The Eightfold Path for Policy Analysis
League of Women Voters of California
2015 Convention

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Basis for Taking Action in the League

In deciding whether to take action, a League Board considers:

• League position, including previous League action

• What does the League’s voice add to the debate?

• Is there a plan for effective action? Funding? Timing?
Where Do I Find League Positions?

• LWVS Impact on Issues

• LWVC Action Policies and Positions

• Your local League’s positions
A Practical Guide for Policy Analysis
The Eightfold Path to More Effective Problem Solving
Eugene Bardach
The Eightfold Path

• Define the Problem
• Assemble Some Evidence
• Construct the Alternatives
• Select the Criteria
• Project the Outcomes
• Confront the Trade-offs
• Decide
• Tell Your Story
Step One: Define the Problem
TIPS

• Think of Deficit and Excess
  • Too big, too small, too slowly, too fast

• Quantify if possible
  • Use a range (between 100,000 - 200,000) if you need to

• Risky conditions can be problems
  • Eg. Odds of an accident are too high
TIPS

• Latent opportunities
  • A problem could be a missed opportunity

• Avoid “issue rhetoric”
  • Stay away from partisan buzzwords

• Consider whether it’s a trouble that warrants definition as public problem requiring public resources
  • Is there a market failure?
  • Is it a purely private trouble?
TIPS

• Avoid defining the solution into the problem
  • “There is too little shelter for homeless families”

• Be careful with causal claims in your definition
  • “Prop 47 has caused an increase in crime”

• Your problem definition may evolve as you learn more
  • Continue to come back to this step as you learn more
Step Two: Assemble Some Evidence
Three Principal Purposes of Collecting Evidence

• Assess the nature and extent of the problem you are trying to define

• Assess the particular features of the policy situation you are engaged in studying

• Assess policies that have been thought to have worked effectively in similar situations
Before you start

Ask yourself:

• What do I already know?

• What do I need and don’t need to know? Why?
The Value of Evidence Depends On:

• What is the likelihood that it will cause you to substitute a better decision for whatever decision you would have made without it?

• The likelihood that the substituted decision will, directly or indirectly, produce a better policy outcome than would have been produced by the original decision?

• The magnitude of the difference in value between the likely-to-be-improved outcome and the original outcome?
Where Do I Find the Evidence I Need?

• Have other Leagues looked at this issue?

• Review available literature
  • Be careful with literature rom advocacy organizations

• People are relevant sources
Survey Best Practices

• The chances are good that the problem you are studying is not unique

• The practices you find may be more like “good practices”
  • What are the vulnerabilities?
  • Will it work in my context?
  • Is this evidence or anecdote?
TIPS

• Start early!

• Get other points of view

• Try using analogies
Step Three: Construct the Alternatives
TIPS

• Options are not necessarily mutually exclusive

• Initially, err on the side of comprehensiveness
  • Letting present trends continue is an option
    • Consider what changes will affect the problem: political, economy, budgets, demographic changes, etc.
TIPS

• Learning more can be an option
  • Consider pilot studies
  • Continue to look for good practices elsewhere

• Wait for future to be less murky
  • There can be a cost to premature decision making
  • There can be a cost to waiting
Step Four: Select the Criteria
Look for Evaluative Criteria

- Efficiency: Maximizing the public interest.
  - Most important criteria in cost effectiveness and cost-benefit analysis

- Limits to efficiency as a criteria:
  - If utility is judged by willingness to pay for a benefit, people with less money have less clout
  - Values with few human defenders may be underestimated
Other Criteria

- Equality
- Diversity
- Fairness
- Justice
- Community
- Privacy
- Safety
Practical Criteria

• Legality of alternatives
• Political acceptability
• Robustness
• Improvability
TIPS

• May be helpful to identify a primary criterion. This is your principal objective to be maximized or minimized.
  • Use weighting for the other criteria

• Don’t confuse alternatives and criteria
  • Alternative are courses of action. Criteria are standards for evaluating the action.
  • “Rapid response election day hotline”
Step Five:
Project the Outcomes
TIPS

• Magnitude estimates
  • Use ranges if you need to (100,000 to 150,000)

• Break-even estimates
  • What is the level of results necessary to justify the known costs and risks?

• Sensitivity analysis
  • How big of a mistake in my assumptions before my analysis is in trouble?

• Guard against excessive optimism
## Construct an Outcomes Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy Alternative</th>
<th>Criteria 1</th>
<th>Criteria 2</th>
<th>Criteria 3</th>
<th>Score</th>
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<td>A</td>
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<td>High</td>
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<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Step Six: Confront the Tradeoffs
TIPS

• Tradeoffs are about the outcomes, not the alternatives

• Can you establish commensurability
  • If outcomes are measurable in dollars, that’s an easy way
    (efficiency? Cost-benefit?)
  • Break-even?

• How does it compare to present trends?
Step Seven: Decide!
TIPS

• If it’s such a good idea, how come nobody has done it yet?
  
  • Bureaucracy resistance?
  
  • Stakeholder resistance?
  
  • Political resistance?
Step Eight: Tell Your Story
TIPS

• Identify and assess the likely audience
  • Level of sophistication and familiarity with the topic

• Consider the political environment
  • Who will use the analysis?
  • Are you comfortable with it being public?
  • Is there language that could alienate certain audiences?
TIPS

• You don’t need the eightfold path in your narrative
  • It’s a tool to help you think through the policy problem

• Don’t include every fact you ever learned

• If you know it’s contentious, consider including rebuttals to objections
TIPS

• Start with your conclusion
  • You aren’t writing a mystery

• Break up large bodies of text
  • Use headings and subheadings
  • Use bullets

• Unless the report is short, include an executive summary

• Include references and sources