



AgEcon SEARCH
RESEARCH IN AGRICULTURAL & APPLIED ECONOMICS

The World's Largest Open Access Agricultural & Applied Economics Digital Library

This document is discoverable and free to researchers across the globe due to the work of AgEcon Search.

Help ensure our sustainability.

Give to AgEcon Search

AgEcon Search
<http://ageconsearch.umn.edu>
aesearch@umn.edu

*Papers downloaded from **AgEcon Search** may be used for non-commercial purposes and personal study only. No other use, including posting to another Internet site, is permitted without permission from the copyright owner (not AgEcon Search), or as allowed under the provisions of Fair Use, U.S. Copyright Act, Title 17 U.S.C.*

TO INFORM THEIR DISCRETION: POLICY EDUCATION AND DEMOCRATIC POLITICS

Michael Briand
The Kettering Foundation

I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion.

—Thomas Jefferson

Charles Anderson has written that,

although all theories of policy science recognize that public decision is a social process, the clear implication of their teaching seems to be that the best course of action can be ascertained within the mind of any single person who analyzes the situation logically and dispassionately (p. 34).

If this is so, it follows that, in principle, at least, there is no need for a social decision-making process. No need, in other words, for politics. And, indeed, this is precisely what many scholars in the policy sciences still appear to believe. According to Douglas Torgerson, for example, the impetus behind the popularity of rational choice theory in public policy is “a dream of the abolition of politics—of putting an end to the strife and confusion of human society in favor of an orderly administration of things based upon objective knowledge” (p. 34).

I want to suggest that politics not only cannot be abolished, it must be embraced if we are to have effective public policies that enjoy widespread public support. The implication for public policy education is that such education must teach politics as well as *policy*.

Trouble in River City

Let's consider a hypothetical community somewhere in the United States—call it “River City.” River City is Anytown, USA. In most respects, it is like numerous other American communities. Like other communities, River City finds itself confronted with hard-to-solve problems: violent crime, pollution, traffic congestion, homeless peo-

ple, overflowing landfills, declining educational performance in its schools, a faltering economy and growing unemployment, drug use, deteriorating roads, bridges and sewer systems. What is most disturbing is that these problems seems to defy solution. The community's leaders cannot agree on what to do about them. What they once agreed on and tried hasn't worked. Now they just seem stuck, unsure what to do next. As a result, people are not sure their community will ever begin making headway in dealing with these problems. Some people expect steady decline, others see crises looming. Everyone is worried.

To compound matters, the policymaking process in River City has grown more adversarial, polarized, intemperate and personalized. The confusion and paralysis in government has dismayed and angered the public. People are frustrated and impatient. They feel neglected—except at election time. Disgusted with the way they are treated, few bother to vote anymore. They staunchly resist higher taxes, in large part because they think their official leaders will misuse the extra revenue. They demand immediate action and tangible results, but do not take the time to study the issues and arrive at considered judgments. They are content to express their preferences and irritations through opinion polls, letters to the editor, radio call-in shows and appearances at public hearings, wherein they make sure public officials understand the new landfill will not be put within spitting distance of *their* backyard.

Now, not every community is River City, of course. Some seem to enjoy a fair degree of success in dealing with their problems. In those communities, it seems the quality of public decision making is high. There is no shortage of “experts” on policy matters who seem to know what to do and how to get it done. But, for the most part, the policy-making process in the United States today is divisive, adversarial and unproductive. As Lawrence Susskind and Jeffry Cruikshank observe in *Breaking the Impasse*,

in the United States, we are at an impasse Whenever [our] leaders try to set standards, allocate resources, or make policy . . . we can expect a fight When frustrated officials try even harder to impose their wills, more intense versions of the same disputes are likely to erupt. The “laws” of public policymaking tend to parallel the laws of physics: for every imposed action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.

It takes only a glance at the multitude of disputes raging today in our legislatures and courts, in the news media and in our communities to confirm Susskind and Cruikshank's observation. A moment's reflection reminds us just how contentious and unproductive our public decision-making process has become. Whatever the problem, we can be sure of one thing: if a dispute arises, the problem will go unsolved.

Why is it that, despite all our knowledge and all our resources, these pressing social problems so persistently defy solution? Well, maybe, in expecting to solve such problems, we expect too much. Maybe they do not have solutions. Even scientific problems do not necessarily have solutions. For example, we might never achieve the elusive goal of a controlled “cold” nuclear fusion reaction that would produce safe, limitless electrical power. If some problems simply cannot be solved—and there is nothing written in the stars that guarantees every one can be—it is only wise to guard against immodest expectations. On the other hand, as Thomas Edison demonstrated in his quest for a workable light bulb filament, we cannot be certain a problem will never be solved. So we have reason to keep trying.

But social problems differ from scientific and engineering problems in a way that makes them much tougher nuts to crack. The difference can be summed up in two words: human beings. The human world we create differs from the physical world in one crucial respect: its variability. Unlike physical phenomena, human beings do not behave according to invariable and universal laws.

Variability in human life stems, in turn, from three fundamental kinds of diversity: diversity of experience, diversity of individual constitution and diversity of response. No two persons—or communities or societies—are exactly alike. In large part, this individuality results from the unique set of circumstances to which each of us is exposed throughout his life. Whether it is an individual or a group, conditions vary from place to place and over time. Add to this variability the diversity of characteristics—dispositions, sensitivities, capacities, etc.—that constitute each person or group, and the result is individuals and communities that are, to a substantial degree, unique.

These two types of diversity mean that ascertaining “the facts” of a situation is anything but straightforward. Indeed, with respect to some of our most vexing social problems, there may be no such things as “the facts,” if by that phrase we mean statements about what exists or what is true that any well-informed, reasonable and careful-thinking person must accept. Often there are only “facts-as-interpreted”—beliefs that are influenced to their core by the interpreter’s experiences, perceptions, dispositions, needs, desires, interests, biases, pre-existing beliefs, priorities, and so forth.

But there is also another important source of diversity: the great variety and unstructured nature of things human beings consider good, valuable or desirable. The activities and ways of life humans value are almost as plentiful and various as people are. In any given situation, two or more of these “values” can come into conflict. When they do, it sometimes proves impossible to obtain or enjoy one without having to do with less of, or go without, one of the others. Which should I value more: clean air and my health or the conven-

ience and freedom that driving myself to work affords? I face a dilemma—a hard choice.

The fact that choices have to be made is not news to anyone in the field of policy studies, of course. Indeed, the notion of choice is at the center of the discipline. I want to suggest, however, that taking the idea of choice seriously entails a *social* decision-making process, one in which individual preferences are formed *through* the process rather than merely “fed into” it.

In the first place, I would argue, I cannot know what *I, as an individual*, want most, what is most valuable for *me*, until I am confronted with the necessity of choosing. If nothing causes me to reflect on my initial desire or preference, it is possible that I will end up realizing a lower level of satisfaction than I might otherwise. It might be that I would *really* prefer something else. But if I do not stop to weight the alternatives, if I go along unreflectively with my first inclination, I will not have a chance to find out. Acting unreflectively on a desire or preference I happen to have is *not*, I would argue, a genuine choice.

How, then, do I insure that I make such a choice? How do I expose myself to alternatives and their consequences so I will have the opportunity to assess the costs and benefits? The best way—perhaps the only way, given my own limited experience and information—is to consider what other people desire, and why. By listening to the arguments offered by others in support of their preferences, which conflict with mine, I at least gain the opportunity to make a genuine choice. This implies that I need to engage others in a process that provides for exchange of information, ideas, arguments, experiences, and so forth. Such a process is essentially *political*.

A second reason for claiming that choice requires social interaction is that what is true for me as an individual applies with even greater force to us collectively, as communities and as a society. Simply to mechanically add up—to aggregate—desires or preferences is not, from a collective point of view, to *choose*. This is especially so if those desires or preferences have not been reflected upon—that is, if they are not the product of genuine *individual* choices. But it is equally the case even if they *are*, because at the *collective* level of choice, there is no *collective* recognition of alternatives, no *collective* weighing of costs and benefits. Preference aggregation—as embodied, for example, in opinion polls, referenda and majoritarian legislative procedures—is not a mechanism for making a social decision so much as it is for taking a short cut to such a decision—or even avoiding it altogether. Again, I would argue, a genuine choice requires social interaction: the exchange of information, perspectives, arguments, and so forth. In the absence of *political* engagement, there is no choice, but only a poor substitute for it.

My third point is this: There are some kinds of value that cannot

be realized *except* through political exchange and interaction. The answers to nondistributional issues—whether there is or ought to be a right to privacy, for example—cannot be authoritatively supplied by the mere aggregation of preferences. In such cases we need to reason our way, together, to a judgment. The same goes for issues such as the form of decision-making itself. Should we permit a market to allocate resources, or should we do so on some other basis? The question calls for a genuine choice, a decision, based on our collective wisdom. What form of government should we have—presidential or parliamentary? Republican or plebiscitary? Again, the question calls for discussion, deliberation and decision. What sort of community shall we have? What is our vision for our future? What kinds of citizens do we wish to produce? What should our priorities be? Such questions bid us to *talk* with each other and *choose, together*—not just tote up our unexamined, unchallenged preferences.

I would argue that every social problem poses a hard choice. No matter what we do there will be undesirable consequences as well as desirable ones. There will be undesirable consequences because we value a variety of things, and these things often come into conflict. Which should we value more: clean air and our health or the convenience and freedom that driving our own cars affords? Which should we give priority: the air that would be polluted by burning our trash or the ground water that would be contaminated by burying it? Which should we save: the jobs a new factory would provide or the green belt that shields our homes from the harshness of asphalt and skyscrapers? This is what makes social problems so hard to solve. When good things come into conflict, it sometimes proves impossible to obtain or enjoy one without having to do with less of, or go without, one of the others.

In such situations, it is bad enough that I feel torn between equally appealing (or unappealing) alternatives. The choice is doubly tough because typically there is nowhere to turn for a definitive answer. There is no principle, no rule of thumb, no wise and benevolent authority that will tell me what is best to do. *Such choices have no theoretical right answer.* I have to use my judgment—what Jefferson called “discretion”—in effect, make up the rules as I go.

If it is impossible for *anyone*, when faced with a hard choice, to know for sure which of several good things he ought to give priority, think how tough it is for a community or society to reach a sound decision. In the absence of clear and compelling guidelines for establishing priorities, and given the variability of constitution and experience among individuals, it is not surprising that people differ considerably in their judgments about what good things ought to be favored in instances of conflict.

So conflict between the things people *value*—conflict everyone experiences within—frequently underlies differences between *persons*. True, people can end up in disputes for all sorts of reasons—person-

ality conflicts, injuries done by one to another, miscommunication, and so forth. But an important source of conflict between persons (and hence between groups of persons) is the universal experience of conflict between things people value, an experience that occurs within each of us. Each of us has a different view of the situations we confront. If in such situations we face a hard choice between valuable outcomes, we have to rely ultimately not on facts or reason, but on judgment. Conflict is inevitable because *no one* can *know* what is best to do—even for her or himself, let alone for everyone affected. Social problems are thus political problems—problems that in their very nature elicit diverse and, often, conflicting responses.

Let me emphasize that in calling social problems “political” I do not mean they necessarily have to be addressed by *government*. Nor do I mean that what we usually think of as “politics”—self-interested competition for advantage—causes these problems. And I do not mean there is no place for careful, thorough, rational analysis and prescription in politics. What I mean is that, because human responses to life are inherently diverse, the conflicts that flow naturally from this fact are not susceptible to any single correct, best, or “most-rational” solution that can be identified independently of a social decision-making process. A solution must be created, generated through the process itself. In other words, the solution, like the process, must be political.

Thus far I have been making a theoretical point. There is also, however, an intensely practical point that will be evident to anyone involved in policymaking. It is this: Actions that might be taken in response to problems that touch many or all of us inevitably will have consequences that affect some people adversely. Proposals to take action thus prompt opposition and lead to disputes. Anyone left out of the decision-making process can be expected to oppose the decision that is reached.

Recently I read a report in *Harper's* magazine that illustrates this point. A rural county in West Virginia was suffering from serious unemployment and underdevelopment. County officials considered and pursued several policies designed to bring jobs and money into their area, but without success. Eventually a proposal came to them to create a landfill for out-of-state solid waste. The county studied the proposal carefully and, only after thorough consideration of the costs and benefits, decided to go ahead with the project. At the last minute, just as the contract was about to be signed, a protest movement materialized. What previously was a policymaking question turned into a political battle, in the worst sense of that term. In the end, the project had to be abandoned and the county is now back to square one. I couldn't help thinking as I read this report that, if the decision-making process had been fully public, inclusive and deliberative from the beginning, the outcome might have been much more satisfactory for everyone.

The moral of this story is that, in such a situation, any solution that stands a chance of being both effective and supported widely must emerge from a decision-making process that enables everyone affected by the problem and the attempt to solve it to feel they have been able to influence the decision so it is acceptable to them, making it possible for them to go along with it. For reasons of both fairness and effectiveness, this decision-making process requires a collective judgment incorporating the perspectives and concerns of everyone and that draws on everyone's experience and abilities. In short, no one can take care of a community's business—no one can set a direction for the community—except the community itself. The form of decision making we require in order to take care of that business must itself be political. In short, we need *politics*.

But what kind of politics? Certainly not the sort we have. In 1991, a study conducted for the Kettering Foundation, entitled *Citizens and Politics*, reported that members of the public are frustrated by and angry about politics in our country today. Americans feel pushed out of the system in which they supposedly have the right and responsibility to govern themselves. These folks are repelled by ideological politics, by what William Schneider has called the "crusading style" of both liberal and conservative intellectuals and activists. They dislike the adversarial, quasi-religious brand of politics because it divides people instead of encouraging them to work together. They believe all Americans should be able to live together within a framework of mutual civility and respect for persons and their basic rights and liberties. Such a framework "works"—it is "practical." In contrast, politics as it is currently practiced appears "ideological"—it is divisive, adversarial and unproductive. It "does not work."

A Misleading Metaphor: The Community as a Market

When you stop and think about it, public life in our communities today looks a lot like the world of the private economy we are all familiar with. Although the (often nostalgic) ideal of community life remains one in which people treat each other as friends and neighbors—almost like members of an extended family—the hard fact is that we approach each other impersonally—even warily—keeping our fellow citizens at arms' length. This is revealing because this is the way we behave in commercial transactions. In the public life of our communities today, just as in an economic market, people are preoccupied with the competition in order to realize their particular interests and desires. They try to satisfy these by "buying" the goods and services they want from the "producer" of these goods and services—in this case, government. Citizens are "consumers" of what government can provide.

So public life gets reduced to the question of "who gets what, when and how." The "community" is nothing more than a loose col-

lection of individuals and groups, each with opinions, preferences and positions that have to be accommodated. The assumption is that there is no *common* or *public* good or interest apart from what emerges from a fair competition among *particular* interests. As in an economic market, the best result is the one that, roughly speaking, comes closest to satisfying every individual's and group's desires. The assumption that there are only particular desires and interests of individuals and groups in turn leads us to rely on decision-making procedures such as majority rule, which merely adds up people's preferences and bases policy on what the majority wants—modified, of course, by such concessions as those in the minority can compel it to make.

Hence the emphasis on the power to influence policymakers who have the authority to make decisions. If the community is like a market, then the people who occupy official positions end up having to act like brokers or agents. The demands we place on elected officials turn them into experts at “working the system.” Their “leadership” consists of using governmental authority to serve “the customers.” An effective “leader” is someone who can “deliver the goods.” A popular “leader” is someone who can respond to the wants of as many individuals and groups as possible without upsetting others. In reality, “leadership” amounts to a talent for selling people the line that their wishes will be fulfilled, even though (it goes without saying) everyone has to compromise and some may even have to lose.

Perhaps we do not get the sort of leadership—and leaders—we *really* need because we have forgotten something important about politics: in a democracy, government is supposed to be not only *for* the people, but *of* them and *by* them as well. This is not to suggest that we should, or can, do away with government. Quite the contrary. Government is indispensable. But it is to suggest that we ask ourselves whether government can operate effectively in the absence of a form of public life that, unlike the market version currently prevailing, places the responsibility for sound public decision making squarely on the shoulders of the citizens.

Community Problem-Solving and Self-Leadership

The market assumptions that have insinuated themselves into our efforts to address community problems prevent us from dealing with conflicts between the things we value. They keep us from reaching solutions to the problems we face collectively. Why? Because they obscure the fact that, in addition to particular interests, we have a shared interest in obtaining those public goods that only we, acting together, can produce. Because only citizens acting together can produce such goods, neutral decision-making principles, such as majority rule, do not suffice. Such rules can deal only mechanically with the competing interests and desires people have. They can ag-

gregate them—add them up—but they cannot integrate them—they cannot reconcile the things that are important to people without compelling someone to lose. Only *people* can integrate conflicting interests.

Public problem solving requires a form of political interaction that is less adversarial than the sort that characterizes the market version of politics. The hard work—and it is hard work—of making tough choices demands frank, open, realistic, but civil talk among citizens. Only talk of this sort will build an integrated public perspective out of fragmented partial perspectives, and, hence, create a basis for decisions that everyone can live with.

What conception of political “expertise” follows from this contention? Clearly, when public problems—racial tensions, drug abuse, poverty, crime, economic stagnation, environmental pollution, etc.—arise, simply having the authority or power to influence public decisions does not guarantee that solutions will be effective or widely supported. Problems such as these require citizens to work together—to do the hard work of making choices based on a shared perspective. This suggests that political expertise is the ability to get people to work together to solve public problems. Specifically, it is the ability to help members of the community

- define their problems from a shared, *public* perspective,
- recognize the costs and consequences of different courses of action,
- work through conflicting reactions to those consequences, and
- make the hard choices that every issue poses.

The purpose of political expertise, on this view, is to improve a community’s ability to understand the hard choices it must make and to work together toward a public judgment. An effective public leader will realize that the solution does not lie outside the public, but within it; what should be done becomes clear only as members of the community deliberate together. Effective political leaders do not assume the problem is already defined, but solicit a variety of perspectives and seek to integrate them into a new, genuine community perspective on the problem. They depersonalize politics and encourage people not to trust them—or each other—but only to work together to solve the problem everyone confronts.

Effective political leaders, then, need not so much facts, analyses, options and plans as the “know-how” required for public deliberation. They face up to hard choices instead of avoiding them and call the attention of their fellow citizens to the inescapability of those choices. They enable them to work through their own conflicting feelings about what should be done and help them weigh their priorities fairly against those of their fellows. They encourage everyone to begin thinking *together* about which consequences are accept-

able and which are not and about which courses of action everyone can live with. They do not seek authority for themselves, but try to disperse it among their fellow citizens. They work not for short-term gains and immediate results, but for the long-term goal of changing the way the community conducts its business.

The Challenge for Public Policy Education

Public problem solving is a practical activity. It is an “art,” and like other arts it rests on knowing *how* to do something. To learn the dispositions and skills—to acquire the “know-how”—needed to practice public problem-solving, people must act. The feeling of empowerment that enables people to take effective action comes only with experience in dealing with real problems in actual situations.

If community problem solving can be learned only by acting with other members of the community, then political *leaders* must begin—and end—as ordinary citizens. If would-be problem solvers do not learn the dispositions and skills that every citizen must acquire through experience, they will be in no position to assist others in developing the know-how that community problem-solving requires. A leader is nothing more, then, than a citizen who has developed this know-how well enough to foster, through examples, its development in his fellows.

Indeed, a political leader will never cease being a citizen. Having learned his civic dispositions and skills as a member of the public, he will understand that a person who is not immersed in the community cannot lead it. A community leader is one who helps the community find *its* voice and set *its* direction. Without being well integrated into that body of citizens, a would-be leader cannot know what the community thinks and what it wishes to do.

The challenge for public policy educators, I would submit, is to supplement their current teaching with a practical educational experience that teaches young Americans how to practice democratic politics. The study of public policy is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the development of effective political leadership and, hence, for the flowering of our public life. For such leadership to grow, the seed must be planted in fertile ground. The political ground in our communities and country is rocky and barren. It needs reviving and cultivating. Unless our young people are prepared to transform the political desert into an oasis in which the seed planted by policy studies can take root, there is little point in teaching them what, in theory, ought to grow there.

We Have Met Our Leaders and They Are Us

Is there reason to hope we can transform politics—render it more like the problem-solving described above and less like the quasi-

market activity that currently dominates our public world? The report *Citizens and Politics* suggests there is. Although Americans express irritation and dismay about public life, many remain actively involved in addressing the problems that concern them. When they have a real chance to have an effect on these problems, citizens take responsibility for addressing them.

This isn't surprising. As political analyst William Schneider has observed, most Americans are "pragmatists." They believe that "what works is right." They support policies—and policymakers—that produce results. But at some level they understand that, in the end, only citizens can make a democracy work. As a recent political cartoon put it, "We the People of the United States . . . are still in charge of making it work." The challenge is to "inform their discretion" by teaching them how to revive a healthy practice of participatory, deliberative, democratic politics.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, Charles W. "Political Philosophy, Practical Reason and Policy Analysis." *Confronting Values in Policy Analysis: The New Politics of Criteria*, ed. F. Fischer and J. Forester. Newbury Park CA: Sage, 1989.
- deTocqueville, Alexis. *Democracy in America*, ed. R.D. Heffner, Part I, Sec. 5, pp. 62-71. New York NY: Mentor, 1956.
- Jefferson, Thomas. Letter to William Charles Jarvis, 28 Sept. 1820.
- Kettering Foundation. *Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street America*. Dayton OH, 1991.
- Susskind, Lawrence and Jeffrey Cruikshank. *Breaking the Impasse: Consensual Approaches to Resolving Public Disputes*. New York NY: Basic Books, 1987.
- Torgerson, Douglas. "Between Knowledge and Politics: Three Faces of Policy Analysis." *Policy Sci.* 19(1986):33-59.