell phone use while driving, state funding for higher education, or government action to combat terrorism. Readers should learn what policy analysis is all about, how to question the assumptions that analysts make about their work, and how analysis of all kinds is used in support of political arguments. We also try to direct readers to a variety of information sources about public policy and provide some guidelines for using them.

## The Nature of Policy Analysis

As discussed in chapter 1, the term *policy analysis* covers many different activities. It may mean examining the components of the policymaking process, such as policy formulation and implementation, or studying substantive public policy issues, such as ensuring access to health care services, or both. Policy analysis usually involves collecting and interpreting information that clarifies the causes and effects of public problems and the likely consequences of using one policy option or another to address them. Because public problems can be understood only through the insights of many disciplines, policy analysis draws from the ideas and methods of economics, political science, sociology, psychology, philosophy, and other scientific and technical fields (J. Anderson 2015; Weimer and Vining 2011).

Most often, policy analysis refers to the assessment of policy alternatives. According to one scholar, it is “the systematic investigation of alternative policy options and the assembly and integration of the evidence for and against each option” (Jacob Ukeles, quoted in Patton, Sawicki, and Clark 2013, 22). Policy analysis is intended not to determine policy decisions but rather to inform the process of public deliberation and debate about those decisions. As in the case of cell phone use in cars, analysis can provide useful information and comparisons to answer the kinds of questions people raise about what might be done about the problem. Ultimately, however, the public and its elected officials must decide what course of action to take.

Policy analysis, then, is part science and part political judgment. Doing analysis often means bringing scientific knowledge to the political process, or “speaking truth to power” (Wildavsky 1979). To put it in a slightly different way, policy analysis involves both descriptive or empirical study, which tries to determine the facts of a given situation, and a normative or value-based assessment of the options. Policy analysis can never be reduced to a formula for solving public

problems, but as we will show, it can bring valuable information to both policymakers and the public. In those cases where public involvement in decisions is important, analysis also may enhance the democratic process (Ingram and Smith 1993).

The study of public policy and the conduct of policy analysis are rarely simple matters. Public problems are usually complex and multifaceted, and people are bound to disagree over how serious they are, what might be done about them, and the role of government in relation to the private sector. Some problems, such as global climate change or the challenge of terrorism, are monumental. Others, such as how best to provide for a high-quality public school system or limit urban sprawl, may be a bit easier to grasp. But they still are not simple. If they were, the course of action would be clear and not very controversial—removing snow from urban streets and collecting household trash, for example. Unfortunately, dealing with most public problems is not so straightforward.

So what exactly does policy analysis do? One of its primary functions is to satisfy the need for pertinent information and thoughtful, impartial assessments in the policymaking process. This is particularly true when decisions must be made quickly because of impending deadlines or when the issues are politically controversial. Essentially, policy analysis involves looking ahead to anticipate the consequences of decisions and thinking seriously and critically about them. It is an alternative to “shooting from the hip” or making snap decisions based on ideology, personal experience, or limited or biased assessment of what should be done.<sup>7</sup> Even though such policy analysis is an intellectual activity, it takes place within a political setting (Dunn 2008). The way the analysis is done and its effects on decision making reflect that basic political reality.

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**Urban services delivery.** Cities and states can choose among many policy alternatives as they attempt to meet recurring needs such as removing snow from city streets and collecting household waste. The photo shows snow removal following an unusually severe winter storm in Atlanta, Georgia, in February 2014 that brought transportation and business to a halt. Much of the South that week was hit with ice, snow, and freezing rain. (AP Photo/David Tulis)





The role of politics is readily apparent in policy areas such as guaranteeing a woman's right to choose an abortion—or limiting that choice, controlling illegal immigration, or ensuring that the subject of biological evolution is included in public school science curricula. All were subjects of great controversy in Kansas, Pennsylvania, and other states in the 2000s. These issues touch on fundamental questions of values, and people may hold intense views on them. It is no surprise, then, that politics sometimes trumps policy analysis when decisions are made on such issues. Yet the political nature of policymaking is also evident in nearly every policy area, from setting foreign policy objectives to reforming the nation's health care system. Policy choices usually reflect some combination of political preferences and various assessments of the problem and possible solutions to it. Policy analysis can help to clarify the problem, the policy choices available, and how each choice stands up against the different standards of judgment that might be used, such as those we emphasized in chapter 1: effectiveness, efficiency, and equity. Ultimately, however, policymakers and the public choose what kinds of policies they prefer to have.

## Steps in the Policy Analysis Process

The most common approach to policy analysis is to picture it as a series of analytical steps or stages, which are the elements in rational problem solving (Bardach 2012; MacRae and Whittington 1997). According to models of rational decision making, one defines a problem, indicates the goals and objectives to be sought, considers a range of alternative solutions, evaluates each of the alternatives to clarify their consequences, and then recommends or chooses the alternative with the greatest potential for solving the problem. This process is similar to the way most of us make everyday decisions, although we do it much more casually.

Often, the so-called rational-comprehensive approach to analysis and decision making is not possible, and the less demanding incremental decision making is substituted. Still, essentially the same steps are involved. The only difference is that incremental decision making is more limited than the rational-comprehensive approach in the extent of analysis required; often it means making modest changes in policy or making them gradually. In political settings, incremental decision making is a more realistic approach, given ideological and partisan constraints and the ever-present pressure from interest groups and other constituencies. All can restrict the range of policy options to be taken seriously and the kinds of questions that are asked about them (J. Anderson 2015; Lindblom and Woodhouse 1993).

Figure 4-1 summarizes the major steps in policy analysis and the kinds of questions analysts typically pose. It also illustrates how each stage of analysis might apply to a particular policy problem. Each step is considered briefly here as a summary description of what policy analysis aspires to do. Chapters 5 and 6 examine each of these steps in greater detail. Note as well how these steps in the analysis process relate to the stages of the policymaking process discussed in

Figure 4-1 Steps in the Policy Analysis Process

| STEPS                                                                                                                   | TYPE OF QUESTIONS                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | ILLUSTRATIONS                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  <b>Define and analyze the problem</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the problem faced?</li> <li>• Where does it exist?</li> <li>• Who or what is affected?</li> <li>• How did it develop?</li> <li>• What are the major causes?</li> <li>• How might the causes be affected by policy action?</li> </ul>                                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How is cell phone use, including texting, related to automobile accidents?</li> <li>• What is the potential to reduce accident rates through policy action?</li> <li>• How does talking on a cell phone or texting compare to other distractions while driving, such as use of navigation systems, drinking coffee, or talking to passengers?</li> </ul> |
|  <b>Construct policy alternatives</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What policy options might be considered for dealing with the problem?</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To reduce drivers' cell phone use, should state governments institute sanctions such as fines?</li> <li>• Should states try to educate drivers on cell phone use?</li> <li>• Should cell phones be disabled in a moving car if effective technology to do so becomes available?</li> </ul>                                                               |
|  <b>Develop evaluative criteria</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What criteria are most suitable for the problem and the alternatives?</li> <li>• What are the costs of action?</li> <li>• What will the costs be if no action is taken?</li> <li>• What is the likely effectiveness, social and political feasibility, or equity of alternatives?</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What criteria are most important for regulation of cell phones?</li> <li>• Will people find these options acceptable?</li> <li>• Is it ethical to restrict individual behavior to achieve a social goal?</li> <li>• What options might be most effective in discouraging drivers from talking on their using cell phones or texting?</li> </ul>          |
|  <b>Assess the alternatives</b>      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Which alternatives are better than others?</li> <li>• What kind of analysis might help to distinguish better and worse policy alternatives?</li> <li>• Is the evidence available? If not, how can it be produced?</li> </ul>                                                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Which policy options are most likely to reduce drivers' use of cell phones and texting: public education or economic sanctions such as fines?</li> <li>• How successful are the efforts of states and localities to regulate cell phone use and texting?</li> <li>• What kinds of evidence are needed to answer these questions?</li> </ul>              |
|  <b>Draw conclusions</b>             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Which policy option is the most desirable given the circumstances and the evaluative criteria?</li> <li>• What other factors should be considered?</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Should state governments impose stiff fines on use of cell phones or texting while driving?</li> <li>• Would such fines be accepted as a legitimate governmental action?</li> <li>• If they work, how might such actions be made more acceptable to the public?</li> </ul>                                                                               |

chapter 3. Defining and analyzing problems is usually part of the agenda-setting stage of policymaking, and sometimes so is the construction of policy alternatives, especially if some potential alternatives are not considered seriously at all. Usually, however, the formal construction of alternatives is part of policy design and hence fits into the policy formulation stage of policymaking. Development of evaluative criteria also can be part of policy formulation, but it mainly falls into the stage of policy legitimation or approval. Assessing alternatives similarly can take place during both the formulation and legitimation stages of policymaking as policy actors consider which solutions they prefer and which may succeed politically. The same is true of the last stage of analysis, drawing conclusions. Analysts and policymakers may draw conclusions about preferred policy alternatives as policy is formulated, debated, and adopted. Since the policymaking process is continuous, these analytic steps also can be found in the implementation, evaluation, and policy-change stages of policymaking as current policies are assessed critically and alternatives considered.

## Define and Analyze the Problem

The first step in any policy analysis is to define and analyze the problem. Everyone knows what the word **problem** means, but for policy analysts the term specifically refers to the existence of an unsatisfactory set of conditions for which relief is sought, either through private means or from the government. Analysts therefore need to describe that set of conditions, usually through the collection of facts or data on its magnitude or extent. For example, who is affected by the problem, and how seriously? How long has the situation existed, and how might it change over the next several years or decades? How amenable is it to intervention through one means or another? The goals and objectives of such intervention, whether private or governmental, may not be clear to all concerned.

It may also be necessary to clarify what is meant by the set of conditions, to define it clearly, and to develop accurate measures of it. If the problem is homelessness in the United States, for example, an analyst will need to be clear about what is meant by homelessness, how to determine the extent of it, and which segments of the population are affected by it.

Beyond gathering basic information about the problem, analysts want to identify its causes, which is not always an easy task. Without a good idea of how and why the problem came about, however, it is difficult to think usefully about possible solutions to it. This kind of diagnosis of the problem is akin to what a physician does when a patient is ill or what a mechanic does when a car is not running properly. The importance of the diagnosis is clear if one looks at how policymakers are trying to cope with an issue as imposing as global terrorism. Without an understanding of the causes of terrorism—and they may be both numerous and difficult to deal with—policy actions are unlikely to be effective. To use a more concrete example, one has first to diagnose the reasons for failing public schools before a solution can be sought. Otherwise, there is little reason to believe that some of the proposed solutions (for example, formation of charter



schools, use of school vouchers, or changing the nature of teacher evaluations) will improve the quality of education.

A long-standing dispute over international development assistance speaks to the importance of careful measures and analysis of public problems. Economic assistance to developing countries from twenty-four donor nations, including the United States, totaled \$126 billion in 2012, or about 0.29 percent of the donor nations' combined gross national income. The United States contributed about \$30 billion of that total.<sup>8</sup> But what impact does spending this money have on developing nations? Critics say the impact is far less than it should be. Yet looking only at the overall statistical portrait misses the real success stories in economic assistance. Experience suggests that economic aid is most likely to work when it comes in relatively small, well-targeted, and tightly controlled investments rather than in large sums delivered to a government that may waste it.<sup>9</sup>

## Construct Policy Alternatives

Once analysts believe they understand the problem, they begin to think about alternative ways of dealing with it. The policy typologies introduced in chapter 3 suggest several different approaches, such as regulation, subsidies, taxing and spending, market incentives, and public education or information provision. The point is that government has a finite number of actions from which to choose. Based on the available inventory of possibilities, analysts could construct a set

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**International economic assistance.** The United States and other developed nations have long provided economic assistance to help developing countries deal with their poverty and also with the effects of severe storms or other natural disasters with which they are poorly equipped to cope. The photo shows Filipinos carrying boxes with aid from the U.S. relief organization USAID after an Osprey aircraft of the U.S. Navy landed in a remote village near the Eastern Samar town of Guiuan on November 19, 2013. This was ten days after one of the most powerful typhoons ever recorded struck the area, killing nearly four thousand people and leaving others in dire circumstances. (© Wolfgang Rattay/Reuters/Corbis)



of policy options for further study and consideration, such as the relative advantages of regulation and information disclosure for ensuring that financial markets operate properly and limit the risk of another economic collapse like the one that occurred in 2008 and 2009. Chapter 5 introduces some useful ways to lay out a range of policy alternatives.

Constructing policy alternatives is perhaps the most important stage in the policy analysis process. If analysts and policymakers cannot think of creative ways of solving problems, conventional approaches that may no longer be appropriate will continue to be used. Early in the process, therefore, analysts are called upon to think imaginatively and critically about how the problem might be addressed, both within government and outside it. One approach that has gained increasing acceptance is privatization, the transfer of public services from government to the private sector. Such private sector solutions, recommended by many policy analysts and organizations, and sometimes endorsed by the government, are said to be more appealing, and perhaps more effective, than reliance on a government agency. Some communities have even turned over management of their public schools to private companies. Chapter 5 also suggests some fruitful ways for students of public policy to think creatively about generating policy options.

## Choose the Evaluative Criteria

When the policy alternatives have been identified, the analysis shifts to assessing their potential. This task calls for deciding on suitable evaluation criteria. As chapter 1 discussed, this text focuses on effectiveness or the likely success of proposals in solving the problem at hand, the economic costs and efficiency of proposals, and the implications for social equity. There are, however, many other appropriate criteria, such as political, administrative, and technical feasibility; environmental impacts; ethical considerations; and any number of political values, such as personal freedom, against which to assess policy proposals. These are further explored in chapter 6 and summarized in Figure 6-1, on page 175.

No matter how long a list of potential evaluative criteria analysts might develop, some criteria will be more appropriate for a given problem than others. For example, for years the United States has been considering and funding the development of a missile defense system for protection against a ballistic missile attack from a so-called rogue nation like North Korea or Iran. On what basis should analysts evaluate the proposal, particularly in relation to other national security needs? One criterion would have to be technical feasibility. Can the missile defense system, which is based on highly complex computer software and state-of-the-art technology, do what it is supposed to do? Another would be the costs. The Pentagon spent more than \$55 billion on the system between 1983 and 1999, and some \$100 billion over four decades, with relatively few positive results.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the cost of a fully deployed system depends on how extensive a shield the government decides to construct. Estimates by the Congressional Budget Office in 2000 put the cost at between \$30 and \$60 billion through 2010,

but the ultimate cost could easily be much higher.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, some estimates put the total cost by the year 2025 at well over \$200 billion. Is this outlay of taxpayer money reasonable in light of the gains to the nation's defense and the risk that the technology might not work as planned? Do new concerns over the nation's deficits and rising debt make a difference in how we appraise the value of such a program? How would an analyst go about determining the answer?<sup>12</sup>

Plenty of information is available about the missile defense system, but a good deal of it is contradictory, and analysts disagree heatedly about the core issues, such as technical feasibility. Any assessment of the desirability of creating and funding a system as technically complex as missile defense would be a demanding undertaking. Nevertheless, policymakers and analysts need to ask the questions and try to find answers.

For some policy actions—for example, whether and how to regulate or control gun ownership, or whether to permit concealed weapons to be carried in public places—the evaluative criteria would likely include political values. Personal rights will be weighed against other needs, such as protecting the public's safety and well-being. As this example indicates, conflicts may arise among criteria. The war on terrorism that began after the September 11 attacks raises similar questions: On what basis should policy analysts, citizens, and policy-

makers judge the suitability of policy options, such as military action against terrorist bases or economic development assistance to poor countries? Or the short-term national security implications of destroying terrorist operations versus the longer-term need to deal with the root causes of terrorism?

In some policy disputes, much of the battle between proponents and opponents of government action is over which criteria to use as well as which conclusions to draw. In 2010 and 2011, energy companies, environmentalists, and state governments in Louisiana, Nebraska, and Texas, among other states, invoked numerous competing criteria to evaluate proposals to drill for oil and natural gas in offshore areas, and to decide whether to permit construction of the Keystone XL pipeline that was proposed for bringing tar sands oil from Alberta, Canada, to refineries in Texas. These included economic costs, national security concerns (the oil would be from Canada rather than the Middle East),



**Choice of policy actions.** Among policy alternatives considered by states in recent years has been expansion of citizen rights to own and carry weapons. Some states, such as Wisconsin, adopted new policies to permit gun owners to apply for a license to carry concealed weapons in public except where prohibited by government agencies or businesses. The state was deluged with tens of thousands of requests for such licenses in the first few months after approval of the policy. The photo of Bob Moates Sport Shop, a gun retailer in Midlothian, Virginia, shows a store manager helping a customer, Paul Pierucki, choose a semiautomatic pistol for a home defense gun. (Ricky Carioti/The Washington Post via Getty Images)

environmental threats (including climate change from additional use of this kind of oil), and technical feasibility (e.g., of building a pipeline with very low risks of leaking oil in sensitive areas). The various sides in these conflicts also reached different conclusions as each of these criteria was considered. As this example shows, policymakers, analysts, and lobbyists of one stripe or another bring their ideological biases to these debates, such as a conviction by conservatives and many businesses that government regulation should be minimal and that economic growth is the primary national goal to be sought. Those beliefs tend to frame their selection of evaluative criteria and therefore their assessment of the problem and the solutions they are willing to consider.

## Assess the Alternatives

With evaluative criteria at hand and a collection of possible courses of action to take, analysis turns to assessing alternatives. That is, the analysts ask which of the several alternatives that might be considered seriously is most likely to produce the outcome sought—whether it is to reduce the crime rate, improve the plight of the homeless, raise educational quality, reform the health care system, or rebuild the nation's infrastructure of highways and bridges. This exercise involves making judgments about how well each policy option fits in relation to the most relevant criteria. The analysts might rank the options in terms of overall desirability or consider them in terms of each criterion, such as effectiveness, economic cost, and equity.

Some authors refer to this stage of the process as projecting the outcomes or assessing impacts (Patton, Sawicki, and Clark 2013; Starling 1988). A number of different methods or tools are used to do this, and they are discussed at length in chapter 6. They range from cost-benefit analysis to ethical analysis. Given their frequent use in policy studies and debates today, it is important even for the beginning student of public policy to understand these methods and their strengths and limitations.

Analysts have many ways to present the alternatives so that policymakers and other interested parties can understand the analysis and the choices they face. For example, if three policy options are offered for consideration, the analyst might present each in terms of its likely effectiveness, economic efficiency, and equity. Trade-offs are inevitable in this kind of decision making. Only rarely does a given policy option rank highest on all of the evaluative criteria. Analysts therefore attach weight to each criterion. Should governments focus on providing access to health care for those without insurance, as President Obama and Congress tried to do with the Affordable Care Act of 2010? Or should the sharply rising costs of health care be more of a concern? What about the mandate in the 2010 law that forces individuals to buy health care insurance? Is that reasonable, and is it essential to achieve the other objectives of the health care reform law? As analysts consider more than a few conflicting bases for assessing policy options, the necessity for weighting criteria increases.

## Draw Conclusions

Most studies draw conclusions about what kind of policy action is desirable, and some strongly advocate a particular position on the issues. Many studies do not recommend a single policy action. Rather, the analysts summarize their findings and draw conclusions about the relative merits of competing policy proposals but leave the choice of policy action to policymakers and the public.

Whichever approach is taken, all analysis is of necessity partial and limited. That is, analysis cannot ever be complete in the sense of covering every conceivable question that might be raised. It also cannot be free of limitations, because every method or tool that might be used is subject to some constraints. Policy analysts need to develop a robust ability to deal with uncertainty, which comes with the territory.

The later chapters consider these challenges and how to deal with them. Students will become familiar with the range of methods employed in the practice of public policy and how to use the different approaches, and therefore will be better prepared to cope with the challenges. For example, the amount of information available might be so overwhelming that finding the desirable course of action seems impossible; or there may be so little that no one can draw firm conclusions. Analysts may be faced with conflicting studies and interpretations that start with varying definitions of the problem and evaluative criteria that render their conclusions and recommendations difficult to compare and judge.

At this stage, we urge students to learn to ask critical questions about the information they collect, especially regarding its validity. Where did the information come from, and how reliable is the source? Is there any way to double-check the facts and their interpretation? Do the information and analysis seem on their face to be believable? Are there any signs of bias that might affect the conclusions that the study offers? If two or more studies contradict one another, why is that the case? Is it because of conflicting political ideologies, differences in the preferred policy actions, or disagreement in the way the problem is defined? Are the authors too selective in deciding what information should be presented and what can be left out? By gathering information from multiple sources and comparing different interpretations, students might find it easier to determine which of the studies is the most credible. Chapter 1 touched briefly on the need to develop these critical skills in appraising public policy information and studies, and the point is stressed throughout the book.

The best policy studies are those that are also sensitive to political reality. Their authors have made a special effort to understand the information needs of decision makers and the public, whether at the local, state, or national level. A common complaint within policy studies is that much analysis goes unread and unused either because it does not address the questions that decision makers think are important or because it is not communicated effectively to them so they can consider it. Analysis that is designed from the start to address these kinds of questions is far more likely to have an impact on the policy process (Bardach 2012; Lindblom and Cohen 1979; C. Weiss 1978).



## Types of Policy Analysis

No matter what kind of public problem needs a solution, from airline safety and urban transportation to persistent poverty, there is usually no shortage of policy studies that might apply. Some come from government offices themselves, such as the Government Accountability Office and the Congressional Research Service, or from executive agencies and departments such as the Food and Drug Administration, the Department of Transportation, and the Department of Defense. Policy analysis is becoming common at the state level (Hird 2005) and globally, both within government agencies and in the private and nonprofit sectors. A great number of studies, however, come from interest groups and independent policy research institutes or think tanks, many of which advocate specific political agendas (Rich 2004).

The abundance of policy studies reflects not only the dramatic rise in the number of think tanks since the 1970s but also the even more striking increase in the number of interest groups that seek to shape public opinion on the issues and affect the policy process. This shift in the political environment is most evident at the national level, where policy researchers and interest groups pay rapt attention to the debates in Congress and the activities of administrative agencies. Even at state and local levels of government, particularly in the larger states and cities, policy studies and advocacy are common, especially as national groups such as the conservative American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) seek to influence policymaking in the states.

Scholars have noted the rise and influence of think tanks in particular, given their visibility in contemporary policymaking (McGann and Sabatini 2011; Rich 2004). Carol Weiss's study of these organizations attributes their dramatic growth and popularity within the United States to several trends and needs. First, government policymakers and the public increasingly need to understand and cope with complex problems. Second, policymakers find it useful in a time of political cynicism to demonstrate the reasonableness and rationality of their positions and actions, and policy analysis symbolizes an acceptable, or proper, procedure for decision making. Third, policy officials value independent research and analysis as supplements to the knowledge and skills within government and see the analyses as helping to persuade skeptical politicians and citizens. Fourth, certain interests who believe they are underrepresented in government circles seek to make their views known and promote their causes (C. Weiss 1992).

The leading think tanks, such as the Brookings Institution, the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, the Urban Institute, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and the Heritage Foundation, are well endowed financially and can afford large professional staffs. Many receive significant and continuing support from foundations and industry or from government agencies for whom they conduct research under contract.<sup>13</sup> These research institutes are therefore generally well equipped to distribute their analyses throughout government, the Washington policy community, academia, and major media outlets nationwide (Ricci 1993; C. Weiss 1992). At the end of the chapter is a list

# Steps to Analysis

## Think Tank Positions on Policy Issues

All think tanks conduct analysis and advocate positions on public policy issues, but some of these groups are committed to political or ideological standpoints that affect their analyses and recommendations. Gun control is one issue that think tanks of varying political persuasions have studied over the past several decades. The shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, in December 2012 once again raised a number of issues related to use of firearms. These included the possible expansion of background checks required for those seeking to purchase a firearm, a size of the ammunition clips to be available, a ban on assault-style weapons, and additional restrictions on gun purchases by those with diagnosed mental illness.

President Obama proposed a number of changes to federal gun control laws after the shooting, but Congress ultimately enacted no changes in the laws. That decision reflected in part the opposing positions taken by Washington interest groups and think tanks, as well as a somewhat divided public. The following summaries come from two think tanks that represent distinctive positions on the ideological spectrum: the conservative Heritage Foundation and the liberal Center for American Progress.

### What Does the Heritage Foundation Say about Gun Control?

All Americans, from whatever walks of life and of whatever political or philosophical convictions, abhor the death of innocent human beings and had a visceral reaction of shock and pain to the killing of 20 schoolchildren and six staff members in Newtown, Connecticut, in December 2012.

In responding to this attack, Americans must consider with great reflection and care how best to proceed, in a manner consistent with our laws and our traditions, to protect innocent lives.

*First*, we must identify the specific problems to be addressed involving school safety,

mental illness, the cultural climate, and the misuse of firearms.

*Second*, we must analyze potential solutions to the specific problems identified, examining the facts and taking into account the costs and benefits of the potential solutions to ensure that sound judgment governs the emotions inescapably attached to the subject.

*Finally*, Americans must implement appropriate solutions in a manner that is consistent with the Constitution, including the Second Amendment guarantee of the right to keep and bear arms, the traditional role of the states in our federal system, and the central significance of family.

*Source:* John Malcolm and Jennifer A. Marshall, "The Newtown Tragedy: Complex Causes Require Thoughtful Analysis and Responses," January 17, 2013, available at [www.heritage.org/research/reports/2013/01/the-newtown-tragedy-complex-causes-require-thoughtful-analysis-and-responses](http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2013/01/the-newtown-tragedy-complex-causes-require-thoughtful-analysis-and-responses).

### What Does the Center for American Progress Say about Gun Control?

The tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, on December 14, 2012, reignited the debate on whether to strengthen federal and state gun laws. . . . Under current federal law, vendors in the business of selling guns must get a license, conduct background checks, and keep records. But unlicensed "private" sellers—persons who maintain they sell only occasionally at gun shows, online, or anywhere else—are able to sell guns with no questions asked. . . .

As a policy matter, most research suggests that making it more difficult for dangerous people to acquire guns will have a significant impact in reducing the more than 30,000 gun deaths that happen every year in America. As a political matter, polling conducted before and after Newtown show[s] that 80 percent to 90 percent of Americans support expanding background checks, including most gun owners. . . .

All potentially dangerous individuals need to be identified as such and prohibited from gun ownership. Many such people are already covered by the federal law—including felons, fugitives, some domestic abusers, and the dangerously mentally ill—but there are additional categories of people who should also be barred from possessing guns, such as violent misdemeanants, convicted misdemeanor stalkers, and certain domestic abusers who are not covered by the current law.

Background Checks, December 13, 2013, available at [www.americanprogress.org/issues/guns-crime/report/2013/12/13/80795/the-gun-debate-1-year-after-newtown/](http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/guns-crime/report/2013/12/13/80795/the-gun-debate-1-year-after-newtown/).

- What conclusions can you draw about how these two policy research organizations evaluate gun control?
- What are the similarities and differences in their positions?

*Source:* Arkadi Gerney and Chelsea Parsons, "The Gun Debate 1 Year After Newtown: Assessing Six Key Claims About Gun

of websites for think tanks and for other sources of policy studies. See the box "Steps to Analysis: Think Tank Positions on Policy Issues" for a comparison of the findings of two prominent think tanks, the conservative Heritage Foundation and the liberal Center for American Progress, on gun control.

One way to compare think tanks is to understand the kinds of policy studies or policy analyses available today, a matter addressed briefly in chapter 1. Policy analyses fall into three broad categories: scientific, professional, and political. All serve valid purposes, but they have varying goals and objectives and use different methods. Figure 4-2 summarizes the distinctions among the three perspectives.

## Scientific Approaches

Some individuals, especially academics, study public policy for scientific purposes—that is, to build understanding of public problems and the policymaking process. They seek "truth" through scientific methods, regardless of whether the knowledge is relevant or useful in some immediate way. For example, social science studies in the scientific category typically are not intended to influence public policy directly. Their purpose is, as one author put it, "to deepen, broaden, and extend the policy-maker's capacity for judgment—not to provide him with answers" (Millikan 1959, 167). On a substantive issue such as climate change, natural and social scientists may be interested mainly in clarifying what we know about climate change, its causes, and its probable effects on the environment, the economy, and people's well-being, not in recommending policy action.

## Professional Approaches

As we have seen in this chapter, others study public policy for professional reasons, such as conducting policy analyses for government agencies, think tanks,

or interest groups. Many policy analysts, both in and out of government, are committed to producing the best analysis possible, and they adhere to strong professional norms for economic analysis, modeling of complex situations, forecasting future trends, and program evaluation. The comparison of the Brookings Institution and the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) in the box “Working with Sources: Comparing Think Tanks” on page 130 nicely illustrates the kinds of topics addressed by such analysts and how they express their purpose. Even though Brookings and AEI are usually described as left and right of center, respectively, both can be categorized as engaging in professional analysis.

## Political Approaches

Some analysts may be as rigorous in the methods they use as the professionals, but they are also committed to specific policy values and goals and sometimes to ideological and partisan agendas. As one would expect, they try to emphasize the studies and findings that help to advance those values and goals. This kind of policy study can be described as political, rather than professional or scientific. Analysts who work for interest groups or activist organizations, such as the National Organization for Women, Planned Parenthood, ALEC noted earlier, or the National Rifle Association, are especially likely to have this orientation. So too are those who work for political parties and ideological groups, such as Americans for Democratic Action, the American Civil Liberties Union, or the American Conservative Union. The two think tanks compared in the “Steps to Analysis” box on pages 126–127, the Heritage Foundation and the Center for American Progress, fit into this category of political policy analysis because of their strong commitments to conservative and liberal policies, respectively.

## What Kind of Analysis Is Needed?

No matter what policy area is involved, there is never a single correct way to conduct a policy study or one set of methods or tools to use. The next two chapters have more to say about appropriate methods and tools, but here it is worth emphasizing that regardless of whether the policy research falls into the scientific, professional, or political category, analysts face important choices about the kind of assessment needed for a given study and what approaches to use.

## Deal with Root Causes or Make Pragmatic Adjustments?

One of the basic questions that all analysts must answer is whether they should focus on the root causes of public problems or examine policy actions that might ameliorate a pressing problem but do nothing about its underlying causes.

Figure 4-2 Orientations to Policy Analysis

| TYPE OF ANALYSIS                                                                                      | OBJECTIVES                                                           | APPROACHES                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | LIMITATIONS                                                                                                                                                                                   | EXAMPLES                                                                                                                          |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  <b>Scientific</b>   | Search for "truth" and build theory about policy actions and effects | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use the scientific method to test hypotheses and theories</li> <li>• Aim for objective and rigorous analysis;</li> <li>• Policy relevance less important than advancing knowledge</li> </ul>                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May be too theoretical and not adequately address information needs of decision makers</li> </ul>                                                    | Academic social scientists and natural scientists, National Academy of Sciences, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change        |
|  <b>Professional</b> | Analyze policy alternatives for solving public problems              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Synthesize research and theory to understand consequences of policy alternatives</li> <li>• Evaluate current programs and their effects; aim for objectivity, but with goal of practical value in policy debate</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research and analysis may be too narrow due to time and resource constraints</li> <li>• May neglect fundamental causes of public problems</li> </ul> | Brookings Institution, Urban Institute, American Enterprise Institute, Government Accountability Office                           |
|  <b>Political</b>   | Advocate and support preferred policies                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use legal, economic, and political arguments consistent with value positions</li> <li>• Aim to influence policy debate to realize organizational goals and values</li> </ul>                                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often ideological or partisan and may not be credible</li> <li>• May lack analytic depth</li> <li>• Level of objectivity and rigor varies</li> </ul> | Sierra Club, AFL-CIO, Chamber of Commerce, National Rifle Association, Heritage Foundation, American Legislative Exchange Council |

Sources: Drawn in part from Peter House, *The Art of Public Policy Analysis* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: SAGE Publications, 1982); and David L. Weimer and Aidan R. Vining, *Policy Analysis: Concepts and Practice*, 5th ed. (New York: Pearson, 2011).

Political scientist James Q. Wilson argued for the latter view in his influential book *Thinking about Crime* (1977, 55–59). The “ultimate causes cannot be the object of policy efforts,” he said, because they cannot be changed. As he explained, criminologists, for example, know that men commit more crimes than women, and younger men more than older ones. It is a scientifically correct observation, Wilson said, but not very useful for policymakers concerned about reducing the crime rate. Why not? The answer is that society can do nothing to



# Working with Sources

## Comparing Think Tanks

Policy research institutes, or think tanks, differ in many ways. Some are large and cover many policy issues, while others are small and highly specialized. Some aim for professional analysis of the issues, and others promote a policy or ideological agenda. Here, we highlight two prominent Washington think tanks that are well regarded for their analyses of policy issues. They also reflect different political philosophies: the Brookings Institution is usually characterized as slightly left of center, and the American Enterprise Institute as right of center.

As you read the think tanks' descriptions below, pay attention to specific language in their mission statements that points to their political philosophy and to possible bias in their analyses.

- Reviewing the topics that each covers, and the way those topics are summarized, can you detect differences between the two organizations in what they think is important, and the kinds of policies they will likely favor?

### The Brookings Institution

Website: [www.brookings.edu](http://www.brookings.edu) (contains about twenty-five thousand separate items)

Founded: 1922

- Orientation and mission: Aims to "conduct high-quality, independent research" and based on that research to "provide innovative, practical recommendations" that advance its chief goals: to strengthen American democracy, to "foster the economic and social welfare and opportunity of all Americans," and to "secure a more open, safe, prosperous, and cooperative international system." It maintains that its research agenda and recommendations "are rooted in open-minded inquiry" and that its scholars "represent diverse points of view." Its more than three hundred "leading experts in government and academia" provide "the highest quality research,

policy recommendations, and analysis on a full range of public policy issues."

Sources of funding: Financed largely by an endowment and through support of philanthropic foundations, corporations, and private individuals.

Selected research programs:

*Economics:* "Brookings experts analyze the full array of domestic and global economic issues, in order to provide better guidance to policymakers worldwide."

*International Affairs:* "Brookings experts are at the forefront of examining the dynamics of world affairs and the new approaches required in a multipolar world."

*Global Development:* "Brookings scholars examine the full range of issues related to global development, from aid effectiveness to foreign assistance reform and governance and anti-corruption to fragile and conflict-affected states."

*U.S. Government:* Scholars "examine how the government's many agencies and organizations function and interact, the role the U.S. government plays in citizens' lives, and offer recommendations on increasing government efficiency."

*Metropolitan Areas:* "Brookings experts examine how metropolitan areas are engaging in the world markets to create more jobs, attract global talent and investment, and spur long-term, sustainable economic growth."

### The American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research

Website: [www.aei.org](http://www.aei.org) (large collection of studies and reports)

Founded: 1943

Orientation and mission: Says that AEI "prides itself on producing leading research in several key policy

areas that weave a tapestry of the organization's core beliefs: respect and support for the power of free enterprise, a strong defense centered on smart international relations, and opportunity for all to achieve the American dream."

**Sources of funding:** Supported primarily by grants and contributions from foundations, corporations, and individuals.

**Topics covered:**

**Energy and the Environment:** Covers both conventional and alternative energy resources, climate change, natural resources and endangered species, and contaminants (air, water, toxic chemicals, use of pesticides, agricultural policy).

**Economics:** Covers fiscal policy, monetary policy, financial services, retirement, and the international economy.

**Foreign and Defense Policies:** Research focuses on regional conflicts around the world, defense strategies and spending,

responses to global terrorism, global economic development and international trade, and international organizations and their activities.

**Education:** Focuses on issues related to K-12 education (spending on education, teacher quality and compensation, educational quality, school reform, federal education policies such as No Child Left Behind), higher education (rising costs, student loan programs), and the role of private enterprise and for-profit institutions in education.

**Health:** Includes studies of health care reform, health spending trends and solutions, access to health care, reform of entitlement programs such as Medicare and Medicaid, medical technology, and global health issues.

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**Sources:** Taken from the websites for Brookings and AEI. The statements are summaries of what each presents as its mission and current (2014) areas of research.

change the facts. So rather than address the root causes of crime, he suggested that policymakers concentrate on what governments can do to reduce the crime rate, or deal with what some call the proximate causes, or immediate causes, of the problem:

What is the condition one wants to bring into being, what measure do we have that will tell us when that condition exists, and what policy tools does a government (in our case, a democratic and libertarian government) possess that might, when applied, produce at reasonable cost a desired alteration in the present condition or progress toward the desired condition? (59)

In contrast, the distinguished scholar Charles E. Lindblom (1972, 1) wrote that the kind of policy analysis illustrated by Wilson's statement can become a "conservative and superficial kind of social science" that fails to ask fundamental questions about the social and economic structures of society. It considers, according to Lindblom, "only those ways of dealing with policy that are close cousins of existing practices," and therefore reinforces a prevailing tendency to maintain current policies and practices even when they may be unsuccessful in addressing the problem.

Analysts who favor Lindblom's perspective would examine the fundamental or root causes as well as the proximate causes of public problems. These analysts would not dismiss as fruitless idealism the possibility of taking action on the root causes of problems in some circumstances. For example, the George W. Bush White House announced in July 2005 that the president's energy bill, then nearing approval in Congress, would help to address "the root causes of high energy prices," chiefly by expanding domestic production of energy.<sup>14</sup> Critics of the controversial energy bill were just as quick to suggest that the root cause most in need of attention was the nation's increasing appetite for energy, and that intensive programs fostering energy conservation and efficient energy use were needed more than an increase in supply. Both sides were correct in emphasizing the need to address not just the high price of energy in 2005 but the underlying causes of the problem.

Even an incremental adjustment in policy that does not look seriously at root causes can make a big difference. Consider the imposition of a national minimum drinking age of twenty-one that was intended to combat the high percentage of automobile accidents attributable to alcohol, especially among younger drivers. In 1984, the federal government decided to deny a percentage of federal highway funds to states that refused to comply with the minimum drinking age requirement. An assessment of the policy's results in Wisconsin showed that it had "immediate and conclusive effects on the number of teenagers involved in alcohol-related crashes." Accident rates declined by 26 percent for eighteen-year-olds and 19 percent for nineteen- and twenty-year-olds (Figlio 1995, 563).

**High-profile measures.** Among the public policy alternatives that received much attention in 2009 and later years were a variety of economic stimulus measures intended to stabilize or jump-start the U.S. economy and create jobs for millions of Americans. This January 2013 photo shows contractors at work on the East Side Access project beneath midtown Manhattan, in New York. East Side Access is one of three major projects under New York that by 2019 will expand what is already the nation's largest mass-transit system. (AP Photo/Mary Altaffer)



## Comprehensive Analysis or Short-Term Policy Relevance?

Should analysts use the most comprehensive and rigorous approaches available to ensure the credibility of their results, even though doing so may take longer and cost more? Or should they aim for a less comprehensive and less rigorous study that might provide pertinent results faster and cheaper, even at some risk of the credibility of the results? The answer depends on the nature of the problem under consideration. The most complex, controversial, and costly policy choices might require the most comprehensive analysis, while more limited studies might suffice in other situations.

Academic scientists (social and natural) tend to favor rigorous, comprehensive studies. They place a high value on methodological precision because they believe that only demanding scientific investigations produce knowledge that inspires confidence. Sometimes, however, a study can take so long to complete that it has less impact on policy decisions than it might have had if the results were known earlier. For example, in the 1980s, the federal government sponsored a decadelong study of the causes and consequences of acid rain, at a cost of \$500 million. Although widely viewed as first-rate scientific research, the study also was faulted for failing to address some critical topics in time to influence decision makers. By most accounts, it had less influence than it should have had on the adoption of the Clean Air Act Amendments of 1990, the first national effort to deal seriously with acid rain (Russell 1993).

Professional policy analysts are often distinguished from social science researchers in part because of the analysts' interest in applied policy research. The professionals are far more likely to aim their research at policymakers and other policy actors as evident in the brief descriptions of Brookings and AEI provided in the "Working with Sources" box on pages 130–131.

Analysts associated with advocacy organizations in the "political" category shown in Figure 4-2 on page 129 are the most likely to emphasize short-term policy relevance. They also typically bring a strong commitment to the values embodied in the organization. It is not surprising that the studies by the Natural Resources Defense Council or the Sierra Club are unabashedly pro-environment, while those by the National Rifle Association or the Nuclear Energy Institute support gun ownership and nuclear power, respectively. Such policy advocacy does not necessarily mean that the studies are invalid; many are just as well done and valuable as those released by ostensibly more objective research institutes. One recent assessment of the liberal Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, for example, described its analyses as "academically rigorous" yet clearly "intended to influence lawmakers, aides, lobbyists, and journalists." The center had become, the author noted, "a powerful source of knowledge that helps out-of-power Democrats counter White House experts at the Office of Management and Budget."<sup>15</sup> Because of these kinds of political commitments, however, reports from advocacy organizations warrant a critical reading to detect any possible bias (Rich 2004).

## Consensual or Contentious Analysis?

Should analysts adhere closely to consensual norms and mainstream public values, or should they challenge them and propose new values or new ways of thinking about the problem under consideration? Political theorist Martin Rein (1976) argued for what he called a value-critical approach to policy research, urging analysts to be skeptical and distrust orthodoxy. He advocated approaches to policy study that made the analyst a “moral critic” who questions the value and belief assumptions behind policy research. He suggested three ways to engage in such research, with increasing degrees of critical inquiry: using consensual or mainstream approaches, using contentious or value-critical approaches, and—the most radical—using paradigm-challenging approaches.

Most contemporary policy analyses fall into the first category, a much smaller number into the second, and a negligible number into the third. Yet one could argue that many public policies today are very much in need of bold new thinking and radical challenges, much as Rein suggested in the mid 1970s. Consider the case of health care policy, the subject of chapter 8. With sharply rising costs and widespread dissatisfaction with access to and delivery of health care services today, some analysts and policymakers are beginning to suggest the need for radical change that goes beyond the Affordable Care Act of 2010. Much the same is true as analysts and decision makers around the country confront the various federal and state entitlement programs—from Social Security and Medicare to Medicaid and public employee pension systems—and seek innovative and sometimes radical solutions to deal with dire forecasts of rising costs.

## Reliance on Rational Analysis or Democratic Politics?

Policy analysts are trained to engage in the rational assessment of public problems and their solutions, and they often use economic analysis and other quantitative methods to find the most logical, efficient, and (they hope) effective ways to deal with public problems. But should analysts also try to foster democratic political processes, such as citizen involvement (deLeon 1997; Gormley 1987; Jenkins-Smith 1990)? As noted, some advocates of policy analysis believe that public problems and policy choices are so complex that technical scientific analysis is essential to reach a defensible decision. These views sometimes conflict with the expectation that the public and elected officials are ultimately responsible for choosing the policy direction for the nation. In short, as citizens, we value rigorous analysis, but we also expect democracy to prevail unless there is some good reason (for example, national security) to limit public involvement.

Consider the case of nuclear waste disposal in terms of this dilemma. Federal government analysts and most of those working for the nuclear industry and technical consulting companies have relied on complex risk assessment, a form of policy analysis dealing with threats to health and the environment. Nearly all of the studies concluded that risks from the radioactive waste to be housed in a disposal facility are minor and manageable, even over the thousands of years that the proposed



repository at Yucca Mountain, Nevada, was to contain the waste without significant leakage. Critics of the government's position, however, including the state of Nevada, countered that the scientific questions were far from settled and that the public's concerns about nuclear waste have not been satisfactorily addressed. They called for a decision-making process that allowed for greater citizen involvement and consultation, no matter how long it would take to build public trust (Dunlap, Kraft, and Rosa 1993; Wald 2002). Proponents of the waste site in turn assert that the critics merely reflect the common NIMBY (Not-in-My-Backyard) syndrome; they argue that local opposition to such waste repositories and other unwanted facilities is inevitable and cannot be the sole basis for a policy decision.

How can this kind of tension between reliance on technical analysis and democracy be resolved? Does the best solution lie in more analysis of these various risks and better management by the federal government and the states? Or should more weight be given to the public's fears and concerns, and should policymakers turn to a more open and democratic political process for making the necessary choices?

## Other Aspects of Policy Analysis

The differences among the fundamental types of policy research are evident in the great variety of academic journals and other professional outlets, many of which are available on the Internet. Some publications, for example the *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, emphasize the economic aspects of public policy, while others, such as the *Policy Studies Journal* and the *Review of Policy Research*, stress institutional and political factors. A few journals, such as *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, examine the ethical aspects of public policy, and nearly every law journal discusses the legal considerations of public policy. We urge students to browse the websites as well as the journals in their campus libraries to see what information is available on different topics. Most think tanks and advocacy organizations (and most government agencies) publish their studies, either in full or summarized, on their webpages as well as in journals, books, and reports.

The primary focus of this text is substantive policy analysis, which aims at answering questions such as what effects school voucher programs have on the quality of education, or whether regulation of cell phone use in cars reduces accident rates. But a great deal of work in the public policy field, especially by political scientists, focuses instead on describing how government and policymakers actually behave. Such work tries to address questions such as how Congress makes decisions on defense policy or agricultural subsidies, and how the White House influences agency regulatory decision making (J. Anderson 2015).

The perspectives and approaches of policy analysis apply to institutional issues as well as to substantive policy questions (Gormley 1987). This kind of analysis is especially helpful for examining proposals for institutional change. For example, institutional policy analysis might address a question such as what consequences could result if environmental protection policy were to be decentralized to the states (Rabe 2010)? Or, in light of controversies over the 2000 presidential

election, what kinds of ballots are most likely to minimize voter error and be counted accurately? Or what would be the likely consequences for the new state “voter ID” laws that went into effect in many states in 2012?

Ethical issues in the conduct and use of policy studies deal with honesty and scruples. For example, what ethical obligations do analysts have to design and conduct their studies in a certain manner? To what extent are they influenced by the source of funding, particularly when the funds come from interest groups with a stake in the outcome, such as the tobacco companies that want to learn about the impact of antismoking initiatives? Does the analyst work primarily for the client who pays for the study, or does the analyst have a duty to represent the larger public interest (Weimer and Vining 2011)? At a minimum, most analysts would agree that they are obliged to be open and transparent about their values and policy preferences, their funding sources, the methods they use, the data they collect, and any critical assumptions they make in the analysis of the data and the conclusions they reach (J. Bowman and Elliston 1988; Tong 1986). Chapter 6 goes further into the criteria, including ethical standards, that can be used to evaluate policy alternatives.

## Conclusions

The example at the beginning of the chapter on cell phone use and driving shows the challenge of making policy decisions when so many questions can be raised about the problem and the implications of taking action. Yet most students and practitioners of public policy are convinced that analysis can advance solutions by clarifying the problem, collecting information, and suggesting ways to make decisions. For that reason, this chapter surveys the practice of policy analysis and shows how it relates to the policymaking process and to politics in general. The chapter also emphasizes that there are many different types of analysis, and that the one that is used in a given case should reflect the particular challenges that are faced.

Today, analysis is ubiquitous, and it enters policy debate everywhere it occurs. Analysis is conducted in formal think tanks, interest groups, executive agencies, and legislative committees at all levels of government. Its thoroughness, objectivity, and purpose vary markedly, as one might expect. Students of public policy therefore need to be alert to the strengths and weaknesses of particular policy studies and prepared to question everything: the assumptions, the methods, and the conclusions. At the same time, however, students need to explore the many available sources of policy information and to think creatively about how to become engaged with contemporary policy problems.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Consider the case of using cell phones while driving a car, whether for talking or texting. Given the information provided in the chapter, would you favor restricting drivers' use of handheld cell phones? What about hands-free cell phones? What about restrictions on texting? How would you defend this policy choice?
2. Much of the policy analysis that is used in public debates today comes from interest groups that are strongly committed to one side of the issue or another, or from think tanks that espouse a particular ideology, on the left or the right. Do you think these policy commitments make the quality of the analysis suspect? Why or why not?
3. Review the two contrasting think tank positions on gun control presented in the "Steps to Analysis" box on pages 130–131. Which do you think is more persuasive? Why is that?
4. Should policy analysts try to deal with the fundamental causes of social problems such as crime, poverty, or homelessness, or aim instead for a more pragmatic and limited approach that may be more realistic and more politically acceptable? Why do you think so?

## KEYWORDS

assessing  
alternatives 123  
democratic political  
processes 134

incremental decision  
making 117  
problem 119  
proximate causes 131

rational-comprehensive  
approach 117  
rational decision making 117  
root causes 128

## SUGGESTED READINGS

James E. Anderson, *Public Policymaking*, 8th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2015). One of the best general treatments of the U.S. policymaking process.

Eugene Bardach, *A Practical Guide for Policy Analysis: The Eightfold Path to More Effective Problem Solving*, 4th ed. (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2012). A short but readable guide to the essentials of policy analysis, particularly for practitioners.

Carl V. Patton, David S. Sawicki, and Jennifer J. Clark, *Basic Methods of Policy Analysis and Planning*, 3rd ed. (New York: Pearson, 2013). One of

the leading texts in policy analysis, with a focus on methods for basic or quick analysis.

Deborah Stone, *Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making*, 3rd ed. (New York: Norton, 2012). An imaginative critique of conventional policymaking and policy analysis, with an emphasis on the role of politics and values in policymaking.

David L. Weimer and Aidan R. Vining, *Policy Analysis: Concepts and Practice*, 5th ed. (New York: Pearson, 2011). A widely used text in policy analysis that draws heavily from economics.

## SUGGESTED WEBSITES

[www.aei.org](http://www.aei.org). American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, a major policy research institute that tends to favor conservative positions.

[www.alec.org](http://www.alec.org). American Legislative Exchange Council, a national conservative research institute

that assists state legislators in advancing the principles of limited government and free markets.

[www.brookings.edu](http://www.brookings.edu). Brookings Institution, a major policy research organization that is usually described as somewhat left of center or liberal.

[www.cato.org](http://www.cato.org). Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.  
[www.cbpp.org](http://www.cbpp.org). Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a liberal policy research organization that focuses on fiscal policy and its effects on low- and moderate-income families and individuals.  
[www.cei.org](http://www.cei.org). Competitive Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank and advocacy organization.  
[www.csis.org](http://www.csis.org). Center for Strategic and International Studies, a think tank that focuses on global challenges and foreign and defense policy issues.  
[http://heartland.org](http://http://heartland.org). Heartland Institute, a conservative think tank.  
[www.heritage.org](http://www.heritage.org). Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank.

[www.hudson.org](http://www.hudson.org). Hudson Institute, a conservative think tank.  
[www.publicagenda.org](http://www.publicagenda.org). Nonpartisan briefings on policy and polling; news, legislation, and studies; and research sources.  
[www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org). RAND Corporation, the first organization to be called a think tank.  
[www.rff.org](http://www.rff.org). Resources for the Future, a think tank specializing in economic analysis of environmental and natural resource issues.  
[www.urban.org](http://www.urban.org). Urban Institute, a leading policy research center that deals with diverse urban issues such as housing, poverty, employment, health, crime, and the economy.

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## LEADING GENERAL JOURNALS OF PUBLIC POLICY

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*Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*

*Journal of Policy History*

*Journal of Public Policy*

*Policy Sciences*

*Policy Studies Journal*

*Review of Policy Research*

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## MAJOR PROFESSIONAL NEWS WEEKLIES WITH POLICY COVERAGE

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*CQ Weekly*

*National Journal*

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## NOTES

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1. Jessie McKinley and Matthew L. Wald, "California Bans Texting by Operators of Trains," *New York Times*, September 18, 2008.
2. The Pew survey can be found at [www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Cell-Phone-Distractions.aspx](http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Cell-Phone-Distractions.aspx). The second survey was done by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and is reported in Associated Press, "Gov't Survey of Drivers Finds About 2 in 10 Texting Behind the Wheel Despite State Bans," *Washington Post*, December 8, 2011.
3. See Gina Kolata, "Accidents Much More Likely When Drivers Hold a Phone," *New York Times*, February 13, 1997; and Matt Richtel, "In Study, Texting Lifts Crash Risk by Large Margin," *New York Times*, July 28, 2009. The estimated

- equivalence to driving under the influence of alcohol came from a study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* that analyzed some twenty-seven thousand cell phone calls. Simulation studies at the University of Utah confirm that the distraction from cell phone use is unique and is no different whether the phone is handheld or hands-free. See Tara Parker-Pope, "A Problem of the Brain, Not the Hands: Group Urges Phone Ban for Drivers," *New York Times*, January 13, 2009.
4. See Bill Vlasic, "Designing Dashboards with Fewer Distractions," *New York Times*, July 5, 2013.
  5. See Matt Richtel, "Federal Panel Urges Cell Phone Ban for Drivers," *New York Times*, December 13, 2011; and Joan Lowy, "Safety Council: Ban Cell Phones While Driving," Associated Press release,

- January 12, 2009. Data on state and local action on use of cell phones while driving can be found at the website for the safety council: [www.nsc.org](http://www.nsc.org).
6. See Damien Cave, "Note to Drivers: Lose the Phone (and Lipstick)," *New York Times*, October 1, 2005; and Katie Hafner and Jason George, "For Drivers, a Traffic Jam of Distractions," *New York Times*, March 3, 2005.
  7. Practical policy analysis is also sometimes referred to as "quick analysis" or "quickly applied basic methods," but the intention is to offer an analytical and objective assessment of the issues, even when policymakers must make decisions quickly. See Behn and Vaupel (1982) and Patton, Sawicki, and Clark (2013).
  8. The data are taken from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report "Aid to Poor Countries Slips Further as Governments Tighten Budgets," March 4, 2013, available at [www.oecd.org](http://www.oecd.org).
  9. Michael M. Weinstein, "The Aid Debate: Helping Hand, or Hardly Helping?" *New York Times*, May 26, 2002, Week in Review section. The many successful projects were highlighted in a 2002 tour of sub-Saharan Africa by Secretary of the Treasury Paul H. O'Neill and rock star Bono of U2, an active proponent of economic assistance to poor nations. Some of the economic studies on the consequences of aid programs can be found in Joseph Kahn and Tim Weiner, "World Leaders Rethinking Strategy on Aid to Poor," *New York Times*, March 18, 2002. The United Nations Millennium Development Goals include cutting the rate of extreme poverty in half by 2015 and calling on nations like the United States to dramatically increase foreign assistance to poor nations.
  10. Richard W. Stevenson, "Missile System Passes a Test as a Target Is Destroyed," *New York Times*, October 4, 1999. A review of the missile tests through early 2005 indicated that the government's ten tests resulted in five hits, but some of them were under "scripted conditions" that may not truly indicate the system's reliability. Despite much criticism, planning for the missile system continues. See David Stout, "Rocket Fails to Launch in Test Run," *New York Times*, February 15, 2005. For a fuller and more recent review of the missile system's challenges, see Eliot Marshall, "Missing the Mark," *Science* 342 (November 22, 2013): 926–929.
  11. James Dao, "Amid Applause, Caution Urged on Missile Defense," *New York Times*, July 16, 2001, A8; and James Kitfield, "The Ultimate Bomb Shelter," *National Journal*, July 8, 2000, 2212–2223.
  12. For a recent attempt by a critic of the system to lay out the issues and provide some answers, see Richard L. Garwin, "Holes in the Missile Shield," *Scientific American*, November 2004, 70–79. See also Christopher Drew, "Soaring Costs Jeopardize Missile Defense Systems," *New York Times*, March 18, 2009. Current data on the nation's missile defense system can be found at the website for the Defense Department's Missile Defense Agency: [www.mda.mil/](http://www.mda.mil/).
  13. For example, many organizations and think tanks on the right side of the political spectrum have received substantial funding from foundations supporting conservative causes and publications. Among the most notable are the John M. Olin Foundation, Scaife Family Foundation, Koch family foundations, Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, and Adolph Coors Foundation. For an assessment of how such conservative foundations have affected public policy debate, see the report by People for the American Way, "Buying a Movement," available at the organization's website: [www.pfaw.org](http://www.pfaw.org). For an objective overview of the role of conservative foundations, see Shawn Zeller, "Conservative Crusaders," *National Journal*, April 26, 2003, 1286–1291.
  14. The statement was made by White House spokesperson Scott McClellan and is reported in Carl Hulse, "As Energy and Highway Bills Near Completion, Congress Gives Itself a Hand," *New York Times*, July 29, 2005.
  15. See Andrew Taylor, "Democrats' Go-To Guy Gets the Facts Straight," *CQ Weekly*, March 7, 2005, 552–553.