

Preface

The aim of this textbook is to introduce students and young researchers to the analysis of the decision-making process. More precisely it provides a conceptual framework that can be used both for understanding how public policy decisions are taken and for designing strategies able to overcome the obstacles that make policy change difficult.

As it will be explained in the following pages, it is only to be expected that in contemporary political systems policy innovation (i.e., the transformation of the ways in which collective problems are dealt with) is difficult. This is a common feature of modern democracies and no amount of tinkering with the institutional settings within which policy making takes place is bound to make it disappear.

Furthermore, the new and novel challenges that governments, at all levels, have to face if, on the one hand, make policy innovation all the more necessary, on the other hand add further obstacles to an already difficult enterprise.

This book is built on the premise that there is no simple solution to this problem. For instance, there is not a shred of evidence that a specific organizational or procedural arrangement is systematically better at making policy innovation possible. This is a field in which there are no universal truths to transmit to the students.

However, there is a vast body of literature that in the last few decades has investigated how policy is made and which factors play a role in explaining decisional success and decisional failure. The social and managerial sciences can therefore provide some guidance in the form of identifying said factors.

This book tries to go a step further. It contains a conceptual framework, i.e., the specification of the different variables explaining decisional outcomes. The advice to the policy innovator—the policy entrepreneur as it is known in the literature—is to pay attention to all these elements and to their combination in specific contexts. Only the careful analysis of the individual decision-making process can substantiate the judgment about the feasibility of the transformation at the same time giving useful inputs for building the most appropriate decisional strategies.

In other words, the possibility to introduce policy reforms with minimal strife depends strictly on the ability to correctly “read” the decisional situation. The “art and craft” of public policy analysis, as suggested by Aaron Wildavsky, one of the fathers of the discipline, is able to improve governance if it combines intellectual rigueur with an hands-on experience in treating collective problems. From this

point of view, a vast knowledge of substantive policy fields is useful if and only if it is coupled with a realistic theory of how public policies take shape. I hope that this book is able at least partly to contribute to increase the understanding of the ways in which the political systems process policy proposals, sometimes rejecting them and sometimes adopting more or less transformed versions of them.

It is my firm belief that decisional analysis, if correctly taught and learned, makes it possible to formulate reliable predictions about the feasibility of policy change and, more in general, improves policy making.

This implies a familiarity with the analytical tools as well as an ability to identify the correct methodologies. This is the reason why this book can be usefully supplemented by the additional texts that can be found on Springer Extra-Materials (<http://extras.springer.com/>). The first (Studying decisions) contains several examples of how it is possible to use decisional analysis in order to better understand policy making and political systems. This text includes also some guidelines for preparing decisional case studies and can be useful for the preparation of master or doctoral theses. The second text (Teaching decisional analysis) includes some suggestions on how to use the present textbook in graduate or postgraduate education and includes an example of a possible exercise in decisional analysis.



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