Proposed Policy Analysis Paper

Due Date:  May 4
Pages:  ~15-20

The purpose of this assignment is to simulate as much of the process of policy analysis as possible within the limitations of the course structure, while allowing students flexibility in choosing topics that fit their interests, educational goals and career goals. The assignment requires some imagination and inventiveness, and some steps will require students to assume knowledge of hypothetical events and proceed “as if” certain steps were already made and we knew the results. However, as long as students acknowledge when these assumptions have been made for the sake of practicality, they can have reasonable success in simulating the types of work they might have to do in real-world policy analysis.

Students should choose one public policy topic or issue of concern and apply the principles, concepts and techniques learned in class to analyzing it. You can choose any topic or issue that you like, but be sure that it is narrow enough to be manageable and broad enough to allow the flexibility necessary to complete the assignment. If you perceive any problems, experience roadblocks or have questions, be sure to ask me as soon as possible.

Set up your analysis by stating both the policy you are analyzing and the underlying problem or problems associated with the policy. Don’t get bogged down in every possible problem, but narrow your discussion to the major concerns you will be analyzing. Explain the policy issue you have chosen and why it is of interest, addressing why the politicians, interest groups or the public would be interested in the problem and its solutions. Clearly define the problem related to the policy and define the stakes involved in solving the problem.

Next, clearly identify the underlying causal relationship between the policy and the associated problems. It is highly recommended that you draw a causal model to describe both the central issue, the relationship between cause and effect (including the direction and nature of the relationship), as well as other important variables that influence the causal relationship. You will not necessarily include the causal model in your paper, but you should have one constructed in your mind. To what extent can the effects of other variables be accounted for in both analyzing the problem and resolving the problem?

Identify pre-existing theories, studies and sources of data related to your topic. This step will require some research, and while you may not find sources or data that analyze exactly your topic (Indeed, you shouldn’t find the exact same study or there would not be reason to analyze the policy), you should find literature related to the topic (assuming it is important enough to warrant some attention). Summarize the theories, assumptions and findings of other studies and discuss how they relate to your proposed analysis. Do not go into too great of detail, but provide
enough relevant information to inform the reader why and what you are doing and how it relates to previous work. Discuss the sources of data as well as the potential biases of the sources and the validity of the data for your analysis.

If existing data sources would not be adequate for your analysis, discuss how and where you would gather relevant data to do your analysis. How would you measure your key variables? If your evidence will be primarily quantitative, address how this might influence your findings.

Next, assume that you have to narrow your analysis to two to four potential courses of action to address the problem. This step might require making some assumptions about your policy issue, but do your best to explain why your courses of action are reasonable. This step is a good place to determine whether allowing current trends to continue is a reasonable policy alternative, and whether you will leave it in or drop it from your proposed alternatives. In either case, explain your decision.

Considering your proposed alternatives, identify other political interests that have the potential to become involved in the policy process—either in support, opposition or some other position related to your alternatives. Remember, these may be interests already associated with the policy issue, or new interests motivated because of your choice of alternatives. Do not try to be comprehensive, but be sure to include the important political actors involved in the policy area. Explain each actor’s primary motivation to act, addressing how they might respond to your proposals and the direction (support or oppose) and probable intensity of their motivation. How might support be maximized or opposition minimized by your choice of alternatives?

Identify any other possible concerns related to implementation of your policy alternatives. Consider potential sources of apprehension for your likely clients of the policy analysis. Consider legal or ethical concerns in policy implementation. Consider potential principal-agent issues in implementation. Considering all the potential interests and other concerns, draw conclusions about the political feasibility of your courses of action. What can be done to increase feasibility? What might be done to decrease uncertainty?

Discuss the evaluative criteria you will use or propose to your clients to use to evaluate your policy alternatives. Will you use only one primary criteria, more than one, and how will they be weighted against one another? Explain why you made your choice.

Finally, compare and contrast your policy alternatives. Offer some conclusions about how you would present your analysis to your client. Does one policy alternative seem dominant, or will there be a choice between them? Will you emphasize one choice over others? Explain your decision.

As a final note, when writing this paper, be sure to incorporate as many of the concepts and techniques discussed in class, making clear your reasoning and wherever you feel you must make assumptions or even ignore some of the advice in the texts. Also, you may find yourself pressed to fit your written analysis within the limits of 20 pages. If this problem occurs, you will have to consider how to focus your analysis to fit within the constraints. If it remains a problem, be sure to talk to me as soon as possible.