Public Policy: Facts, Myths, and Values

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Our opinions are based on facts, some myths that we think are facts, and our values. In public policy, it is important that we sharpen our skills at separating facts, myths, and value judgments so that we can make well-informed policy choices and be more effective public policy educators.

The real purpose of public policy education is to establish fact and minimize myth. If we get the job done, we establish fact and reduce fiction, we have basically completed our task as public policy educators, because the main purpose of public policy education is to increase the body of fact, to increase public understanding, and to help the public make more informed choices.

How do we distinguish between facts, myths, and values, and what are the implications for public policy education? How can we educate about value-laden issues without taking on an advocacy role?

Before we discuss these questions, we need to know what defines a public issue, or problem.

A public issue:
- Has broad interest and concern.
- Requires a group decision. We are not talking about individual problems; we are dealing with group problems that require a group decision.
- Is controversial. If you are not dealing with a controversial issue, you really are not dealing with a problem that concerns the public. Policy issues are controversial, and that is why they require a unique educational methodology.
- Involves value judgments to arrive at solutions. If we can settle the problem through scientific analysis, if we can come up with the answer in the laboratory, it is not a public issue. The answer will be a compromise based on value judgments.

Identifying Facts, Myths, and Value Judgments

A fact is a verifiable statement of what is true. The sales tax in Kentucky is six percent; this is a fact. Social security is partially funded out of current tax dollars; it is not a long-term pension fund. Current workers are paying the bill for those who are drawing retirement benefits. These are all facts that can be verified.

A myth, in the policymaking process, is treated exactly the same as a fact, because a myth is what people think is fact; for example, all sales taxes tax the poor relatively more than the rich.

Values are opinions about how things should be. Values cannot be proven right or wrong. Part of the government’s responsibility is to look after the elderly. That is a value judgment. It cannot be proven right or wrong.

Each public issue has its own set of facts as well as an abundant supply of myth. We all have our own values and we assume, in our democratic nation, that we are welcome to express our own opinions. All three — facts, myths, and values — play a role when we make public policy choices. And remember, just because someone has studied the issue, has a degree, and may even be the “expert” does not make that person’s values superior to anyone else’s. There are no “right” or “wrong” answers to public issues. If you can convince yourself of that, you are a long way toward beginning to discuss the problem rationally.

When we do not have a universally accepted measuring stick or standard of how things should be, we settle public issues with value judgments. This is
done, at least in a democracy such as ours, in the political arena through debate and compromise among diverse interests that have conflicting views.

**Pitfalls in Analyzing Public Problems**

Our values and beliefs greatly influence our involvement in the public policy arena. For example, they influence which problems we view as important and how we think a particular problem should be resolved. Because they play such a crucial role, we must have explicit knowledge of our own values and beliefs to deal with public policy issues rationally. Values and beliefs can lead us into “pitfalls” in analyzing public problems if we are unaware of how strongly they influence our judgments.

Values guide our thinking in terms of what we perceive to be “good” or “bad.” Most of the friction in dealing with public problems stems from value conflicts. Although value conflicts will always exist, they can be minimized by “filtering” accepted values through the following principles:

- Values are subject to change and should be constantly reassessed; e.g., attitudes about drinking and driving have changed in recent years.
- Everyone must be open to the constructive criticisms and viewpoints of those who place a different emphasis on certain values; that is, values cannot be “proven” right or wrong. Instead, they reflect the individual’s perception of what is good or bad.
- Values are subject to different interpretations and have a limit to their desirability; that is, what is best for one person may not be so good for someone else.

Beliefs are our ideas of the way things really are. It is important to filter beliefs and “facts” through rigorous logic and analysis to minimize the risk of:

- Confusing the symptoms of a problem with its causes;
- Jumping to conclusions;
- Developing general conclusions from limited or unrepresentative observations;
- Oversimplifying the analysis;
- Distorting conclusions beyond the factual base;
- Assuming what is true of the pieces is also true of the whole;
- Judging the person instead of the ideas presented; and
- Judging the response instead of the ideas presented.

The reason for avoiding these eight pitfalls relates directly to our philosophy of government and public policy education. The essence of this philosophy is that individuals are responsible for the consequences of their choices. This responsibility implies that individuals must make well-informed choices, and the likelihood of such choices is increased every time the foregoing sources of error are avoided.

**Instructions for Public Policy Quiz**

Administer the first 15 statements in the Public Policy Quiz. (The key for the quiz is at the end.) Give the following guidelines to the participants before they begin:

1. To help determine which statements are facts ask yourself, for which do we have a “measuring stick?” If a measuring stick exists, it suggests that the statement is either a fact or a myth. If we have no measuring stick, it is a value judgement.

2. Another way to separate facts from myths is to ask yourself whether the statement is verifiable. Would another analysis, using the same measure of verification, yield the same results?

Let participants “check” their answers as you review each statement. Ask participants if they had trouble distinguishing facts, myths, and values. If they did, give them the second half of the Public Policy Quiz. When finished, review the answers.
Public Policy Quiz

Some of the following statements are facts, some are myths, and some are value judgments. Which are F (fact)? M (myth)? or V (value judgment)?

____ 1. If the people had all the facts about any particular problem and really understood them, their decision in regard to what ought to be done to solve it would be almost unanimous.
____ 2. Taverns should be permitted to operate on Sunday.
____ 3. We need educational programs to keep more young people in the rural area.
____ 4. Home economics agents should be paid the same salary as agricultural agents.
____ 5. The national debt is already at the danger point and under no circumstances should it be increased.
____ 6. In an unregulated market, prices are set by the free forces of supply and demand.
____ 7. Taxes are now too high and should be reduced.
____ 8. As the percentage of the population engaged in farming declines, a nation’s material standard of living increases.
____ 9. The government already has intervened in many spheres of the economy and certainly could curtail rather than expand its activities.
____ 10. Extension workers should be required to take advanced academic training as a prerequisite to professional advancement.
____ 11. Extension workers who have their own selfish interests at heart should not do educational work in controversial areas, e.g., school consolidation, at what levels farm prices should be supported, or proper eating habits.
____ 12. Interest rates are too high.
____ 13. Public policy educators should be on tap, not on top.
____ 14. Our defense capability is already more than needed and, therefore, can be cut.
____ 15. If interest rates are to come down without a return to inflation, the federal deficit must be cut.
____ 16. What you and I decide to eat is not the government’s business.
____ 17. Scientific investigations have shown that those who have a history of cholesterol problems must monitor and control their cholesterol intake.
____ 18. What is advantageous to one individual may be disadvantageous to another.
____ 19. The power structure is continually in a state of flux.
____ 20. The status quo is rarely preserved over the long run.
____ 21. Since Extension has historically served rural, agriculturally oriented people, Extension public policy educators have an obligation to promote rural interests in public policy issues.
____ 22. Economic justice is to each the same.
____ 23. Economic justice is to each according to ability after meeting minimal needs.
____ 24. We have become a government of special interests.
____ 25. Public issues usually are debated in terms of the symptoms rather than the actual problem.
____ 26. The farm family has served Americans well and, therefore, must be preserved.
____ 27. We are depleting our groundwater supply; therefore, we must find another way to ration it.
____ 28. Because of the influence of the cattle industry, it is impossible to conduct a public policy education program on nutrition in beef-producing states.
Answers to Public Policy Quiz

F = FACT  M = MYTH  V = VALUE JUDGEMENT