

Policy Instruments and Public Management: Bridging the Gaps

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ABSTRACT

The literatures on public management and on the characteristics of policy instruments have developed independently. The two literatures should, however, be related, given that instruments are rarely capable of being effective in implementing policy without adequate management. Further, public management should be understood in the context of achieving policy goals and hence of a relationship to policy. This article makes a preliminary linkage of those two approaches to policy and administration. It demonstrates that each approach helps to illuminate the other and also helps to understand contemporary reforms in the public sector.

This article is an attempt to bring together two rather disparate areas of development within the broad area of public administration and public policy. One is concerned with the instruments used by government to influence the economy of society and with the differential impacts that the selection of instruments can have on the success of programs (Peters and Van Nispen 1998; Salamon and Lund 1989; Bemelmans-Vidic, Rist, and Vedung 1998; Varone 1999). The other is concerned with the massive transformation in the practice of public administration/management during the past several decades and with the potential impact of those administrative changes on public policies (Peters 1996; Peters and Savoie 1998).

The basic argument of this article is that these two literatures (as well as their practical utilization) have developed in isolation from one another and should be brought together in order to develop a more complete understanding of the nature of contemporary policy making. Indeed, in some important ways the development of thinking about public management tends to be opposed to common patterns of thinking about the effectiveness of tools. That is, one famous formulation of new public management (NPM) is that governments should "steer, not row"¹

¹For an alternative conception see Peters (1998a).

(Osborne and Gaebler 1992). On the other hand, much of the instruments literature has an implicit or explicit assumption that the tools that governments themselves control will be more effective than those controlled by third parties.

The juxtaposition of the two literatures is also required to understand better the policy performance of government in contemporary political systems.² Discussions about the relative merits of policy instruments are often conducted as if they were self-implementing and administration was irrelevant to their success or failure. Similarly, many discussions of administrative reform, and of the NPM, have been developed as if the techniques advocated were equally suitable for all types of policy and for all policy instruments (for superior examples see Hood 1991; Pollitt 1993). Even when NPM advocates do discuss the instruments of public policy (e.g., when advocating alternatives to “rowing” in the public sector), they do so without considering the multifaceted nature of instruments and the difficulties of instrument evaluation. The argument here is that the assumptions of independence guiding both NPM advocates and advocates of particular instruments are almost certainly, and equally, incorrect. Indeed the problem may not be so much an assumption of the independence of the two aspects of governing as an ignorance of developments and thinking in the other area of inquiry.

A second and more practical aspect of this argument is that selections of both instruments and management techniques often are made without reference to the influence of the other factor. This disregard may result in suboptimal decisions simply because of the failure to match effectively instruments and the managerial techniques used to implement them.³ The by-now conventional question of whether form follows function is rarely addressed within these particular segments of the public policy and administration literature. This absence of complete cogitation about linking instruments and management appears to be in part because of the location of the different types of expertise within different academic disciplines.⁴

The failure to consider the appropriate connection of instruments and management techniques may result as well from their association with different parts of the policy-making apparatus of government. Decisions about instruments are generally made within the programs that will use them, while management issues tend to be more the preserve of central personnel and budget agencies. For whatever reason, the development of these literatures, and practices, in isolation often makes the recommendations that emerge—whether from management or program personnel—appear questionable once the additional factor is considered.

²I owe a debt to Lester Salamon for forcing me to begin to think about the intersection of these literatures (and real world transformations) for a workshop at Johns Hopkins in April 1998.

³This corresponds in a way to the contingent position in the study of policy instruments, although the usual contingency assumed is the nature of the policy and its relationship to an instrument, rather than a managerial tool. See Linder and Peters (1998).

⁴In addition to the difference between public administration and public policy, economists have tended to dominate the tools debate while public management scholars and political scientists have dominated the public management discussions. Some notable exceptions to the first generalization are Christopher Hood (1986), Lester Salamon (1989), and Helen Ingram.

TOOLS AND MANAGEMENT

The usual perspective adopted in the tools literature is that of government programs employing a particular instrument in an attempt to produce a certain outcome in the economy and in society. As a result, the usual questions about tools are about the effectiveness and efficiency of the tools and about their capacity actually to produce the changes in the target populations intended by their formulators (Ingram and Schneider 1991). Political questions also are asked about the visibility and intrusiveness of instruments, and hence their acceptability to the public (Woodside 1998; Doern and Phidd 1978). It is also not uncommon to consider more normative questions about instruments, including the extent to which particular tools permit individuals to make autonomous choices.⁵ These are all crucial criteria for understanding policy instruments but they are hardly at all related to the manner of their administration.

As I have noted, the question here relates to how the particular instrument functions within the political system, rather than to its external effects. Increasingly, this set of concerns also implies concern about the manner in which the tool works in concert with networks, or “communities,” as well as simply within the public service itself (LeGales and Thatcher 1995). Instruments that are effective if government is the principal or sole relevant actor often are substantially less effective when they must work through a large and often largely autonomous collection of actors. For example, an attempt to implement programs through complex networks simply exacerbates all the familiar problems of implementation within the public sector itself. This is even more evident if the actors within the networks are less than fully committed to the programs being administered or if there are (as is often the case) conflicts within the network over goals and mechanisms (see below).

⁵This question of whether the state should operate in loco parentis remains central to a variety of public policies. For example, a major concern about welfare reforms in a number of countries has been the extent to which it removed autonomy from the recipients.

⁶Most discussions of the linkage between instruments and policies tends to discuss policy in functional terms, e.g., defense or agriculture, rather than in terms of more analytic categories. See Elmore (1987).

⁷For a comparative perspective see Walsh et al. (1997).

Bringing the question of management into consideration means that the analyst now is required to think about three-way matching: the instrument, the policy problem, and the managerial technique. Bringing in a third criterion also means that the match is all the more difficult, with the technology for linking problems and tools being itself already underdeveloped.⁶ There is a limited literature that links some types of policy tools to management (e.g., Kettl's [1988] work on the use of contracts in the public sector).⁷ Likewise, there has been some discussion of the manner in which loans and loan guarantees are used as a means to motivate management decisions (Stanton 1996; Lund 1989), with the choice of instrument at least determining the focus for management of the organization delivering the service.

MAKING THE LINKAGE

Since I have argued that there is relatively little about the linkage of the issues of tools and management techniques in the existing literature, it is now obviously necessary to begin to explore how the two factors might be better connected, analytically as well as empirically. One way to do this is to begin with each of the two bodies of literature as an independent variable to explain the other. In all this analysis the third source of variance—the nature of the policy problem—must always be considered. Of course, there is by no means the body of literature or practical experience available to justify the explanatory language that has been used to this point. This scientific perspective can, however, still be adopted as a means to pose questions about how the interaction of the two factors can be most fruitfully understood. These analyses may oversimplify the nature of both the tools and the techniques—and most importantly may oversimplify their often complex interactions, but this is still a good way to increase the understanding of this linkage.

Tools as an Independent Variable

If we begin with instruments as an independent variable in the analysis, we choose a tool and then see what the managerial implications are. In the real world of policy making, the selection of instruments and policy may actually occur in this manner. Some policy makers have been observed to be committed to particular instruments and to select the same instruments to address almost any policy problem. For example, regulation is often selected as a means to address any and all economic problems, and social insurance is often selected as a means to cope with all manner of social policy problems. This commitment by individuals to particular instruments has been described elsewhere as *instrumentalism* (Linder and Peters 1998). See the appendix.

The commitment to particular instruments arises from several sources. The most important element in developing a strong dedication to a particular instrument is the formal education of the policy maker. Lawyers, for example, tend to be partial to legalistic regulatory instruments while economists tend to favor tools—for example, loans or tax expenditures—that depend upon an economic mechanism for their effects. Although it is not entirely separable from formal education, the type of organization by which individuals are employed also influences their commitment to one type of instrument or another.⁸

⁸For example, lawyers tend to work for legally oriented organizations and economists for economically oriented organizations so that the predilections created by their formal education may be reinforced.

Mapping

We can begin to differentiate among types of instruments along a number of dimensions that may have some implications for management. Some of these dimensions are displayed in the exhibit (see also Linder and Peters 1989; Mathiasen 1998). For example, one distinguishing characteristic among instruments is whether they are designed to act directly on the target population or whether they are designed to operate indirectly, through incentives and the moral or instrumental behavior of individuals. Traditional ways to classify instruments may not be effective in capturing these differences, given that many are sufficiently broad to include both types of dynamic assumptions. For example, regulation is usually directly enforced, but it increasingly may also be self-enforced or enforced by third parties (see Bardach and Kagan 1982, as opposed to Kooiman 1993).

Another important distinction for the purposes of this article is between instruments that are labor intensive and those that are more capital intensive. The former type of instrument will require making use of more explicit, *ex ante* managerial strategies that focus on the appropriate control of personnel. The assumption of the managerialist reforms is that they can make the labor intensive instruments more effective, while the latter may depend upon more *ex post forms of evaluation and assessment*. The former types of instruments may therefore be amenable to improvement through the techniques proposed by managerial reforms, while the latter may not be.

In the end all these different ways to classify instruments may come down to a distinction between Weberian styles of management and either more humane or more entrepreneurial styles of management. The Weberian style appears to be appropriate for the direct delivery of programs and services, while the alternative styles of management may be more appropriate for the variety of

Exhibit

Dimensions of Policy Instruments

Direct Influence vs. Indirect Influence
Visible vs. Invisible
Capital Intensity vs. Labor Intensity
Automatic vs. Administered
Universal vs. Contingent
Information vs. Coercion
Forcing vs. Enabling

other instruments. That having been said, however, the simultaneous loosening of controls through substituting process controls and the use of indirect means of implementation may open the public sector to major deviations from the intentions of the policy makers in the systems. The changes in tools and in management may appear to go together logically, but also may combine to reduce the overall performance of the system in reaching its intended goals.

The argument that tools come down to a relatively simple dichotomy between direct, hierarchical interventions and hence management and more indirect and self-enforcing types of tools points to the linkage that must be made between the tools and management. The purpose of the tools approach to public policy is to attempt to ensure an appropriate match between policy and the instruments used to address it, with one dominant concern being the capacity to make the policy work in society (Salamon 2000). Most of the NPM literature, on the other hand, focuses on processes, with the assumption that if those are managed well then the outcomes will materialize as planned. Even when—as in what appears to be a second wave of managerialism—outputs and quality are the principal concerns (Bouckaert and Pollitt 1995), the management literature appears to focus on the procedures for reaching the goals.

Tools and the Classic Question of Public Administration

When we begin to think about the administration of policy tools, we have to think about some of the classic questions of administration and management. Some of these questions are normative, and others are more practical questions of how to manage a public organization efficiently and effectively. In the tools literature there is almost no real consideration of how individual instruments correspond to many of these questions. This relative dearth of thought about the linkage of the two considerations in turn means that choices are being made on the basis of an excessively constrained set of criteria.

One crucial question in any policy choice is accountability. Many of the techniques favored by the NPM, as well as more indirect tools, raise important questions about how government can be held accountable when there is such limited direct control over outcomes. For example, an instrument such as loans and loan guarantees may be effective for getting money to the target populations. These instruments may not, however, be nearly as desirable in accountability terms. Removing government from many of its “rowing” functions lengthens the chain of accountability and may make accountability in a traditional sense

virtually impossible to enforce. On the other hand, the consumerism inherent in some of the NPM discussions appears to argue for an enhanced accountability, albeit of a different sort from traditional parliamentary methods (see Hood, Peters, and Wollmann 1997).

Again, the tools perspective and the NPM perspective may be somewhat at odds with one another. One criterion being pushed in NPM thinking about the public sector is “transparency” (Debbasch 1990) as a means to facilitate public understanding of what is happening in the public sector, and for the public sector to respond to policies and practices. The tools literature, on the other hand, often advocates reducing the visibility of particular instruments so that they can be implemented with less manifest political opposition. In this case, the introduction of the third variable—the particular policy under consideration—may help sort out the contradiction. Some policies may demand greater transparency, while others may be better as invisible as possible.

The distinction between Weberian and non-Weberian styles of management also raises some of the classic managerial questions about the involvement of employees (and clients) in the organization. Going back at least to the human relations school of management, there has been an advocacy of what is now often referred to as “empowerment” (Peters and Pierre forthcoming) of lower-level public sector employees. Many tools discussions tend to imply that administration through empowered administrators may actually impede the success of the tools, while the management literature of involvement and empowerment tends to focus on the necessity of enhancing discretion.

Implementation

Another way to cast the relationships between instruments and the NPM is to think of this relationship as simply another implementation problem. That is, when an instrument is selected to achieve a particular public purpose, what implementation problems are presented? The principal question is, To what extent will the process of implementation produce any substantial deflection from the original goals of the “formators” (Lane 1983) in favor of the goals of the implementors? Again, the logic of NPM, at least in its empowerment and entrepreneurial version, may be in direct contradiction to the demands for “top down” implementation (see Hogwood and Gunn 1986) and a guarantee of achieving the purposes of a program.

Also, if we examine indirect tools such as loan guarantees and tax expenditures, the number of clearance points (Pressman and Wildavsky 1976; see also Immergut 1992) that must be passed successfully becomes extremely large. Successful implementation of tax expenditures, for example, depends upon millions of individual taxpayers making their own decisions about the viability of the incentives offered. This program may require very little hands-on management, but it also may not be very likely to attain its goals.

As implementation is increasingly channeled through networks and other indirect channels, the nature of those structures should be examined and categorized (see also Pierre 1998) more carefully so that their potential impact on administration can be identified. Networks are a ubiquitous feature of contemporary political and administrative life, and the prevailing political ethos presses for an increased use of these structures as a means to administer policies. Despite their pervasiveness, not all networks are alike, and different forms of network structures will have different consequences for public policies.

Several scholars have provided sets of defining characteristics of networks. One of the more useful schemes is that of de Bruijn and ten Heuvelhof (1995) in which two characteristics in particular can be related to the probable effectiveness of networks in implementation:

- **Pluriformality.** Some networks are more integrated than are others, so that it is possible to treat such networks as if they are a single organization, while others must be treated as if they are collections of more or less autonomous organizations. Alexander (1993, 340) refers to these networks as “feudal.” Everything else being equal, more pluriform networks are less successful in implementation, given their inability to “march to a single drummer.”⁹
- **Self-Containment.** Networks also differ in the extent to which they are able to shield themselves from influence from other networks, and are able to have effective gate-keeping to preserve relative internal homogeneity. More self-contained networks may be, everything else being equal, more successful in implementation because they can maintain greater agreement on goals.

When the use of networks is considered, the new public management and the tools perspective again diverge. NPM tends to conceptualize networks and “new governance” (Rhodes 1997) as a means to reduce the costs of administration and perhaps also

⁹Hood (1976) uses this phrase in his early discussion of the problems in implementation.

to improve the public acceptability of a service in an era in which the public is skeptical about government and its bureaucracy. For the tools advocate the use of these structures tends to be seen as a different instrument—and one over which government has substantially less control. The logic (in instrumental terms) is the direct provision of services, but the actual delivery is so indirect that it must be conceptualized differently and without the certainty usually sought with direct provision.¹⁰

USING MANAGEMENT AS THE INDEPENDENT VARIABLE

We can also utilize management techniques as the independent variable in an analysis, and then examine the possible impact that the prior selection of a management technique may have on the effectiveness of the tools being administered. The potential conflicts in the underlying logic of the instrument and managerial approaches are somewhat less apparent when they are viewed from this direction, but they are still present. If we refer to the categories presented in the appendix this can be seen as a proceduralist strategy in which the procedure is the dominant consideration and other aspects of policy are secondary. The dominant value is process (even when the processes are argued to emphasize outputs).

Procedures and Tools

Even without examining the impact of the contemporary managerialist reforms there are certainly relationships between management and managerial styles and policy instruments. At the most extreme there are marked differences between the legalistic styles of administering, encountered in most continental political systems, that can be contrasted to the managerial orientation that characterizes Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian styles of administering policy. Clearly the legalistic style and its concentration on procedure is conducive to the adoption of tools that themselves depend upon strict legal enforcement, for example, traditional command and control regulation. Similarly, the more managerial and political styles may be better suited for the use of tools that function through more complex interactions of social and political organizations, and they may also be more suited to managing tools that involve substantial discretion.

Similarly, the proceduralist orientation may come to dominate in policy areas that are closely related to civil liberties and the rights of citizens. The use of proper procedure may be seen as a means of ensuring fairness and equality, if not necessarily equity, in the treatment of citizens. This notion of rights is

¹⁰The principal reason to choose the relatively high-cost option of direct provision is to have certainty in delivery. Network delivery may be more expensive than other forms of delivery, and yet not have certainty.

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increasingly extended to a variety of tools that at one time might have been considered to border on discretionary but that have come to be defined almost in terms of property rights for individuals. For example, social insurance is a major policy instrument used to address a range of policy issues, and it has come to be a new form of property for citizens.¹¹

The Reforms of Public Management

The widespread reform of the public sector over the past several decades has generated an immense number of alternative techniques designed to make government perform better. This is by far too large a list to be able to discuss each technique separately. Indeed, a number of classification schemes describe these reforms (see Peters 1996). Space limits the opportunity to discuss them all here, so I will simply look at one of the more popular—Christopher Hood's idea (1991) that "Sigma, Theta, and Lambda" strategies for reform describe what has occurred in the reform process—to characterize the developments in NPM. While it is to some extent based on the proposals of new public management, this discussion points out the extent to which the same reforms tend to be recycled when changes in the public sector are proposed (see Light 1997).

Hood discusses the ways that different proposals for reform address very different concerns and deficiencies identified within the public sector. At one extreme the sigma model of administration (1991, 11), stressing frugality and cost minimization, has clear implications for the selection of policy instruments. For example, indirect instruments such as loan guarantees or tax expenditures tend to cost government substantially less to administer than does direct service delivery, but the control that is implied in the model may make that type of administration less acceptable. That is, although the uses of third-party government and other means of achieving policy goals so popular with the new public management may save money, there is less certainty that the service will be delivered as and when it was intended.

Similarly Hood's lambda model, intended to maintain a higher level of resilience within government, may require some of the concepts of "flexible government" (Peters 1996, chap. 4) if it is to achieve its desired administrative goals. One problem that the NPM is designed to correct within government is the persistence of outdated programs, and the outmoded procedures for implementing these programs. However, these programs often are associated with robust and familiar tools, which frequently require the most direct administration and the more direct forms of public intervention. For example, government has delivered

¹¹The *takings* literature has been developed primarily in the context of more traditional views of property but could easily be made applicable to this form of new property.

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education services directly for some years, and reform attempts that use indirect methods (e.g., vouchers) may introduce greater flexibility and perhaps may reduce costs. On the other hand, the reforms may not be able to deliver education on the universal and egalitarian basis that has been expected in contemporary democracies.

SUMMARY

This has been a preliminary examination of the ways in which management tools—especially those associated with the new public management—may be related to the tools used to implement public policies. If we are to consider seriously policy design, or the design of governing institutions, then we need to understand how to link tools, the management of those tools, and the problems they are designed to solve. The few examples presented here point to the factors that can make any such contingent matching exercise for the three factors extremely difficult, even when they begin to be addressed more directly.

This article is one component of an ongoing project concerning policy design and the shaping of policy instruments. This linkage with management is in some ways a diversion from the central project of examining the nature of policy problems and of analyzing the contingent fits of tools and problems. Still, this exercise does point to the necessity of thinking about the ways tools will be administered so as to understand the dynamics of the process or to offer any practical advice to policy makers. Policy instruments are rarely as automatic as they are conceptualized to be. Without understanding that any instrument must be managed and administered if it is to be successful, serious errors can be made in the selection of the instruments.

APPENDIX

Our empirical research has indicated the existence of four styles of thinking about instruments among a sample of policy makers (both politicians and civil servants). One, as described in the article, was the *instrumentalist*, with a commitment to particular instruments, but little or no regard for the type of problem that is being addressed. In contrast to the three other positions, instrumentalists tend to have ideological and/or professional commitments to their instruments.

The second category of thinking about instruments is labeled *proceduralist*, and is to some extent the antithesis of the instrumentalist perspective. The pattern of reasoning here is that there is no particular commitment to an instrument. Rather the *process* of making policy is seen as the paramount consideration. In this view policy making is not a once-and-for-all activity but rather a dynamic process of adaptation. Instruments, therefore, represent virtual experiments in policy, rather than the definitive answers to any policy questions (see also Peters 1998b). The proceduralists are, therefore, closely allied to incrementalist thinking about policy.

A third style of thinking about the relationship between instruments and policies could be labeled *contingentist*, with a pronounced concern for making judgments about the relationship of the two factors. Although there

APPENDIX (continued)

is clearly the practical beginnings of a program for making these matches, the technology for doing so remains rudimentary in the thinking of this group. The match is made generally upon experience or some intuitive understanding of both policy problems and instruments. Also, it tends to be made on the basis of nominal categories—e.g., social problems are to be solved with particular types of instruments, while agriculture requires a very different set of interventions for success. The weaknesses of the bases from which these matches are made does not prevent strong commitments to them on the part of contingentists.

The final category of thinking about instruments we have labeled *constitutivist*. This is by far the most complex pattern of reasoning about instruments, perhaps the most difficult to understand, and certainly the most difficult to identify in operation. The reasoning is to some degree related to social constructivism (Berger and Luckmann 1967; Schon and Rein 1994; Schneider and Ingram 1997), with the argument that problem and instrument are defined virtually simultaneously and through their interaction, rather than as a linear process of defining one first and then selecting the other. The definition of both instrument and the problem is a political process through which formal policy makers interact with interests in society and elements of the policy environment to develop a picture of the policy area and the linkage to the possible solutions.

These four categories of thinking about instruments are abstractions of the thinking of actors. They are, however, by no means the only patterns of thought existing in the field. An alternative view, albeit closely related to the constructivist position, would hold that thinking about instruments is something of a wasted effort. The underlying argument is not totally nihilist, rather it is that the societal actors in a policy area will tend to dominate the conceptualization of the issues and will create their own formats for solving the problems (Ringeling 1983 and 1998). The implemented solutions may not always suit the government of the day or conform to the designs for policy, but they may be the effective policy.

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