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PUBLIC POLICY PROGRAMS — A POLITICAL SCIENCE APPROACH

Carole Yoho
University of Minnesota

I have been asked to discuss public policy education programs from a political science approach — content, approach, strengths, and weaknesses. It would be presumptuous in the extreme to attempt to speak for the whole discipline, especially in view of the fact that for the last 20 years I have been influenced and surrounded by agricultural economists and rural sociologists.

The public policy program divides into three major areas or thrusts: (1) government organization/structures, (2) the political process, and (3) issues and the policymaking process.

Government Organization and Structure

Citizen education/knowledge, motivation, and effective participation are program areas designed to increase the level of citizen knowledge about how government is organized and how it functions. Emphasis is on the local level(s) of government. The rationale isn't unique. It is simply that: (a) local government decisions and performance have profound, if not generally recognized, impacts on the quality of our daily lives; (b) the general public tends to know the least about the government closest to them; (c) active and informed individuals can make a difference, especially at the local level; and (d) it is still true that people do "cut their political teeth" through local government experiences.

The specialist's role in this effort is in provision of support to field staff in the form of appropriate publications, assistance in program design, including identification of local resource people, and moral support and encouragement. In Minnesota, extension agents in the home economics/family living area are especially receptive to these programs. Some have been quite innovative in adapting basic materials to the leader training format.

In addition to the intrinsic merit of citizen education on local government, these programs have the additional strengths of acquainting local officials with extension and of increasing the confidence and enthusiasm of field staff in public affairs programming. It also

provides potential for joint programming with citizen groups such as the League of Women Voters. In short, it is a high payoff-low risk operation. One does not have to be a political scientist to work in this area, but it may help.

Programs designed to assist local government officials perform their duties focus primarily on what can be classified as technical assistance — including administration, finance and budgeting, planning, management, and group process and decisionmaking skills. Minnesota is a state with a long tradition of strong governmental associations that maintain their own training initiatives.

There are factors unique to the state for this situation. Therefore, the agricultural extension public affairs program has not concentrated its major efforts on this audience. Rather the aim is to keep the lines of communication open, help to identify and anticipate issues, assist in planning educational programs, and provide analytical input on issues of concern to these groups.

Another function sometimes performed by policy specialists is linking local and state government personnel and other extension specialists who may have the types of knowledge and skills needed by these units; e.g., soils, forestry, communications, entomology, planning and zoning, agricultural engineering, etc. The resource linkage mission is usually done by CRD area people; however, policy specialists become involved when staff shortages exist at the area level.

Contact maintenance tends to be a state-level effort. A political science background may well provide an initial comparative advantage in working with government officials, both elected and staff. The advantage will be a continuing one only if one keeps on top of issues and problems relevant to the organization and functioning of these units.

The Political Process

Policy analysis is certainly a key part of the policymaking process, but it alone often doesn't get people to where they want to go in terms of influencing, changing, developing, or implementing policy. Political interaction is also a part of policymaking. The political process is really part and parcel of the content of public policy education. Having said this, how do we go about providing educational programs on the political process? Can we develop programs that focus specifically on the political process? Certainly we can. Would anyone be interested? Probably not. Rather, the challenge is to build more political process content into our ongoing issue-oriented programs and into our own knowledge base and thought processes as we design those programs. Many do this now, but probably more automatically and intuitively than systematically and explicitly.

We do need to have an understanding of institutions and their functions and limits, the policy environment, methods of influencing the political process, and alternative ways of citizen participation in policymaking. My conception of the policy environment consists of elements such as a knowledge of relevant past policies and how and why they were derived, how they worked, who the significant actors were, what the political situation was, who was affected and how and what led to the present situation or problem.

What is the present problem? Whose problem is it? And how did it get on the agenda? Who are the participants or actors and what are their characteristics? Who are those who are key and what are their roles, formal and informal? What kinds of leverage e.g., authority, resources, ability to control others, do they have and on whom? How do they relate to each other, and to the problem? What are their styles; e.g., persuasion by analysis, by horsetrading, or power?

The problem-alternatives-consequences approach to public affairs education gives the appearance of being a tidy, logical one, but I think we must always keep in mind and in the minds of our audiences that policymaking as a process doesn't necessarily proceed in such an orderly fashion. Political interactions can enter at any and all points from problem definition to implementation. Also it is important to realize that some are going to see others' solutions as their problem and that new problems can and often do arise from the way in which a policy is implemented. The objective of all of this, as I see it, is more effective political participation resulting from increased understanding of the political process, including acceptance of the fact that conflict and compromise are part of it. Politically inactive citizens do not often have their problems put on the political agenda, much less acted upon.

These kinds of objectives can be translated into a variety of programs. One of the more popular state-level efforts in Minnesota has been an inservice training program for specialist and field staff geared to understanding the legislative process. Resource persons have included legislators and lobbyists from a diverse mix of interest groups. These sessions have been replicated at the field level for the general public by area CRD agents.

Careful planning of this type of session will elicit from the resource persons a clear and informative description of the key decision points, the role of analysts, pressure groups, support groups, etc. It also may serve to make the word "compromise" sound less like a dirty word. These kinds of program efforts are not unique to Minnesota, obviously.

Another type of program effort that I would like to mention briefly is the public affairs leadership seminar program series. Participants are selected and invited based on their leadership skills and potential

and their interest and involvement in public affairs issues. This is a seminar setting over a period of days with presentations by recognized experts on whatever issues are being addressed. Obviously these kinds of programs have the benefit of raising the knowledge level of key people. However, to the political scientist, they are more exciting for the interaction opportunities they offer—the opportunity to practice tolerance of sharply opposing points of view, the arts of persuasion and influence, dealing with conflict and compromise, and using an analytical approach to issues. In short, both content and process objectives are addressed in these programs.

Issues and the Policymaking Process

Depending upon the nature of the issues being examined, the political scientist in agricultural extension may play different roles. If the issues and problems relate directly to government and politics, the role is that of the traditional subject matter specialist. If the issues relate to food and agricultural policy or family living, for example, the role will probably be an auxiliary one in which one is concerned with assisting other specialists or members of a team in identifying the relevant parts of the policymaking process, and/or providing training or counseling in public affairs methodology.

A short list of issues and concerns currently uppermost in the mind of at least one political scientist/policy specialist in extension would include:

1. The issues and problems associated with intergovernmental relations. These are going to be challenging for those involved and affected. And we are going to be “affected” along with our clientele groups in ways we haven’t even thought of yet. New ways of doing business and hard decisions about services and taxes will be the order of the day at both the state and local levels. High rates of turnover among state and local elected officials will likely continue. Managing conflict along with managing budgets is certain to be a major concern.

2. Issues and problems associated with the functioning of the political system generally. Those concerned and vocal on these issues often assert there are causal relationships between such seemingly unrelated items as the role of political parties, mass media, and the political process, party rules, nominating procedures, openness in government, campaign finance laws, high turnover in elected officials, single issue interest groups, and competence in government generally (to cite just a few).

I hope that I have shed some light on how at least one political scientist relates to the public affairs programs of the cooperative extension service.