

The administrative skills of the organizational leaders involved are another key factor, as are the attitudes of the lower-level bureaucrats toward the new policy. Political battles through, for example, the use of the media, word wars, definitional struggles, and court cases continue through this aspect of the policy process. Increasingly, the political nature of implementation has become a known reality. Whatever the wisdom of the goal of separating politics and administration, the dichotomy is dead.

Policy Evaluation, Adjustment, Termination

As the costs and benefits, the winners and losers, and the unintended and unforeseen consequences become clear, the policy creates new demands and supports. The policy process is not only nonlinear, it is continuous, and feedback is inevitable—with or without formal assessment. Especially if policy is implemented without strong legitimization, and even if it possesses it, one common reaction to policy is political backlash that calls for adjustment.

Theoretically, policy evaluation takes place as a means to discover the outcomes of the policy. (Did the policy bring about the intended results?) Realistically, as Charles O. Jones states, “policy evaluation tends to be program justification” (1984, p. 35). Just as there are no objective descriptions of a situation, nor are there purely objective descriptions of how well the policy is implemented or how well it met its objectives. Ideally, program evaluation also leads to policy change leading to program improvement. Though not the norm, policy evaluation does at times lead to policy termination.

(Lewis, 1997, pp. 2–3)

So far we have discussed the political essence of the policy process and examined it as a whole. We then examined its component parts and discovered four distinct but interrelated phases of that process: problem identification gaining agenda status, policy formulation and adoption (including funding), policy implementation, and policy evaluation/adjustment/termination. The mini-case that follows will revisit the issues of pluralism, group theory, and elitism as it illustrates the political, rather than rational, aspect of policy formation.

Mini-Case: The Pocatello Prison Siting Story— A Case of Politics

What is the best method of deciding where to put a new state prison? Many individuals, desiring rational policy, would argue that a new prison site should be located wherever the study of cost-benefit ratios suggests is most favorable. Perhaps proximity to the major population center of the state would be a major criterion. Or perhaps that would increase the cost of the land too much. A community with an available workforce trained in corrections and law enforcement would tip the scales of rationality. It might even be beneficial to build onto an existing prison rather than build an entirely new prison to reduce duplication of costs. For example, if you expanded an existing prison, you would still need only one warden.

However, the process of siting a prison is less a rational process than a political one. Siting is based on state and local politics, coalition building, political compromise, partisan concerns, and political skill. This is not necessarily to argue that the political path is worse, nor that rationality plays no role. This is the real-life story of the siting of a prison in Idaho. As you read on, notice how rarely rational analysis is the story and how often the story is about political power plays.

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