**Public administration and decisions**

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Monday, Nov 29, 2021

Policymaking is an important and consequential public activity that needs to be in the limelight – and it often is. An allied public activity, also of much importance but in dire need of being highlighted, is the implementation of public policy.

Public policy is mostly thought of as the legislation that is enacted in parliaments. One reason for this perception is that politicians – both those who support a policy and those who oppose it – will carry over debate on a policy from parliament to the media and, through the media, to the public.

The focus on the policymaking processes in parliaments helps direct attention of policy influencers and the general population on the making of policy. The constructive and sincerely deliberative aspects of this attention can lead to better policy. However, there is little recognition of the fact that the quality of administration and implementation of policy is not contingent solely on the quality of policy that is passed in parliaments.

When looking at how public policy impacts the lives of the people, policy legislation that comes from parliaments is key, but along with this high visibility activity is another very important subsequent activity that rarely gets the attention it deserves. This equally important but often overlooked activity is the actual administrative implementation of public policy.

While the need for better decision-making in the policymaking process is critical to improving the lives of the public, alongside this is also the need for better decisions in the implementation of policy.

The implementation of public policy by the bureaucracy and the public administration sector is a very important aspect of policy. The bureaucracy’s role is broad and in addition to enlarging and clarifying policy as legislated by parliaments, it also plays an important role in drafting the contents of policy proposals or bills that are debated in parliaments.

These proposed bills that are presented for debate in parliament are complicated pieces of legislation that have to be in compliance with existing laws. In many cases, the proposed legislation will involve complex alignments or possible modifications of existing laws, rules and regulations.

The clarification and detailing of legislated policy by the bureaucracy is the crucial step that takes a usually somewhat vague policy document and translates it into laws, rules and regulations. These laws, rules and regulations are then what the public-at-large faces.

The policymaking processes followed by parliamentarians contribute significantly to the formulation of effective policy. The more participative and deliberative the processes, the better the quality of the legislation. Policymaking that comes from more inclusive processes can better accommodate the views of diverse groups of stakeholders. Similarly, the processes of decision-making at the implementation level also need to be more participative and deliberative.

Group decision-making processes that can foster better laws and regulations can come from a spectrum of techniques. These techniques can include some that are more contentious and some that are less so. To help crystalise the extent to which group processes may differ we can look at two different group decision-making techniques that are very different from each other. These two techniques are the devil’s advocate design and the nominally contentious design.

The effectiveness of these two techniques is context specific and one cannot be said to be superior to the other in all possible scenarios. Similarly, the advantages and disadvantages of each of these group decision-making techniques vary with the situations in which they are applied.

The devil’s advocate group decision-making technique can be highly contentious. Its design can vary but the defining characteristic is that within the group discussion process is embedded the persistently active functioning role of the devil’s advocate. To provide a brief background, the expression ‘playing the devil’s advocate’ comes out of the Catholic Church’s canonisation process, in which an appointee of the church was tasked with arguing against the canonisation of a candidate.

The contentiousness of the devil’s advocate role is accentuated because it strives to pose a challenge to the group decision positions just for the sake of contention and the challenge is not necessarily driven by a genuine support for the challenge posed. The advantage of the devil’s advocate design is that it covers and then seeks to address a wide range of possible challenges.

The design also is a potent antidote for ‘groupthink’. Groupthink is a prominent weakness of group decision making situations. The phenomenon works when group members are less critical of group decisions. When groupthink takes place some group members, though personally not in favour of a decision, will nonetheless support it publicly in line with most of the other group members. One very well-known instance of groupthink was seen in the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis during John F Kennedy’s administration in the US. A sobering incident, when one recognises that during the missile crisis the US and the USSR were very close to launching nuclear strikes at each other.

Another advantage of the devil’s advocate technique in group decision-making processes is that it can, by design, help address the ‘authority bias’ in group decision-making. Authority bias skews decision-making by giving undue weightage to the views and opinions of people in positions of authority.

The nominal group technique is a much less contentious design that is focused on progressing with group decision-making by minimising criticism of the group member’s ideas. The mechanisms to engineer such a process include isolated working, the probing of decision suggestions only to seek clarification, and the use of secret balloting to arrive at final decisions.

The advantages of this technique include that it will encourage those group members who would otherwise be reluctant to share their ideas in the face of possible criticism, to freely share their ideas. Also, this group decision-making process is usually more time efficient as less time is spent addressing criticisms.

Between the diverse designs of these two decision-making techniques are a myriad of other possibilities. The purpose of highlighting these two diverse techniques is to bring to light the vast choices that exist in group decision-making processes. Eventually, it is the context that must drive the selection of the appropriate technique.

While making new public policies is a central function of the government, the public realises the full impact of a policy when the policy is implemented. The use of appropriate group processes can help public administration experts arrive at better and more inclusive decisions on the implementation of public policy.

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