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Political Psychology and Political Policy

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Abstract. This article describes the basic components of political policy which can be influenced through political psychology. It also suggests some political limitations of this influence.

One purpose of IBPP and of political psychology worldwide is to influence government policy, thereby contributing to human welfare. Yet healthy ambivalence towards this purpose is in order, for it echoes the motives of as diverse a cast of characters as political assassins, fascists, and human rights activists. Nevertheless, the question can still be asked--how can political psychologists influence policy?

(1) They can provide theory and data on optimal processes to develop policy. This can be done to (a) attenuate psychological phenomena which may noxiously affect policy development, e.g., satisficing, fundamental attribution errors, group think, social loafing, the "risky shift," and the like. This can also be done to (b) facilitate policy acceptance by those whom it will affect through reinforcing perceptions of procedural justice. As perceptions increase that the procedures used to develop policy are fair, so will policy acceptance, regardless of the epistemological and metaphysical status of some sort of "actual" procedural justice. And this acceptance often will apply, not only to policy content, but to the consequences of policy implementation as well.

One important contribution to reinforcing perceptions of procedural justice is the perception that one provided input for the policy--again, whether this "actually" occurred or not. This contribution seems to apply even if the policy turns out to be against one's own views and even if one seems to have no demonstrable control over it. (The sense of control over policy certainly will facilitate procedural justice, however.)

(2) Political psychologists can provide theory and data on optimally stating policy content, its rationale, and its expected consequences so as to facilitate policy acceptance. For example, the same policy stated in terms of what will be lost will usual ly be less supported than when it is stated in terms of what will be gained. Also, a policy stated in terms of a restricted, prohibited, or limited option will often increases psychological resistance to it--probably through reinforcing a sense of losing degrees of freedom in one's daily life. This seems to be the case even if the option is itself undesirable! In addition, opposition increases if policy is stated in a manner which creates social groupings of "winners" and "losers." This is likely even if what some other group is winning is undesirable and what one's own group is losing is undesirable. In fact, opposition increases even when the groupings being fostered are arbitrary with no obvious expectations of winning or losing anything. There are a number of social cognition processes responsible for this that also endanger whatever procedural justice has been or might have been achieved.

(3) Political psychologists can provide theory and data on policy substance--what should happen and how it can best happen. This contribution to policy substance is often the most common, but is accompanied by a host of caveats. (a) It is not easy to carry out research or help influence or identify a body of research which adequately covers the multivariate nature and appropriate variable range of values of so-called "real world" phenomena. (b) Even if (a) is possible, the research is too often carried

out in different environments with different sorts of people than of immediate, direct relevance to the policy in question. How great these differences are affect the research's ecological validity. (c) Political psychologists often are naifs in the policy arena and may assume that their sterling research is in itself enough to drive the policy process and appropriately influence it. Or they may over-advocate from legitimate research results and interpretation to make their voices heard, perhaps facilitating their own sense of procedural justice. Or they may boldly make unsubstantiated research claims fueled by their own psychopathy, high sensation-seeking, malignant narcissism, desire to assume a crusader's mantle, or perceived need to play hard ball politics as a means to career advancement.

(4) Political psychologists can provide methods to evaluate implemented policy. This is most often accomplished through outcome research--the focus on a policy's actual versus expected consequences. As legitimate, however, is to evaluate process as well as outcome which would include fairness of development, its expressive style, and modes of implementation.

Even with the most zealous attempts to achieve the above, political psychologists are still subject to coercive political mechanisms. Certain research topics, methods, and opinions can elicit danger--not getting funded, the derision of colleagues, denial or loss of tenure or promotion, threats to one's property, loved ones, and self, and attempts to actualize these threats. Political psychologists--unlike novelists and journalists--rarely have been imprisoned or murdered. Is it their skill in maintaining their policy research programs in the face of danger? Or the avoidance of danger through research and advocacy choices? (See Baker, E.L. (1994.) Researchers and assessment policy development: A cautionary tale. American Journal of Education, 102, 450-477; Campbell, D.T. (1979.) Assessing the impact of planned social change. Evaluation and Program Planning, 2, 67-90; Kennemer, W.N. (1995.) Psychology and the political process. Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 26, 456-458; Sechrest, L.B., & Bootzin, R.R. (1997.) Psychology and inferences about public policy. Psychology, public policy, and law, 2, 377-392.)(Keywords: (Foreign) Policy.)