USING MULTIPLE CRITERIA
TO EVALUATE PUBLIC POLICIES
The Case of School Desegregation

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This article suggests a framework by which to organize information and evaluate policy alternatives. In this framework, equity, efficiency, effectiveness, and political feasibility are criteria for choosing policy alternatives. In addition, the framework includes strategies—the policy formulation and the compliance structure—for achieving these values. Among the three major types of school desegregation policy alternatives implemented since Brown v. Board of Education—freedom of choice, mandatory reassignment, and magnet-voluntary—the magnet-voluntary alternative appears to achieve the greatest equity, efficiency, and effectiveness because it relies primarily on market-like incentives and an incremental decision-making approach.

The analysis of school desegregation policy, like the analysis of other policy areas, has suffered from competing theories, paradigms, and evaluation criteria. Policy alternatives are discussed and evaluated by so many different and conflicting criteria that it is unclear what the basis of each analyst’s conclusions on the relative merits of different types of school desegregation plans. This article attempts to draw together criteria from the policy analysis literature to form a framework by which school desegregation policy, and other policies, can be evaluated in order to help clarify the, at times, heated debates over the choice of policy alternatives.

The public policy literature would seem to be an unpromising source of clarity and coherence for policymakers and policy analysts seeking guidance on criteria of choice. The field has produced a literature so diverse in focus and analytical tools that Bobrow and

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Dryzek (1987) call it a “a babel of tongues” (p. 5). Although these works can be roughly divided into two major categories—prescriptive analyses and descriptive predictive analyses—each of these categories can be further subdivided.

The prescriptive analyses seek to improve the policy-making process by rationalizing the selection of policy alternatives so that government policies and programs are best able to achieve their goals. This branch of policy analysis, also called the “policy sciences” has two streams: qualitative, theoretical pieces exemplified by Dror (1968), Lasswell (1950) and Lindblom (1959, 1979); and quantitative work largely dominated by welfare economics, and relying on such techniques as cost-benefit analysis, cost-effectiveness analysis, public choice models, decision analysis, and linear programming (see Stokey and Zeckhauser 1978 for an overview).

The descriptive predictive analyses, typically conducted by political scientists, attempt to make sense out of and to evaluate the policies and programs that have already been implemented. They can be divided into (1) attempts at classifying policies into different categories (i.e. distributive, redistributive, and regulatory as in Lowi 1964; Salisbury 1968; Uslaner 1985); (2) quantitative analyses of factors related to policy expenditures and other outputs across cities, school districts, states, and nations (as in Cndnde and McCrone 1969; Hofferbert 1966; Lewis-Beck 1977; Lineberry and Fowler 1967; Sharkansky and Hofferbert 1969; Rossell and Crain 1982; Rossell 1990a, 1990b); (3) qualitative case studies of one or more policy areas (as in Kirp 1982; Elkin and Cook 1985; Mantell 1985; Kelman 1981; Edmonds and Reilly 1985; Wilson 1984; Hochschild 1984; Rodgers 1986; Levitan 1985; Marmor 1983; Cochran et al. 1990; Heidenheimer, Hecho, and Adams 1990); (4) case studies of the implementation of public policies and analyses of the factors likely to lead to successful implementation (as in Pressman and Wildavsky 1973; Mazmanian and Sabatier 1989); (5) theories of the policy process that describe policy subsystems and institutional frameworks in universal terms that can be applied to different policy areas (as in Hofferbert 1977; Kingdon 1984, Kiser and Ostrom 1982; Sabatier 1991b); (6) theoretical works on the field itself (as in Bobrow and Dryzek 1987; Sabatier 1991a) and critical assessments of its important concepts (most recently, Stone 1988); and (7) a host of studies of the policy-making process that differ little from what used to be called political science or the study of politics except that they have the word “policy” in their title.

I would argue that there is, or should be, a common thread throughout these studies that distinguishes policy analysis from political analysis of the policy-making process. Policy analysis is interested in policy content above all else. The process is important, of course, but primarily because it helps us to understand the content of a policy and its success in achieving its goals. Political analysis, by contrast, is interested in the process and political behavior almost as an end in and of itself. Policy content is important only in so far as it helps us to understand the political process and behavior (see also Sabatier 1991a). Policy analysts, by contrast, view government in instrumental terms—its purpose is to improve the welfare of society, a view that is exemplified by the pioneering work of Lasswell (1950), who saw the goal of the “policy sciences,” as joining and integrating theory and practice for human benefit.

This proactive, instrumental view is exemplified by the prescriptive literature in the field, but is also an implicit underlying rationale for the descriptive predictive analyses and for the most common type of policy analysis in political science—the qualitative case studies of one or more policy areas, such as energy, the environment, social welfare, education, civil rights, health, crime, the economy, or defense. These case studies typically include an examination of the history of legislation in a policy area, a discussion of policy goals and political conflicts, and/or an assessment of the extent to which the policy achieved its goals, the factors contributing to it and an assessment of the likely success of other policy proposals. The case studies all too often appear to be atheoretical and to have no common thread (see also Sabatier 1991a).

On the other hand, the prescriptive side of policy analysis that began as an attempt to improve policy-making and provide guidance in evaluating policy alternatives has lost favor in recent years. Stone writes in 1988 that her dissatisfaction with the fields of public policy and policy analysis "stems from the academy's profound rejection of politics in favor of rational analysis" (p. vii). Bobrow and Dryzek (1987) review the mathematical side of policy analysis grounded in welfare economics and public choice theory and conclude it is of limited value because it does not fit well with political reality.
(1977) argues that the most important assistance that policy analysts can give policymakers is not technical, but political: designing policies and programs that in their basic conception and structure are able to withstand buffeting by a constantly shifting set of political and social pressures during the implementation phase. He calls this "scenario-writing."

Thus the mathematical side of policy analysis is often indicted as naive because it is apolitical, whereas the political science literature is often charged with lacking rigor because it is descriptive and atheoretical. It seems, however, that some aspects of each tradition might be combined in order to facilitate policy analysis. Many of the concepts used in welfare economics and cost-benefit analysis, stripped of their mathematical formulas, are useful criteria for organizing the information found in the case studies and for evaluating policy alternatives. When these are combined with some concepts from political science, they constitute a framework of criteria by which policy alternatives can be compared and evaluated before adoption or after.

The usefulness of this framework for political scientists depends on its being (1) qualitative rather than quantitative, and (2) simple enough so that data can be easily organized and policy alternatives ranked in a qualitative manner.

This framework is shown in Figure 1. The analysis is divided into the study of policy content and the study of policy formulation. These can be further classified into values to be achieved by a policy and strategies for achieving these values. The inclusion of values and strategies in one framework reflects the diversity of the public policy case study literature that may include an analysis of strategy or content or both.

Each case study of a policy area can be analyzed by organizing the information into these categories. Those that focus on the policy process and ignore the outcomes of that process would obviously use only the policy formulation part of the framework. Those studies that deal only with purely distributive policies would have no use for the compliance characteristics part of the framework. Those that deal only with policy alternatives and outcomes to the exclusion of the policy process would have no use for the policy formulation part of the framework. Studies that consider all aspects of a policy, at least to some degree, would use the entire framework.

Figure 1: A Framework of Criteria for Evaluating Public Policies

I have divided the study of policy content into the two following substantive criteria for the choice of policy alternatives: an overarching notion of the public interest that comes from the political science literature and the more specific criteria of equity, efficiency, and effectiveness from the welfare economics literature that are subsumed
under the notion of the public interest. These are the substantive values to be achieved by a policy. In addition, I include political feasibility from the political science literature as another criterion, not necessarily a part of the public interest, by which public policy alternatives can be evaluated. Political feasibility is primarily an instrumental criteria—that is a means of achieving other values, but because it is critical to the success of a public policy, it is often seen as one of the values to be sought and traded off against another.

The study of policy content includes the compliance characteristics of a policy alternative. I have envisioned this as continuum from a command-and-control model that involves more direct government regulation to a market incentives model that involves less direct government regulation. In a similar manner, the policy formulation process can be envisioned as a continuum from the rational comprehensive model to the incremental model. Although this is usually a descriptive endeavor, it can also be prescriptive. That is to say, one can recommend that a rational comprehensive process be adopted for a particular policy rather than determining post hoc that in fact this was the process that existed. Both the choice of compliance characteristics and the policy formulation characteristics are strategies for achieving the substantive values and thus the utility of one model over another depends on its ability to do this in any particular policy area. Although these models are often discussed as if one is always superior to another for all policies, it is quite possible that the recommendation for the adoption of a model will vary from one policy domain to another.

The purpose of this article is to illustrate how this framework might be used in one policy area, and to make explicit the concepts and models that already implicitly guide the analysis of public policy and the debates over the choice of policy alternatives. School desegregation policy is used to illustrate these concepts because it is the area of research of the author and its literature exemplifies the lack of coherence and structure in evaluating public policy. The discussion that follows begins with the criteria by which to choose among policy alternatives and then moves on to policy compliance characteristics and policy formulation characteristics. The nature of school desegregation policy is such that this is probably the causal order in this policy area. Although perhaps the most common assumption is that policy formulation determines policy content, it can also happen that the relationship is reciprocal or even that policy content determines the policy formulation process and compliance model. For example, if preliminary research or political ideology predisposes policymakers toward a particular policy alternative that requires a phased-in implementation and periodic revision of the policy as new information comes in, it might be said that policy content affects policy formulation rather than the other way around.

CRITERIA FOR CHOOING POLICY ALTERNATIVES

THE PUBLIC INTEREST

Although few political scientists believe that a common good exists that is well enough defined and agreed on to serve as a criterion for choosing policy alternatives (see Chorin 1974), it is difficult to see how one can do policy analysis without some conception of what is good for society. Analysis inevitably involves a clarification and ranking of values, and a conception of desirable public purpose. Indeed, without a notion of the public interest, goals could not be established. Why should we eliminate poverty, reduce pollution, or secure energy for future generations? Why tax workers in order to pay for the public education of all? It would be impossible to make critical judgments regarding the desirability of various policy alternatives without some conception of the public interest. Nor is the public interest simply the aggregation of preferences in society, because it seems clear that we neither know how to aggregate conflicting preferences based on imperfect information into a single measure of the public interest nor even that the public would be satisfied with what resulted.

In fact, the broad policy goals that are set by government do seem to reflect a conception (or some group’s conception) of the public interest that is broader than any individual or group’s self-interest. The legislation and regulations include such objectives as a clean environment, a healthy and well-educated population, a reduction in the inequality produced by differences in social origin, abundant and secure energy, and a “safety net” for the poor. The fact that the
legislation and regulations may also include concessions to powerful individuals and interest groups does not mean the public interest is not at least an implicit criterion in the formulating of legislation and regulations. To say that analysts and policymakers have some conception of the public interest when they make and evaluate policy, however, does not mean there is a uniform set of principles that guides them. Although liberal democratic thought—the notion that ethical action is guided by universal, impartial principles rather than personal or factional interests—is an important theme in the debate over how policy analysis should be conducted, there is still no one overarching set of principles. As Braybrooke and Lindblom (1970) noted two decades ago, a statement of “naive preferences” such as favoring greater equality does not take us very far as a guide to policy.

Despite the impossibility of creating an all-encompassing, operationalized definition of the public interest to serve as a standard for evaluating and formulating all public policy, it is still possible to see a notion of the public interest serving as a backdrop or foundation to a more detailed analysis with more specific criteria (see also Martin 1991). Policy analysts and policymakers must be able to give reasons for their decisions—reasons that can withstand public scrutiny and that justify their actions. Often this justification is the “public interest” or the “public good,” not only because that is considered fair by the polity, but also because many analysts and policymakers truly believe it.

Because of the vagueness of the concept, however, more specific criteria need to be developed by which policy alternatives can be ranked and evaluated in the public interest. These criteria—equity, efficiency, and effectiveness—are discussed below.

EQUITY

For most Americans and policymakers, equity is synonymous with social justice rather than equality. Thus equity means that similarly situated people should be treated equally. In the real world, where people are not similarly situated, equity claims often become claims for the redistribution of scarce resources. The losers in the marketplace make demands for the redistribution of rewards—both income and services—from the winners to themselves.

In the debate over what is a fair distribution of services and income, there are two competing camps. On the one side, differences among people in intelligence, skills, income, wealth, education, and occupational status are considered the norm and any attempt to change these differences must be carefully justified in terms of other social goals and values. On the other side, equality in the distribution of intelligence, skills, income, wealth, education, and occupational status is considered the norm, and deviations from equality must be just as carefully justified in terms of other social goals and values.

Legislation in the United States is usually a compromise between these two positions. Typically, policymakers measure how fairly a service is distributed among various target groups by considering how much of a needed service the individuals in each recipient group receive. Because the needs and abilities of individuals and groups will differ, equity is not necessarily interpreted as meaning that equal amounts of a good or service should be provided to each group or individual but rather that a fair amount should be provided.

EFFICIENCY

Efficiency is the ratio of inputs to outputs. Inputs are resources transformed through activities into policy outputs. Policies that achieve more of a desired goal at less cost are more efficient than those that achieve the same goal at greater cost or less of a goal at the same cost. It is by now a truism that bureaucracies, unlike private sector producers, not only have no reason to be efficient because they do not operate for profit, but there is no clear-cut production process for public goods as there is for private ones. For most public services and programs, the variety of goals associated with any given activity makes the attainment of efficiency much more complicated and problematic than in the private sector.

As a result of conflicting goals and different priorities for different interest groups, efficiency is typically achieved in government policies only in a limited way—that is, for specific programs rather than broad policy areas. Nevertheless, despite the difficulty of attaining it in government enterprises, efficiency is an important criterion in the public policy literature.
EFFECTIVENESS

Effectiveness—the extent to which a policy achieves its goals—is another criterion used in the evaluation of policy alternatives. In technical terms it is the ratio of actual output to planned output over time. It differs from efficiency in the sense that it looks at ultimate attainment whereas efficiency is concerned only with how much of a given outcome unit one achieves for a given input unit. Thus a policy might be very efficient in the sense that a dollar expenditure produces a dollar’s worth of output, but the total output might be quite small. A policymaker would usually prefer a policy that was less efficient in that it achieved 90 cents in output for every dollar expended, but a total output of $1 million to a more efficient policy that achieved $1.00 output for every dollar expended but had a total output of $1½ million. It is thus possible for a policy alternative to be highly efficient, but not very effective. The failure to distinguish effectiveness from efficiency is a shortcoming of several important works in the policy field written by political scientists (see for example, Bobrow and Dryzek 1987; Stone 1988).

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN EQUITY, EFFICIENCY, AND EFFECTIVENESS

The fact that equity, efficiency, and effectiveness are often in conflict means that policymakers must estimate the proper mix that will be consistent with the public interest. Public opinion or the simple aggregation of preferences might be an important indicator of what constitutes the proper mix except that American attitudes toward equity are so complex that it would be hard to imagine clear policy alternatives emerging from this. In the area of economic inequality, for example, our society accepts a large measure of inequality, even inherited inequality. Most Americans believe that differences of wealth and income generally result from differences in effort, skill, foresight, and enterprise and thus are legitimate (see Tobin 1970; Hochschild 1981; Kluegel 1985). But the willingness to accept inequality in general is tempered by a persistent and durable strain of what Tobin (1970) calls “specific egalitarianism.” This is the view that certain scarce goods, such as life, health, and citizenship, should be distributed more equally than the ability to pay for them. The legislation of the last century reflects to a large extent specific egalitarianism in its provision of specific services and goods for those who cannot afford them.

On the other hand, economists and classically trained policy analysts who place great value on equity believe that it should be attained with as little government intervention as possible. Tobin (1970) calls these individuals “general egalitarians.” They argue that specific interventions introduce inefficiencies and the more specific the intervention, the more serious the inefficiency. Problems of equity and social justice should be resolved at the most general level through taxation of income and wealth and the redistribution of revenues. Problems of efficiency, on the other hand, should be resolved by government policies that make markets work competitively. General egalitarians argue that it is not only inefficient for government to attempt to reduce economic equality by artificially reducing milk prices or minimum wages or apartment rents or subway fares and so on, but that this all too often subverts the very goal the policy was trying to achieve—that is, it is ineffective. Even in totalitarian societies, fixing the price of a good below what it would be in a free market reduces its supply.

Whereas specific egalitarians who observe people in substandard housing or in poor health instinctively want to give them those goods, general egalitarians want to give them more cash and let them decide how to spend it. They believe that if recipients do not buy housing or health care with the money, it is because they have a better use for it. The problem with the argument of the general egalitarians, of course, is that there are political limits on the amount of taxes that can be levied and their redistributive use. Although economists argue that a good or service is worth less to the needy than an equal amount of cash, legislators are nevertheless willing to redistribute considerably more goods to the poor than they are cash because they want to ensure that money will be spent on the goods whose lack offends our social conscience—food, basic shelter, and access to medical care—than on those goods whose lack does not. Therefore, although economists argue that giving cash is more efficient, it is not politically feasible, and policy analysts have had to settle for what general egalitarians feel is a suboptimal solution.
But even the provision of goods can be achieved in more or less direct ways. Government can provide the good itself—viewed by general egalitarians as the least efficient means of reducing inequality—or it can provide a voucher to purchase the good, the latter being considered less efficient than cash, but more efficient than direct government provision of the good (see, for example, Tobin 1970).

POLITICAL FEASIBILITY

Although not in the same category as equity, efficiency, and effectiveness because it is an instrumental, not substantive value, another criterion by which public policies should be evaluated is that of political feasibility. Elkin and Cook (1985), Mantell (1985), and Kelman (1981) have all pondered why it is that the market incentives approach in environmental policy (i.e., a tax on pollution) is not adopted by government when most analysts regard it as theoretically the most efficient means of reducing pollution. They conclude that at the present time this approach is not only technically difficult, but politically infeasible. Thus in every policy area some alternatives will be rejected, not because they are not in the public interest, that is, not on grounds of efficiency or effectiveness or even equity, but because the policies cannot obtain political support. On the other hand, it is possible to manipulate political support. Political feasibility may be viewed as a constraining or as a manipulable variable (see especially, Bardach 1977).

Peter May (1986) defines three kinds of assessments of political feasibility that might influence policy-making. The first includes judgments about the probability that a policy would be adopted and carried out without being unacceptably changed by lower-level bureaucrats. The second considers the political constraints inherent in a policy and how far they can be stretched. Knowing what features to include in policy proposals in order to build supportive coalitions or enhance legitimacy, thus reducing opposition, is obviously crucial to the success of any policy proposal.

A third kind of assessment of political feasibility is of the political price to be paid for a course of action. Because securing approval or implementing a policy proposal can involve concessions that diminish the policy advocate's political prestige or take attention away from other important political issues, policymakers must consider this before they associate themselves with a proposal. Thus a policy proposal may be feasible in the sense that it has sufficient probability of adoption, but the political costs or consequences may be so great as to justify modifications or to argue against the proposal. Clearly then, political feasibility is an important criterion in assessing policy alternatives. Indeed, the recognition and analysis of this may be one of the important contributions of political science to the field of policy analysis.

RANKING POLICY ALTERNATIVES ON EQUITY, EFFICIENCY, EFFECTIVENESS, AND POLITICAL FEASIBILITY

I use examples from my own research on school desegregation policy to illustrate how one might evaluate policy alternatives using these four criteria. The major policymakers in school desegregation are the courts, the federal and state governments, and local school districts. All but a handful of the mandatory reassignment plans implemented in the United States from 1954 to the present were court-ordered, as were all of the freedom-of-choice plans in the South and most of the comprehensive magnet-voluntary plans of the 1980s. The federal and state governments have been able to accomplish some desegregation through the withholding of general education federal assistance funds or the offering of desegregation assistance funds, but the amount pales by comparison to what the courts have accomplished. Local school districts, on their own initiative, in both the North and South rarely went beyond voluntary, freedom-of-choice plans that accomplished little in the way of actual desegregation. Thus, from 1954 to the present, the most powerful and arguably the most important policymaker in this field has been the courts.

The definition of success used in the analysis presented in this article is limited. It is the definition used by the courts since 1968 in Green v. County Board of Education of New Kent County (391 U.S. 430 [1968]). A successful desegregation plan is one that results in black and white children actually enrolling in the same schools—that is, interracial exposure. The courts have not concerned themselves with the other outcomes that interest social scientists, such as academic achievement, racial attitudes, or life chances, which might be affected
by school desegregation. Moreover, there is, as yet, no evidence that one policy alternative is more effective than another in achieving these outcomes. Thus the goal discussed in this article—interacial exposure—is an instrumental one, but one that even today school districts have had great difficulty in achieving, and it is the only outcome of importance to the courts.

The plans that have been implemented in the almost four decades since Brown v. Board of Education (374 U.S. 483 [1954]) have changed considerably over time. School desegregation policy has evolved from (1) freedom of choice plans in the 1950s and 1960s to (2) mandatory reassignment (i.e., forced busing) in the 1970s to (3) magnet-voluntary plans in the late 1970s and 1980s. Freedom-of-choice plans have neighborhood schools, but allow students to transfer to other schools in a school district. As these plans have evolved (they are currently called “majority-to-minority” transfer plans) racial controls are placed on transfers so that a student is only allowed to transfer to a school outside their neighborhood if it improves integration at that school. Transportation may or may not be provided. Mandatory reassignment plans are desegregation plans that reassign students from their neighborhood school to an opposite-race school for all or part of their school careers. Magnet-voluntary plans are those that keep the neighborhood school concept, but attempt to provide incentives in the form of a special curriculum focus and reduced class size in order to motivate transfers to opposite-race schools.

Equity

In school desegregation policy, equity claims are made by civil rights leaders and attorneys for the equal treatment of blacks and whites. This translates into demands for equal school closings in black and white neighborhoods, equal access to and participation in educational programs, equal disciplinary action and outcome, and equal “busing burden.” The pre-1968 “freedom-of-choice” desegregation plans were considered inequitable by civil rights leaders not only because they did not desegregate black schools—virtually no whites ever transferred to black schools—but because only blacks did the transferring. Equity became defined as equal numbers or proportions of whites and blacks being burdened by taking away choice and mandatorily reassigning them. Thus, in school desegregation policy, equity became synonymous with equality and the mandatory reassignment plans were carefully scrutinized to see if equal numbers or proportions of each race were reassigned.

Although critics of magnet-voluntary plans have often voiced suspicion that, in these plans, more minorities than whites will choose to leave their home school for another school and thus be disproportionately burdened, the evidence suggests that differences in transfers by race are relatively small, on average, particularly when most of the magnet programs have been placed in minority neighborhoods. Nevertheless, several judges have ordered mandatory reassignments to replace the nonmagnet school, voluntary transfer component of a plan when its only defect was disproportionate transfers by minority students. The same parents who once had a choice as to the schools their children attended then saw them mandatorily reassigned, a decision thought to be equitable because whites were also burdened by being mandatorily reassigned. Surveys, however, indicate that both minority and white parents overwhelmingly prefer any desegregation plan with neighborhood schools and voluntary transfers to a mandatory reassignment plan (Armor and Rossell 1986, 1989, 1990a, 1990b, 1990c; Armor 1990).

Further, even if mandatory reassignment plans appear to have equal burden on paper, the reality after implementation may be quite different. When whites leave the school system in disproportionate numbers, as occurs in a mandatory plan, blacks and Hispanics inevitably assume the busing burden, even if they did not do so in the proposed plan—a fact they are well aware of (Cooper, 1982; “Keeping Boston Whole” 1987).

Perhaps the most important reason that voluntary plans are more equitable than mandatory plans is that they give more power to black and poor parents than do other plans. A mandatory reassignment plan offers choice to the affluent, who can leave the school system, but not to the poor who must remain behind and who have little or no choice about which schools their children are assigned to. Voluntary plans with magnet schools, in contrast, offer choice to people who would otherwise be powerless—those who cannot afford private schools. As long as there are differences in the preferences of whites and minorities, minorities may be expected to transfer more than whites. But if
they have freely chosen to do so, I believe it stands logic on its head to say that this is a burden.

There are, however, other defects of magnet schools that reduce their appeal to minority parents and that make their equity superiority more muddled. First, there are issues of disparities between the magnet schools and the regular schools. If the magnet schools are only in minority neighborhoods, this is less of a defect. Most school districts, however, do not restrict their magnets only to minority neighborhoods and thus the magnets in white neighborhoods are often viewed as elite schools. Second, many magnet schools exist as schools-within-schools with a small magnet program enrollment that is racially balanced (typically at 50% white and 50% minority) and a large resident neighborhood population that is not enrolled in the magnet curriculum and that interacts with the magnet population only on a part-time basis. Although the magnet resources are typically made available to the neighborhood population, there is still a feeling among many that this is a defect because the neighborhood children are only receiving part-time integration. Thus the magnet-voluntary desegregation plans are not without their flaws, but I would argue that these are less than those of the other plans in which there is no choice and no right to a neighborhood school.

Efficiency

The comparison of inputs to outputs in estimating the efficiency of policy alternatives is usually defined in an economic sense. For school desegregation and other policies, however, cost can also be defined in a human resource sense, and this definition is actually more important to the courts than the economic one (see Rossell 1990a, 1990b). Human resource efficiency in school desegregation can be defined as the ratio of students reassigned to those who actually enroll. Using this definition, the least efficient desegregation alternative is a mandatory reassignment plan. On average, for every 100 white students who are reassigned to a predominantly minority school, approximately 50 will not show up at the school they are assigned to (Rossell 1988). This inefficiency is viewed by policymakers and many academics as a serious defect of mandatory reassignment plans (see Coleman, Kelly, and Moore 1975; Welch and Light 1987; Rossell 1990a, 1990b; Armor 1989). It is also probably the major motivating factor behind the growing disillusionment with school desegregation among Americans of all races and the approval of magnet-voluntary plans by the courts in the 1980s (see Taylor 1986; Armor and Rossell 1986, 1989, 1990a, 1990b, 1990c; Armor 1990).

By the late 1960s, the freedom-of-choice plans were probably more efficient than the mandatory plans. All students who wanted to transfer did so. This can be inferred from Green (1968) in which 15% of the black students were taking advantage of the freedom-of-choice plans, a figure that is quite close to current black willingness to transfer to white schools (Armor and Rossell 1986, 1989, 1990a, 1990b, 1990c).

The magnet-voluntary plans of the mid-1970s appear to be the most efficient plans in terms of the ratio of students assigned to students enrolled. Most of the students assigned to their first choice schools do indeed show up at that school. There is probably some white loss when whites do not get their first choice magnet program and do not want to attend their neighborhood school, but that would typically represent very few students. As importantly there is dramatically less white flight from the school system as a whole (Rossell 1990a, 1990b). Thus, in most respects, magnet-voluntary plans are much more efficient than mandatory reassignment plans and somewhat more efficient than pre-1968 freedom-of-choice plans.

Effectiveness

For school desegregation policy, effectiveness is the extent of school desegregation produced in a school system. This is defined not as racial balance—the distribution of the races among schools—but interracial exposure—the percentage white in the average minority child's school. The formula is

\[ \sum \frac{S_{mw}}{k N_{km} P_{kw}} \]

\[ \sum \frac{k N_{km}}{k N_{km}} \]
where \( N_{km} \) is the number of minorities and \( P_{kw} \) is the percentage white. The problem with the racial balance measures is that if almost all whites leave a school system, but the remaining few are evenly distributed across schools, racial balance will be perfect and the plan will be judged a success, although there are almost no whites left. The above measure, however, would more accurately reflect reality by showing this situation to have very little interracial exposure. It is thus the preferred outcome measure (see Rossell 1990a, 1990b).

In the late 1960s freedom-of-choice plans were very efficient in that the ratio of students assigned to students enrolled was close to 1 and there was little white flight from the school system. However, these plans were rather ineffective—at most 15% of the black students transferred to opposite race schools and none of the whites did so.

Court recognition of this outcome began the era of mandatory reassignment in the 1970s. These mandatory reassignment plans were usually more effective than the old freedom-of-choice plans in achieving desegregation in the district as a whole (Welch and Light 1987) and always more effective in desegregating black schools than the earlier voluntary plans.

Thus the conventional wisdom of the 1970s, based on empirical observation, was that mandatory reassignment plans were more effective than voluntary plans in desegregating school systems. However, the advent of comprehensive, court ordered, magnet-voluntary plans in 1976 changed this. The most recent empirical research (Rossell 1990a, 1990b) demonstrates that over the long term magnet-voluntary plans more effectively desegregate a school system that either a mandatory reassignment plan or the pre-1968 freedom-of-choice plans. Moreover, unlike the pre-1968 freedom-of-choice plans, magnet-voluntary plans are able to desegregate black schools through the use of incentives.

**Political Feasibility**

In school desegregation policy, the most politically feasible policy on all three of May’s (1986) dimensions turns out to be the magnet-voluntary alternative. First, it is the plan that is most likely to be adopted and to be carried out without unacceptable change by lower-level bureaucrats (although some change does occur). Second, because it is the preferred alternative of parents of all races and of school administrators (see Armor and Rossell 1986, 1989, 1990a, 1990b, 1990c), only a few concessions have to be made to interest groups. Although there is usually opposition by attorneys for the minority parents who have brought suit against a school district, the compromises that have to be made in the courtroom are typically not so great as to alter the fundamental characteristics of the plan. (In a few instances, however, they have been enough to whittle away at the effectiveness of the plan over time). Third, there is little or no political price to be paid for offering such a plan because, although these plans certainly have flaws, the alternatives have substantially greater defects, and most of the interest groups and elites in a school system seem to understand this.

The final proof of political feasibility in a policy area where the courts are the major actors is that, since 1981, there have been only two court decisions ordering mandatory reassignment plans. This is because the courts are political compromisers. Because there is very little support among the minority community, let alone the white community, for mandatory reassignment plans and because they produce so much white flight that voluntary plans ultimately produce greater interracial exposure, the courts have, in the last decade, favored voluntary plans with magnets. Thus there is little political risk involved in offering a magnet-voluntary plan when black interest groups or state and federal governments demand desegregated schools or when the courts order it.

**RANKING BY FOUR CRITERIA**

In any analysis of a policy area, the criteria of equity, efficiency, effectiveness, and political feasibility will, of course, be given different weights by different analysts with different conceptions of the public interest and different assessments of outcomes. As a result, there are heated debates concerning the best strategies and procedures to attain policy goals. But I argue that the explicit discussion of these criteria and the ranking of policy alternatives by them will help clarify the debate over policy alternatives and outcomes.
Table 1 shows a ranking, by the criteria discussed above, of the three major types of desegregation plan alternatives used in the almost four decades since Brown (1954). I did not have to decide on a differential weighting of these four criteria in order to make a choice of alternatives. Although conflict between these criteria is found in many policy areas (see Okun 1975), my research indicates that this is no longer the case with school desegregation policy. Currently, the most effective plan—a magnet-voluntary plan—is also the most efficient, the most equitable, and the most politically feasible. A magnet-voluntary plan is the most effective plan because it produces the greatest interracial exposure. It is the most efficient plan because the ratio of students assigned to students enrolled is the highest of all the plans. It is the most equitable type of plan because in many respects it empowers and, as a result is preferred, by parents of all races. In addition, it usually produces very similar participation rates among white and minority students. A magnet-voluntary plan is also the most politically feasible plan because, given that there is little opposition to it and it produces the greatest interracial exposure, the courts will almost always approve such a plan when it is offered by a school district.

The mandatory reassignment plans are ranked above freedom-of-choice in political feasibility in Table 1 because the overwhelming importance of equal participation rates makes them still more acceptable to the courts than the latter, which even today will result in only minority students transferring to opposite-race schools. (Whites need an incentive before they will transfer to opposite-race schools). If I were considering parents and school administrators as the major political actors, however, I would rank freedom-of-choice above mandatory reassignment on political feasibility. Overall, in this particular policy area (in which costs are not a concern to policymakers), the magnet-voluntary plan is the preferred alternative in all respects.

COMPLIANCE CHARACTERISTICS

COMMAND AND CONTROL VERSUS MARKET INCENTIVES

A major debate in the policy analysis literature is whether government will more efficiently and effectively achieve its goals if it acts
directly on regulated entities by telling them what they are to accomplish and how to do it or if it acts indirectly by establishing market or market-like incentives that make the pursuit of self-interest consistent with the public interest (i.e., the goals of the policy). Although the model of compliance is not a criterion for choosing policy alternatives, it is a choice that has to be made once the policy alternative has been selected on other grounds.

In modern states, the choice over which approach government should use in achieving its goals has been made largely in favor of direct government regulation—that is, the command and control approach, also called the directives or standards approach. The command and control approach places the decision as to how much of a desired goal to achieve and by what means in the hands of government officials. Reagan (1987) calls this “regulation by public decision” because government officials not only make the law and choose the goals, but select the methods to attain these goals. This approach typically involves extensive negotiation between government officials and representatives of affected entities. As a result, the success of the bargaining situation often depends on the skill and creativity of the bureaucrats involved. Unfortunately, as Bardach (1977) points out, there are more programs needing creative and skilled administrators than there are creative and skilled administrators.

In the market incentives approach, by contrast, the government’s role is to provide positive, and sometimes negative, incentives in order to motivate the regulated entity to act in the socially desirable manner. Reagan (1987) calls this “regulation by private decision” because most decisions regarding behavior are made by the regulated entities themselves, not by government officials. The goal here is to create through government action a new kind of market in previously untraded goods so as to avoid the conflict produced by specific government mandates. Many analysts argue that not only is government more likely to achieve a desired goal if it can harness self-interest, it will do so more efficiently and effectively than with the command and control approach. Thus the general claim that many analysts make is that a market incentives approach almost always enhances the efficiency and effectiveness of a policy alternative although it may or may not be politically feasible or produce greater equity.

Both approaches, however, require government administration to establish goals, create directives or incentives, and monitor results and policy directives. Moreover, policy alternatives can be placed on a continuum from more to less direct government control.

For most of the 35 years since Brown (1954), the courts relied on the command-and-control model of government regulation. In part, this stemmed from the empirical knowledge that in the South in the 1950s and 1960s no whites, and few blacks, would transfer to an opposite race school even with incentives. Nevertheless, in the 1970s when racial attitudes had changed dramatically, the courts continued to rely on command and control despite white flight and protest because there was a consensus in the civil rights community, and its allies in the media and academia, that the history of racism in this country demanded a more “moral” response from government than incentives, which smacked of “bribery” (see for example, Rossell 1990b, 185).²

In school desegregation policy, the mandatory reassignment plans involve the most direct government regulation, the magnet-voluntary plans less government regulation, and the freedom-of-choice plans the least. Although magnet-voluntary desegregation plans use incentives to motivate voluntary desegregation transfers, it is the courts and/or other policymakers who establish desegregation goals and place racial controls on transfers in order to achieve desegregation. This differs from the mandatory reassignment plans in that, in the latter, all of this is done plus specific students are ordered to attend specific schools. It also differs from the freedom-of-choice plans that have no special programs or program requirements. Freedom-of-choice plans are also the least effective and thus, the relationship between direct government regulation and policy effectiveness is not a linear one. It is the structuring of incentives by local school districts that makes the magnet-voluntary plans more successful than the freedom-of-choice plans and this takes us several steps toward direct regulation. Thus, in this policy area as with many others, the greatest success seems to be achieved by relying to some extent, but not completely, on the “invisible hand of the market.”
POLICY FORMULATION CHARACTERISTICS

INCREMENTALISM VERSUS THE RATIONAL COMPREHENSIVE IDEAL

The debate over the best approach to achieving goals extends to the policy formulation process. The literature on cost-benefit analysis and cost-effectiveness analysis argues for a rational comprehensive, policy-making model that involves in a simplified form the following steps: (1) establish goals with weights; (2) identify policy alternatives for achieving these goals; (3) estimate the costs and benefits of each alternative; and (4) select the alternative that produces the greatest net benefit (see Dror 1968; Stokey and Zeckhauser 1978). As critics are quick to point out, however, this involves more information, skill, and resources than policymakers are apt to have in the unpredictable political arena in which they have to operate. Such a policy-making model is only feasible for the most limited, technical questions on which there is a great deal of information and very little conflict.

The most common alternative to the rational comprehensive model is the incremental model of policy-making espoused by Lindblom (1959, 1979) and Braybrooke and Lindblom (1970) as both a description and a prescription for policy-making. This model, they argue, reflects the real world where there is disagreement over values and policy objectives and difficulty in obtaining the information needed to evaluate all possible alternatives and produce a long-range plan. The incremental model involves a strategy of continual policy readjustments in pursuit of marginally redefined policy goals. Long-range plans are rejected in favor of short-range politically expedient plans. Moreover, Braybrooke and Lindblom (1970) argue, this is not only the way the process works, it is the way it ought to work if anything significant is to be accomplished. Thus the general claim they and others make is that the incremental model will be the most effective strategy for achieving values in all but the narrowest, technical policy areas.

Unlike the model of compliance characteristics, however, in most policy areas policymakers have no choice over the particular model of policy formulation used—it is incrementalism. Because there is a continuing debate, however, over which model is most likely to facilitate goals and there are numerous policy studies that recommend the rational comprehensive model, it is useful to include this in a framework as a means of classifying policy alternatives and analyzing their effects.

This is particularly true for school desegregation policy where there is a relationship between the extent of incrementalism and the nature of the plan. The magnet-voluntary plans are more incremental than the mandatory reassignment plans. Although in theory mandatory plans could be incremental, in practice they are not, primarily because incremental mandatory plans became constitutionally unacceptable by the late 1960s as the incremental component came to be viewed as a means of delaying “forced busing,” but also because it came to be believed that incremental mandatory reassessment plans produced more negative outcomes such as white flight and protest (see Hochschild 1984). Although parents subvert mandatory plans with individual decisions to withdraw their children from the school system, this possibility is not provided for in the plans either a priori or post hoc. Mandatory plans are legally carved in stone—every student receives a desegregation assignment as a function of their race and residence and this is typically fixed for the life of that plan regardless of what individual decisions parents make. This is because courts that order mandatory reassignment plans are primarily interested in whether the school district, not individual citizens, complies with the order to correct the constitutional wrong.

Voluntary plans with magnet schools, by contrast, have no student assignment other than to the neighborhood school. Nevertheless, at least some students are expected to transfer from their neighborhood schools to other schools and thus the plan is constantly in flux—an absolute necessity if it is to be effective because no one knows which school each individual will opt to enroll in. Indeed, court opinions approving voluntary plans are rife with language noting the uncertainties and dynamic nature of such plans. In Díaz v. San Jose Unified School District, for example, the court noted that “if the District exhausts the potential for voluntary transfers without meeting desegregation goals, it will place ethnic enrollment caps (discussed below) on segregated schools until they become desegregated.” In Savannah, the court rejected a specific mandatory back-up “in case the voluntary
CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this article has been to suggest and to illustrate with the example of school desegregation policy a framework by which one can organize information and evaluate policy alternatives within a case study of one policy arena. Using a framework that considers equity, efficiency, effectiveness, and political feasibility as criteria for analyzing public policies and choosing policy alternatives is one way that policy analysts might bring greater meaning and organization to the case studies of individual programs or policy areas that dominate the public policy field. Although there will always be different weights attached to each criteria, their explicit consideration might help clarify the source of the differing conclusions regarding the success of alternative policies and facilitate comparisons across policy areas.

Part of this framework includes strategies for achieving these values—an assessment of the proper policy formulation approach to take (rational comprehensive or incremental) or the compliance structure to include in a policy (command and control or market incentives). Arguments are often made in the literature that one model is inherently superior to another. To some extent this exaggerates reality. It is certainly the case that it does so in school desegregation policy. The most successful alternative—magnet-voluntary plans—is not a complete marketplace solution, but one that relies on government to provide positive incentives in the form of distinct curricula and extra resources, and negative incentives in the form of racial controls on transfers. Nor is it completely incremental because, although subject to revision, a school district will typically have some desegregation goal that it is trying to achieve and some notion, however sketchy, of how it will be achieved. But the extent to which a policy alternative relies on one end of the continuum rather than the other is, I would argue, a useful means of classifying policy alternatives, particularly if it can be shown to be related to the achievement of goals. The case study public policy literature could certainly benefit from some scheme, if not this one, by which to organize the data assembled for each study and to evaluate alternative policies.
NOTES

1. Although each successive environmental legislation incorporates more market mechanisms (see, for example, the 1990 Clean Air Act), as yet policy is not at the point of relying on a system of efficient changes that makes pollution simply a part of the cost of production.

2. See also Kelman (1981) for a similar argument in environmental policy.


REFERENCES


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