

THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE

Prospective Policy Analysis

The classical model of prospective policy analysis is traditionally presented as a linear process in which you work through a series of analytic steps that lead you to a policy recommendation for addressing the problem at hand. In Chapter 3, you will see that this model has several shortcomings that limit its applicability, one of which is that policy analysis rarely proceeds in a linear fashion. Nonetheless, as an aspiring policy analyst, you need to master this model and understand the logic upon which it was built. Despite its flaws, the model is a powerful tool for clarifying messy and confusing policy debates. It also reflects the kinds of careful and disciplined thinking that is a prerequisite for success as a policy analyst. Although you'll find variations in the literature (Bardach & Patashnik, 2016; Patton, Sawicki, & Clark, 2013; Stone, 2012; Weimer & Vining, 2017), the classical model is usually built on the six steps listed in [Exhibit 1-1](#). Each subsection of this chapter corresponds to one of these steps and later chapters of the book take a deeper dive into several of the steps.

Exhibit 1-1 Steps in Prospective Policy Analysis

1. Characterize the Policy Problem
2. Specify Policy Alternatives
3. Identify Evaluation Criteria
4. Create a Criteria-Alternatives Matrix and Predict Performance of Alternatives
5. Analyze Trade-offs Across Alternatives
6. Communicate Results

Learning Objectives

By studying this chapter, you should be able to:

- Describe the sequential approach to policy analysis in classical models of prospective policy analysis.
- Define a policy problem as a gap between a descriptive, as-is, condition and a normative, to-be, condition.
- Create policy alternatives that are actionable, detailed, realistic, and matched to the problem at hand and its context.
- Identify evaluation criteria that surface all of the important pros and cons of all policy alternatives being considered.
- Predict the performance of each alternative with respect to each criterion, and summarize the results in a criteria-alternatives matrix.
- Characterize the trade-offs across alternatives using cost-benefit, cost-effectiveness, multiattribute analysis, or narrative prose.
- Describe some key features of policy writing and communication.

1.1 CHARACTERIZE THE PROBLEM

The point of departure in classical policy analysis is the **problem definition**.¹ The basic idea is that before we can discuss the pros and cons of different policy options, we need a clear understanding of exactly the problem we're trying to address.

Imagine a debate about building a new community recreation center. Planners have rolled out the design. It's expensive but packed with features that the community has asked for—a pool, basketball courts open late at night, a running track, and a weight room. One group of residents is adamantly opposed to the project while its supporters are equally fervent. The opposition claims that the costly new center is just another example of the tax-and-spend attitude of unelected bureaucrats. Some proponents don't care much about the center's expensive features but really want to make sure teenagers have a supervised place to hang out in the evening. On the other hand, fitness buffs aren't really worried about the teenagers but want a high-quality and free alternative to a commercial gym.

As you try to make sense of this debate, you begin to realize that these advocates are coming from very different places. Before the community can decide what to do, it has to figure out what it's actually trying to accomplish. Is the problem a lack of safe spaces for teenagers? Or is it that the community doesn't offer residents affordable opportunities for health and fitness? Or might it be that there are other pressing community needs on which the money would be better spent? Depending on the answers, the appropriate policies may differ radically.

Starting your policy analysis with a problem definition is intended to give you an intellectual destination, namely, the best way of approaching the problem at hand. If it helps, think of it as your North Star; you can use it to navigate your way through the policy analysis. Doing so will help you avoid the quandary faced by Alice in Wonderland when she went down the Rabbit Hole:

Alice: Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?

The Cheshire Cat: That depends a good deal on where you want to get to.

Alice: I don't much care where.

The Cheshire Cat: Then it doesn't much matter which way you go.

(Carroll, 1865)

Without a crystal-clear problem definition, like Alice, your policy analysis will begin to wander aimlessly as you get distracted by all the things that *might* be relevant.

¹Most versions of the classical model don't provide much guidance about the process of deciding which specific policy problems deserve our attention in the first place.

So, let's drill down on this idea. What, exactly, is a policy problem? The word problem implies that something is amiss, that the current state of affairs—the status quo—is somehow not what it should be. Maybe, for example, our military is not properly equipped for the threats it's been asked to address.

Regardless of the issue, all well-reasoned claims about a policy problem comprise two elements. The first element of a policy problem is an assertion about the status quo, a descriptive statement about the **as-is condition**. When it comes to the readiness of the military, the descriptive as-is condition might be characterized in terms of the types of threats from enemy actors, the dangers posed by those threats, and the capability of existing military technology and tactics to neutralize them.

By itself, however, a descriptive as-is statement about the status quo is insufficient to fully define a policy problem. We need a second ingredient: a normative, **to-be condition**. This element of a policy problem is normative because it embeds a value judgment, not about what the world currently *does* look like, but about what it *should* or *ought to* look like. Military readiness is a policy problem only if we think that our military *should* be stronger than it currently is. If we find the status quo—the current state of affairs—normatively acceptable, then we don't have a policy problem.

This leads us to a working definition: *A policy problem exists when there is a gap between the descriptive as-is condition that exists now and a normative to-be condition that we believe ought to exist in the future.* Keep in mind that these gaps can take on different forms. It might be that the status quo is horrendous, but we can imagine ameliorating its worst features even though we can't quite envision attaining a trouble-free to-be condition. Alternatively, the status quo could be working reasonably well, but opportunities for further improvement might be within easy reach.

Accordingly, your first task is to *come up with a clear problem definition* that reflects a gap between the as-is and to-be conditions. But be careful about locking on to a specific formulation of the problem until you've done sufficient research to understand whether your first intuitions were right. It's a lot like trying on clothes in a store; something might look good on the mannequin, but you don't want to hand over your debit card until you're sure it looks good on you. Similarly, policy analysis is a highly iterative process, and you should become comfortable with the process of trying on and discarding multiple versions of the problem definition until you're confident that you've got it right.

Another word of advice: *Don't embed an implicit solution* into the problem definition. For example, if you define the problem along the lines of "there are too few homeless shelters," you are unnecessarily steering the analysis toward the foregone conclusion that we should build more shelters. A more neutral problem definition—"there are too many homeless persons"—opens up the conversation in ways that let you consider a broader, and potentially more effective, set of approaches to the problem.

Moreover, you'll need to *decide who has standing* to be considered in your analysis. Standing defines the people, institutions, and groups whose problems, concerns, and

experiences are deemed relevant to the analysis. If you're studying homelessness, for example, you'll need to decide on your geographic scope. You could focus on one neighborhood, the whole city, or an entire metro area. In short, standing delineates the scope of the problem definition. The condition of folks without standing is irrelevant to your analysis whereas folks with standing are at the center of your work.

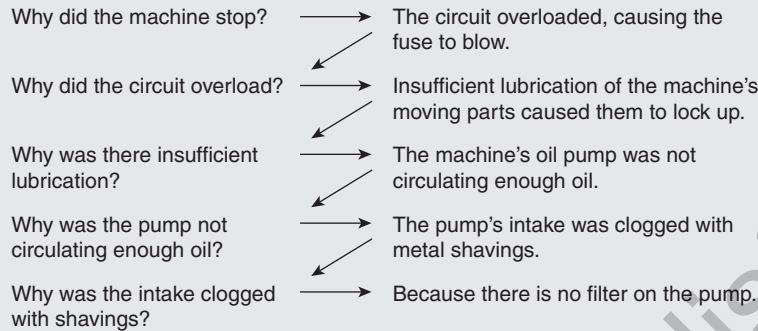
To develop your problem definition, start with some *context*. Is this a big problem, affecting many people or wasting a lot of time, money, or resources, or is it a small problem? When did the problem first arise? Did it just pop up, or has it been around for as long as anyone can remember? Is the problem getting better or worse over time? How does the nature and structure of the problem *here* compare to the problem *there*, in the next town, state, or region? Have we tried to solve this problem before? If so, why are we unhappy with that solution? What went wrong?

Once you've characterized the context of the problem and decided who has standing, you're ready to move on to **causal reasoning**. The rationale for doing so is that before you tackle a problem, it's best to understand why the problem is occurring in the first place. Think about a doctor who sees a patient with symptoms that could be caused by two different maladies, each with its own treatment. Misidentifying the cause of the symptoms will lead to the wrong treatment. So too with policy problems.

How do you go about figuring out the causal drivers of the problem that concerns you? In my class, I talk about Taiichi Ohno and the Toyota Production System he helped develop in the 1950s. Mr. Ohno was well known for his work to improve the quality and efficiency of Toyota's auto manufacturing plans (Card, 2017). In particular, he is credited for developing the **Five Whys** approach to problem diagnosis. Take a look at [Exhibit 1-2](#), which depicts the process of figuring out production problems on a factory assembly line. When a problem is detected, we don't settle for the first explanation of its cause, but dig deeper to get closer to the root cause of the problem. Every time we get an answer to the question of why a driver of a problem exists, we ask why *that* driver exists. The rationale for doing so is that addressing the underlying drivers of a problem increases the chances of successfully mitigating the problem. In the simple example depicted in [Exhibit 1-2](#), each cause produces one effect, and each effect subsequently causes one consequence. In Chapter 12, we'll look at more sophisticated ways of simultaneously considering the interaction of multiple causes and effects.

An example may help here. I live in Northern Virginia, in the suburbs of Washington, DC. Many jurisdictions in the area are struggling with the loss of affordable housing. Long-term, low- and middle-income residents are moving out of the area to more affordable locations. Amazon's recent decision to locate its second headquarters in the area has heightened concern about the cost of housing (Lytle, 2019). Imagine you're working for a local or state policymaker who thinks that the loss of affordable housing is a serious problem worthy of policy action. She asks you to suggest some policy options.

Exhibit 1-2 Diagnosing Causality: The “Five Whys” at Toyota



Don't just change the fuse. Put a filter on the pump.

Source: Adapted from Toyota Motor Asia Pacific Pte Ltd, 2006

Before you can do so, however, you need greater clarity on the cause of the problem. Perhaps it's an influx of highly paid workers who have moved into the area for its amenities (parks, schools, nightlife) and are willing to pay much higher rents than current residents. Maybe its profit-seeking developers who have built high-end apartments and condominiums close to the area's subway stations. It could be that existing zoning rules strongly favor low density development in most areas; it could also be that many neighborhoods are fully 'built-out' with virtually no open land on which more housing could be built. Perhaps it's cold-hearted employers who refuse to pay low-skill labor a living wage. Depending on what's causing the problem, the preferred policy option is likely to differ.

Let's imagine that with sufficient research and careful thinking, you develop a solid understanding of the causal drivers of the problem. You're not done with the problem definition, however, until you can articulate the consequences of the problem. In policy analysis, *characterizing the effects of a policy problem is as important as identifying its causes*. Why? Because the consequences of the problem are what motivate citizens and policymakers to 'care' about the problem. Identifying the specific effects of a problem may also point the way to policy alternatives which, while they don't eliminate the problem, might mitigate its impacts. The doctor may not be able to cure you of the cold virus you've come down with, but she can treat your symptoms with, say, a cough suppressant and a decongestant.

Let's return to our example of affordable housing in Northern Virginia. Rather than applying the Five Whys approach, you can use what I call the **Five So-Whats** method. Housing has become unaffordable. So what? We might think it's just wrong

to force out long-time residents, and we want our elected officials to do something about it. Maybe folks who play a key role in society—nurses, teachers, fire fighters, and police officers—can't afford to live in the community they serve. Perhaps employers won't be able to find the workers they need for lower-paid jobs like hotel housekeepers, landscapers, day care staff, and fast-food workers. Maybe the number of homeless people living on the street will increase, creating a moral quandary and a jump in the demand for social services.

Having articulated a gap between the as-is and to-be conditions, asked *why* five times, and asked *so-what* five times, you undoubtedly have uncovered a great deal of material that could be relevant to the policy problem of interest. What should you do with all this stuff? A good test of whether you have a sufficient understanding of a policy problem is to try to write a *succinct problem definition* of only two to three sentences that does three things:

- Describes the *most important causes* of the problem, typically in just a few words each,
- Articulates the *core problem that arises from the gap* between the as-is and to-be conditions, without getting bogged down in details, and
- Identifies the *most important consequences*, again in just a few words each.

One formulation of a problem definition for our unaffordable Northern Virginia city might look something like this:

Increases in the number of highly paid workers throughout the region, improved community amenities for residents, zoning rules that limit housing density, and static wages for low-skill jobs have caused a continuing loss of affordable housing in the area. Consequently, there has been a spike in homelessness, displacement of long-time residents, and an inability for public servants and low-skill workers to live in the communities they serve.

Notice how we move progressively along a chain of causation. We start with the drivers of the problem, move on to articulate the core problem, and conclude with the major consequences of concern. To link back to our earlier discussion, this progression is created first by asking “why?” several times, then articulating the gap between the descriptive as-is and the normative to-be conditions, and finally by asking “so what?” several times.

For practice, try crafting a problem definition for an issue you care deeply about. Try to copy the style of the example above. Really, take out a piece of paper and give it a try. I'll wait.

Now look at what you've written and ask two questions. First, do you suspect all of the statements are likely true? Don't worry if you're not 100% sure; after all, at this point, you haven't yet done your analysis. Second, do your words capture the most important aspects of the causes and consequences of the problem? If the tentative answer to both questions is yes, then you have a workable problem definition upon which to base the rest of your analysis. If not, you need to go back and, perhaps repeatedly, revise your problem definition until you *can* answer yes to both questions. Remember, the problem definition is the foundation upon which your analysis will be built. If your problem definition is flawed, then the quality of your subsequent analytic work will suffer.

The final task in the problem definition process is to select the potential **point(s) for policy intervention**. Will you try to attack the root causes of the problem or focus on treating its symptoms? If the former, will you tackle all of the causes of the problem, or just one or two? If the latter, which of the problem's consequences will get your attention? There is no right answer here, but these questions must be asked and answered before you move forward with your policy analysis. Aaron Wildavsky (1979), the founding Dean of what is now the Goldman School of Public Policy at UC Berkeley, offers some advice:

Policy analysis is an art [and] must create problems that decision-makers are able to handle with the variables under their control and in the time available. ... Policy analysis, to be brief, is an activity creating problems that can be solved. (pp. 15–17)

Putting Wildavsky's advice into practice requires you to think about your client—the policymaker—and consider their *legal authority, political power, and ability to command resources* when you are deciding where to target your policy interventions. You should also think about how quickly you need to come up with potential responses to the problem. Do you have two weeks, two months, or two years? If you have limited time and resources, you might choose to work on only one aspect of the problem. If you have a lot of time and resources, you might go for more fundamental reforms that tackle the problem's underlying root causes.

1.2 SPECIFY POLICY ALTERNATIVES THAT MIGHT MITIGATE THE PROBLEM

With a solid understanding of the policy problem you hope to address, it's time to start thinking about policy options that deserve consideration as potential approaches to the

problem. Let's start with [Exhibit 1-3](#) and the characteristics of policy alternatives that facilitate further analysis.

Exhibit 1-3 Characteristics of a Strong Policy Option

1. Actionable
2. Described in detail
3. Matched to problem and context
4. Described, not evaluated
5. Not a dummy alternative

First, a policy option needs to be *actionable*. An aspirational statement along the lines of 'parents should read more to their kids so they will do better in school' is not an actionable policy option. A reasonable alternative might be something like 'hold Saturday morning workshops for parents at local libraries and teach kids how to use the library.' In short, we must be able to imagine that the policy can be turned into a concrete and tangible statement of how it would work.

Second, each policy alternative should be *specified in enough detail* so that it's possible to project the consequences of its adoption. Imagine we are considering a policy to end incarceration of nonviolent drug offenders. Are we talking about changing sentencing guidelines so that fewer people go to prison in the first place? Or about releasing folks currently in prison; if so, what are the criteria for who is to be released? What services, if any, will be offered to facilitate prisoners' return to their communities? Are we talking about Federal, state, or local prisons? I could go on with more questions, but the point should be clear: Vague and ambiguous language now—while specifying policy alternatives—will come back to haunt us later when we're try to figure out the pros and cons, and the costs and impacts of the policy alternatives that we are evaluating.

Third, *match the policy alternatives to the problem* at hand and the *context in which solutions will be attempted*. Imagine you work for the city manager who, in consultation with the Fire Chief, has determined that for budgetary reasons, one of the city's five fire stations must be closed. In this case, the set of options has been predetermined for you: Close station 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5. While you might ask your boss and the Chief if they'd like you to consider other ways of closing the budget gap, if their answer is no, then you're done with the process of specifying policy alternatives. As you finalize your list of alternatives, inject a *dose of pragmatism*. Your options need to be within the power your client has (or aspires to have), come with

a price tag that is in the realm of the possible, and comply with relevant constitutional or statutory constraints.

Fourth, your goal—at this point in the analysis—is simply to *describe the policy alternative, not evaluate it*. Novice policy analysts often find it difficult to follow this advice. Consider this policy alternative: “The Federal government will levy an excise tax of \$5 per ton on coal used by electric power plants so that emissions of greenhouse gases will fall.” The first part of the sentence is fine; the policy is specific and actionable. The trouble comes with the second part of the sentence, which makes a causal claim about the effect of the tax. Yes, the *rationale* for the policy *is* to decrease emissions, but at this point in the process, we have yet to actually do the work to predict the impact of the tax. Our subsequent analysis might reveal that a \$5 tax is too low to have a material effect on emissions.

Finally, *stay away from dummy alternatives*. A dummy option is a policy option that you know to be deeply flawed; yet, you include it anyway. Sometimes, such options are referred to as straw men because they are easily knocked down. Why might you be tempted to include a straw man option in your analysis? Sometimes, before you even begin the analysis, you already have a favorite option that you think is best suited to addressing the policy problem at hand. By comparison, a dummy option can make your option appear stronger. Until you actually do your analysis, however, you do not have a basis for having a definitive opinion. To be blunt: If you already know the answer, why are you wasting time and resources doing an analysis to reach a foregone conclusion?

Once you’ve assembled your list of alternatives, you will usually want to add one more option: *continue current policies*. As bad as current conditions are, there might not be any policy intervention that would appreciably improve the situation. Failure to consider the option of leaving existing policies unchanged creates an inappropriate bias for action. In other words, if maintaining the status quo is omitted from the analysis, you run the risk of deciding on an option that actually makes matters worse. The only exception to the rule is when you’re told that *something* must be done. In this case, inaction is not an option. This can happen for political reasons; perhaps your boss is loath to be perceived as uncaring, indecisive, or unable to tackle problems. Other times, you’re handed a constrained problem definition, like which of the five fire stations should be closed. In such cases, there’s no need for a current policy option because business as usual is not a choice.

Exhibit 1-4 shows a hypothetical set of options that might be used in an analysis of our illustrative Northern Virginia affordable housing situation. Let’s assume that our client is the city manager, so we are interested only in policies that can be implemented at the local level. We give each alternative a short name to help us keep track of it in our subsequent analysis and then succinctly describe its key features.

Exhibit 1-4 Hypothetical Set of Policy Options

Current Policy: Under this option, the city would not change existing policy. Zoning regulations would remain unchanged. Rents and home prices would be dictated only by market forces, or by policies implemented by other levels of government.

Rent Control: Under this option, landlords would be prohibited from raising rents faster than the cost-of-living. Conversions from rental housing to individually owned units would be banned.

Public Housing: Under this option, the city would build and operate three low-rise apartment complexes in separate neighborhoods, comprised of two- and three-bedroom units suitable for families. Rents would be permanently limited to no more than 30% of the median family income for the city. A total of 500 units would be constructed.

Vouchers: Under this option, the city would issue vouchers to families with incomes below three times the poverty level. Vouchers would have a value of \$1,000 per month and could be applied to the rent on any residential property in the city. Landlords would redeem vouchers for cash.

Developer Regulations: Under this option, zoning regulations would require that all new multiunit residential rental buildings set aside 25% of the units as affordable. Rents would be permanently limited to no more than 30% of the median family income for the city.

Your goal is to have four to seven alternatives. Including three or fewer options is probably a sign that you're not being expansive enough in your thinking about how to approach the problem. More than seven and you risk analytic overload, trying to cover too much terrain in a single project. It's also ideal to have policy alternatives that are distinctly different from, rather than slight variations of, each other. The idea is to creatively consider a conceptually wide range of options. All this notwithstanding, if there are only a couple of options with any prospect of being adopted, or if your client instructs you to focus on a particular option, then you should do whatever the situation requires rather than heeding my advice!

1.3 IDENTIFY CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING ALTERNATIVES

Virtually *all policy options have both pros and cons*. If someone tells you that they've found a policy that doesn't—all upside and no downside—you should treat their claim with deep skepticism. Ask them how it's possible that their amazingly great option has not already been adopted (Bardach & Patashnik, 2016). An honest answer to your question will undoubtedly reveal someone—people, institutions, firms, or politicians—who prefer the status quo to the proposed policy. And therein lies at least one downside of the proposed policy, the need to use the coercive power of public policy to override preferences of proponents of the status quo (while you may not see doing so as a problem, rest assured that the parties on the receiving end of the coercion will).

Here's another way to think about it: *By choosing one policy option over another, we experience the pros and cons of the selected option and forego the pros and cons of the other, unselected, option.* Consider a simple example. Imagine a pre-K program (like Head Start) that a large school district is thinking about adopting. It's been proven very effective but has a high cost per pupil. The School Board could roll out the program district wide for 6,000 students at a cost of \$30 million or it could offer the program to only 2,000 students at low-performing schools for \$10 million. The first option helps a lot more students (a pro), but at a higher cost (a con), than does the less costly (a pro) second option which helps fewer students (a con). On the other hand, the second option addresses those most in need of help (a pro for those lucky enough to get into the program, but a con for those who don't).

Most situations are not so simple. Without some sort of organizing framework, keeping track of all the pros and cons of multiple complex policy proposals can be very difficult, especially during heated debates. This challenge was well articulated by Benjamin Franklin two and a half centuries ago:

When these difficult Cases occur, they are difficult chiefly because while we have them under Consideration all the Reasons pro and con are not present to the Mind at the same time; but sometimes one Set present themselves, and at other times another, the first being out of Sight. Hence the various Purposes or Inclinations that alternately prevail, and the Uncertainty that perplexes us. (Franklin, 1772)

The classical model of policy analysis has a practical suggestion for Mr. Franklin: the *systematic application of a set of evaluation criteria to each policy option* under consideration. Think of criteria as “mental standards for evaluating the results of action” (Bardach & Patashnik, 2016, p. 45). Applying each criterion—in the same way, with the same method—to each alternative ensures that we use an intellectually consistent approach to evaluate the alternatives against a common set of benchmarks. Evaluation criteria also give us a way to discipline our personal preferences. If we're already inclined toward or away from one of the options, systematically taking a hard look at each alternative in light of each criterion may help us control our own biases.

It's one thing to say that systematic application of evaluation criteria will help us keep track of pros and cons. It's another to explain where evaluation criteria come from, particularly in light of Nienaber and Wildavsky's wry observation that evaluation criteria “invariably may be distinguished by three outstanding qualities: they are multiple, conflicting, and vague. They mirror, in other words, the complexity and ambivalence of human social behavior” (1973, p. 10). What follows below is my advice about developing evaluation criteria.

While the set of relevant criteria will vary from analysis to analysis, four evaluation criteria should be considered for inclusion in all policy analyses. I think of them as **off-the-shelf criteria** because once you master them, you can insert them in any analysis and in doing so, quickly jumpstart the process of getting your policy analysis sorted out. The four criteria are efficacy, cost, equity, and administrability. Let's look at each one in turn.

The first off-the-shelf criterion is **efficacy**, which means the degree to which the policy alternative is likely to mitigate the core policy problem. To be more specific, an efficacy-based criterion captures the extent to which adoption of a policy alternative might narrow the gap between the descriptive as-is and the normative to-be conditions. You probably won't use the word efficacy in your criterion; rather, you should aim for a more intuitive phrase. If the core problem is lack of community mental health services, for example, then an efficacy-based criterion might read, "maximize the number of mental health practitioners." It's also possible to have more than one efficacy-based criterion. For example, you might add a second criterion—"maximize the number of spaces in in-patient mental health facilities"—to get at another aspect of the problem.

The second off-the-shelf criterion is **cost**, which is often broken into two subcriteria: cost to the government and cost to nongovernmental parties. Governmental costs matter because policymakers are invariably allocating a limited budget across a number of competing priorities. Predicting government costs under alternative policies is usually a conceptually straightforward process: figure out the scope and magnitude of the activities that government will undertake and put a price tag on each.

Nongovernmental costs comprise two components. First, there may be **direct costs** paid by consumers, workers, firms, and institutions as a consequence of the policy. Second, there may be **indirect opportunity costs** experienced by these groups when policy limits their ability to engage in an activity to the same extent as they otherwise would in the absence of the policy. Even though they don't directly affect the public treasury, nongovernmental costs are important in policymaking because they are typically incurred by the constituents of those making policy decisions.

While important, nongovernmental costs can get tricky to calculate. If we compel a firm to install a \$1 million pollution control device, for instance, we might be tempted to tally the cost at \$1 million but doing so would not capture the full cost. The cost of production will go up for the directly regulated firm and its production will likely drop somewhat, thereby costing the firm the returns it would have earned on those lost sales and depriving customers of the value they would have received from consuming those additional units of production. We also need to consider the value of the environmental benefit created by the pollution reduction. In short, we have to take care to count all costs, avoid double counting, and compute only net costs when we're assessing policy alternatives. Microeconomists have developed sophisticated ways of

sorting out these issues (with a technique called cost–benefit analysis, or CBA); we’ll touch on CBA later in this chapter and take a close look at it in Chapter 9.

The third off-the-shelf criterion is **equity**. The term equity is a container for several related concepts like equality, liberty, justice, and security (Stone, 2012). As you develop criteria related to equity, you may want to start with a series of questions like the following, which are adapted from Stone’s work, to stimulate your thinking.

- *Rights and Duties*: What demands can a person legitimately make of other people or of society in general? What obligations legitimately bind people to act on behalf of others?
- *Equality*: To what degree do people enjoy equal opportunities? Can inequality of results be satisfactorily explained?
- *Liberty*: To what degree are individual liberties unnecessarily limited? Is the power of governments, firms, and institutions appropriately limited?
- *Justice*: Are people treated fairly by governments and institutions? To what degree is there meaningful participation in collective decision-making?
- *Stability, Security, and Safety*: Are important social systems reasonably stable or are they changing rapidly in disruptive ways? Are people secure in their economic situation with resources to cover the costs of daily life? Do people enjoy physical and emotional safety?

As you develop answers to these questions and ponder their relevance to your analysis, you’ll need to convert them into the form of evaluation criteria, along the lines of ‘minimize racial disparities in criminal sentencing,’ ‘maximize freedom of landowners to develop their property as they choose,’ or ‘ensure that all workers receive a living wage.’ We’ll take a deep dive into the process of applying normative thinking to policy analysis in Chapter 8.

The final off-the-shelf criterion is **administrability**. Here, our focus is on the ease with which a particular policy can be readily implemented in the real world. Why focus on administrability? Simple: words on a page don’t matter. We only reap the benefits of programs that are successfully implemented. Similarly, good intentions don’t matter; if a program has a convoluted, hard-to-understand structure, requires sophisticated expertise, is intolerant of small mistakes, or makes unrealistic assumptions about folks’ ability to implement it, the program will likely fail to deliver all of the hoped-for positive outcomes.

Logic and experience suggest that big, complex programs are harder to administer than are small, straightforward programs. Think also about which agencies and levels of government will be involved in implementation. A program under the control of a single entity within one level of government will be easier to administer than one

where staffing, budget, and authority are spread across multiple agencies at the Federal, state, or local levels, and perhaps also to nonprofit organizations. You'll also need to think about whether agencies charged with implementation responsibilities have the staff skills, physical infrastructure, and requisite budget to successfully execute the tasks they've been given. Finally, consider whether the program structure allows for continuous improvement so that managers can try different approaches, keeping what works and discarding what doesn't. Such a program will be easier to administer than one where policymakers have set a rigid structure and made it very hard to adjust the program without going all the way back through the policymaking process.

You'll note that there is one potential criterion—maximize political feasibility—that doesn't make my list of off-the-shelf criteria. That doesn't mean that politics is irrelevant to policy analysis. To the contrary, very few policies are put in place except as the result of a political process (Eggers & O'Leary, 2009; Mead, 2013). It's just that *doing a good job of political analysis within policy analysis is almost impossible*. There are at least two reasons why this is true.

First, political bargaining about policy adoption doesn't always follow a predictable pattern. You might think a particular policy option simply isn't politically feasible, but behind closed doors, one vote may be traded for another and suddenly the option becomes viable. As former Congressman Barney Frank put it "The key to understanding deal making in Congress is to remember that the ankle bone is connected to the shoulder bone. Anything can be the basis of a deal" (Binder & Lee, 2015, p. 246).

Second, the politics behind a policy may change not only because of deal making among politicians but because of persuasive policy arguments, coupled with an effective lobbying campaign by the policy's proponents (and perhaps an ineffective campaign by its opponents). In other words, even though your initial appraisal of a promising policy option might be that it's politically infeasible, it could gain political support over time as its merits become apparent to larger and more powerful audiences (rendering your initial judgment incorrect). Conversely, a policy proposal that initially enjoys strong political support may be subjected to relentless attacks by its opponents and become politically infeasible over time. The bottom line? The political feasibility of a particular policy option is a dynamic and fluid concept that can be very hard to capture in a policy analysis.

What's more, an overemphasis on what is politically feasible may distort the analytic process. *Just because a policy is politically popular, that doesn't make it a good idea; likewise, just because a policy option lacks political support, that doesn't make it a bad idea*. In short, adding political feasibility as an evaluation criterion may bias your analysis toward popular policies and away from unpopular policies that are strong on their merits.

Mead suggests a way out of this dilemma. He recommends that, initially, politics be left out of policy analyses so that options can be judged solely on the basis of their intrinsic pros and cons. After identifying the most promising policy option, the policy analyst then investigates how the political world might react to that option. If the

reaction is likely positive, great! If not, the analyst revisits the preferred option to assess whether it can be adjusted to mollify its political critics without undermining its fundamental effectiveness. The analyst may also choose to revisit the second- and third-best options to determine whether, if politically acceptable, they still might be worthy and reasonable responses to the policy problem of concern. Alternatively, he or she might choose to wait for the politics to change, rather than moving forward with a politically acceptable, but likely ineffective, option. Finally, the analyst might opt to back off and allow time for politicians, lobbyists, and/or citizens to change their minds (Mead, 2013).

While these four off-the-shelf criteria can jump start your development of the evaluation criteria for your analysis, you'll need to do more work before you can finalize the set of criteria for your analysis. At this point, you want to think about possible **unintended consequences** of your policy options and, rather than letting them surprise you after implementation, find a way to explicitly factor them into your analysis. Shift into brainstorming mode and try to come up with as many ways as possible to evaluate your list of policy alternatives. Write down everything that comes to mind without prejudging whether they're good or bad ideas. Here are some suggestions to get you started.

- Think about each policy alternative. Pretend you're a consultant being paid first to viciously tear it down and then to enthusiastically promote it. What would you say?
- Think about your favorite alternative. What do you like about it? Think about your least favorite alternative. What do you dislike about it?
- What do advocates claim are the strengths and weaknesses of policies being debated?
- Assume each alternative affected you directly, and that you don't like it. Where are the loopholes? How would you avoid compliance? What if everyone behaved like that?
- To what degree will the effects of each option change over time, for better or worse?

Jot down answers to these questions and then look at what you have in the context of our four off-the-shelf criteria. Perhaps the four criteria will adequately surface all the issues that you just brainstormed. If not, you may need additional criteria to permit a full understanding of *all* the pros and cons of *all* the options. You may have to cut and paste, delete, merge, and rearrange your messy notes but, with a little work, you should have a working draft of your evaluation criteria.

One last step remains before you can finalize your criteria: you must *ensure that you have a complete list of evaluation criteria*. All factors that might affect the policy

decision must be captured in the criteria. Imagine you're working on a plan to modify local bus routes and fares to deal with budget cutbacks. Aiming to minimize impact on transit riders, you include criteria related to cost, convenience, and ridership. Failing to recognize the connection between transit and car use, you neglect to include a criterion to capture impacts on local drivers. Based on your recommendation, bus fares are raised but riders desert the system and start driving, leading to increased traffic congestion. Leaving out an important criterion can leave you regretting the conclusion you drew from your analysis. By way of illustration, [Exhibit 1-5](#) provides a set of evaluation criteria that could be used to assess policies for our hypothetical Northern Virginia city facing a loss of affordable housing.

Exhibit 1-5 Hypothetical Set of Evaluation Criteria

Maximize Affordable Housing: Measured as the estimated number of rental units in 2025 with rents that do not exceed 30% of the income of a family at three times the poverty level.

Minimize Cost: Measured as the cost to the city over ten years of operating the program.

Maximize Development Incentives: Measured using a qualitative scale of high, moderate, and low. Metric is intended to capture city's desire for ongoing increases in amount of housing.

Maximize Administrability: Measured using a qualitative scale of high, moderate, and low. Metric is intended to reflect the likelihood of successful program implementation by the city.

Minimize Social Disruption: Measured using a qualitative scale of high, moderate, and low. Metric is intended to reflect degree of stigmatization of program participation and potential segregation of low-income residents.

1.4 CREATE A CRITERIA-ALTERNATIVES MATRIX AND PREDICT THE PERFORMANCE OF EACH ALTERNATIVE

You've settled on a problem definition, identified policies that deserve scrutiny, and selected the evaluation criteria to systematically assess the pros and cons of the alternatives. In short, you've framed the analysis by setting boundaries on what you will and won't consider. Create a **Criteria-Alternatives Matrix** (or CAM²) like the one shown in [Exhibit 1-6](#). Use the short titles of your policy alternatives and evaluation criteria as row and column headers. You might want to identify the client and provide a brief version of the problem definition to title the matrix. For now, the cells

²Rhymes with ham. Note that there are other names for a CAM, including a decision matrix and a policy scorecard.

Exhibit 1-6 Illustrative Criteria-Alternatives Matrix

		Evaluation Criteria				
		# of Affordable Housing Units in 2025	Incremental Cost to City over 10 Years	Continued Incentives for Development	Ease of Administration by City	Extent of Social Disruption
Policy Options	Current Policy					
	Rent Control					
	Public Housing					
	Vouchers					
	Developer Regulations					

of the matrix are empty but eventually, they will be filled in with short statements about the performance of the alternatives.

By the way, if you asked me to single out the most important feature of the classical model of policy analysis, I would name the Criteria-Alternatives Matrix. Why? *A thoughtful and carefully constructed CAM can be a powerful tool for organizing the debate* about how to address a policy problem.

While the CAM, by itself, can't tell you what to do about a particular policy problem, it will provide a structure that helps people focus on what's important and avoid talking past one another. One of the most important contributions a policy analyst can make is to bring clarity to the complexity of policy debates. For this reason, learning to build and use CAMs that are complete, clear, and user-friendly is a skill worth mastering.

Once you've created the (as yet incomplete) CAM, look it over and double check that you're satisfied with it. Is anything missing? Have you left out an important alternative or criterion? Did you include an alternative or criterion that, on second thought, should be dropped or perhaps revised? If so, now is the time to fix problems with the CAM. Because you haven't yet done the hard work of predicting the performance of each alternative and making trade-offs across alternatives, changing the

CAM now can save you pain and suffering later if you try to revise it midway through your analysis.

After you have finalized the structure of your CAM, it's time to methodically work through each of its cells and think about how each policy alternative will perform with respect to each criterion. Ultimately, you will be inserting only a short phrase into each cell, but don't think that doing so is an easy process. Your task is to transport your mind into the future and *imagine a world where the policy alternative has been fully implemented*. When you're in that imaginary world, take a look around and figure out to what extent the alternative is meeting each evaluation criterion. Take some notes and move onto another imaginary world in which a different alternative has been put in place. Look again at each criterion and judge the performance of *that* alternative. Sometimes the process is easier if, as you travel to the imaginary future, you work through the matrix one criterion at a time (rather than one alternative at a time). Doing so may help you apply the criteria in a more consistent fashion across alternatives.

There are several techniques for making this process as rigorous as possible. If your criterion lends itself to quantification, your predicted outcome might be a specific number. For instance, if your criterion focuses on governmental costs, perhaps you can build up a cost estimate for each policy option by looking at all the activities that an agency would undertake to implement that option and then attach a price tag to each one. The sum of all the cost detail is then entered in the CAM.

Another way to predict the performance of an option in your analysis is to look for analogous existing policies that have already been implemented elsewhere, in another jurisdiction.³ If you can find policies like the one you're assessing, you may be able to extrapolate from the performance of those other policies to predict how a similar policy might perform in your jurisdiction. As you do the extrapolation, however, be sure to take account of differences, both in context and in content. By context, I mean the ways in which the two jurisdictions might differ—bigger or smaller, wealthier or poorer, more rural or more urban—in ways that could affect the degree to which results in the other jurisdiction are predictive of the results you can expect in your jurisdiction. As regards content, be sure to think about whether the policy as implemented elsewhere is really the same as the policy you're contemplating for your situation. Seemingly small differences in program design may have big effects on results. If you are thinking about implementing a different version of the policy option in your jurisdiction, be sure to adjust your predicted outcomes accordingly. Don't let an inability to quantify a policy outcome deter you from including it in your CAM. Instead, try to cobble together evidence and logic

³We'll revisit the nature of inferential reasoning in Chapter 5 and the process of extrapolating from other jurisdictions in Chapter 13.

to draw conclusions about how each policy option will perform. Your carefully considered judgment is almost certainly more instructive than no information at all. In short, don't be afraid to populate your CAM with narrative predictions such as

- High, medium, or low cost,
- Simple, somewhat challenging, or very difficult to implement, or
- Equal, disproportionate, or very disproportionate impacts across socioeconomic lines.

As you fill in your matrix with the predicted performance of each option, there are three things to keep in mind. First, if you are uncertain about the accuracy of a particular prediction, don't hide your uncertainty. It's fine to say something like 'the cost of Option A is likely to be somewhere between \$10 million and \$20 million' or 'Option B will probably be very difficult to implement, but with a strong management team and adequate resources, effective implementation is possible.' And, while you do want to characterize uncertainty, take care not to impose your own risk preferences on the analysis. You may be a risk-averse person who would shy away from an option with highly uncertain outcomes, but your client may feel differently about risk and not worry so much about it. It's best to leave those judgments to the policymaker.

Second, decide at the outset whether you will report **absolute or incremental results**. By way of simple example, consider a large city that currently has 2,500 drug overdoses per year. Under Option A, you believe the number would drop to 2,000 and under Option B, to 1,500. You could either report that Option A reduces overdoses *by* 500 per year (incremental) or *to* 2,000 overdoses (absolute). Neither number is incorrect, but whichever approach you use, be consistent. Offering a conclusion that Option A reduces overdoses by 500 while Option B reduces overdoses to 1,500 is needlessly confusing.

Third, recall that above all, policy analysis is an applied and pragmatic process that takes place in the context of specific pending decisions. If time is short, data are sparse, and a decision is looming, you *may need to content yourself with completing the CAM with your best guess* of each outcome (sometimes referred to as a 'quick and dirty analysis' or a 'back of the envelope' estimate). In such cases, annotate your CAM with language that makes clear the tentative and uncertain nature of your results. Do so on the same page as the CAM, to avoid separating these important caveats from your results. When you're finished, you should have something that resembles the Criteria-Alternatives Matrix shown in [Exhibit 1-7](#) for our hypothetical Northern Virginia city.

Exhibit 1-7 Illustrative Criteria-Alternatives Matrix Including Predicted Outcomes^a

Client: City Manager

Problem: Loss of Affordable Housing in Northern Virginia

		Evaluation Criteria				
		# of Affordable Housing Units in 2025	Incremental Cost to City over 10 Years	Continued Incentives for Development	Ease of Administration by City	Extent of Social Disruption
Policy Options	Current Policy	1,000 (+0 units)	\$0	High	High	Moderate
	Rent Control	2,250 (+1,250 units)	\$0	Low	Moderate	Low
	Public Housing	1,500 (+500 units)	\$350 million	Moderate	Low	High
	Vouchers	2,000 (+1,000 units)	\$240 million	High	Moderate	Low
	Developer Regulations	2,500 (+1,500 units)	\$0	Moderate	High	Low

^aThe information in this matrix is purely hypothetical, intended only to illustrate the process of completing a criteria-alternatives matrix.

1.5 MAKE THE TRADE-OFFS ACROSS ALTERNATIVES

What, exactly, do I mean by the word **trade-off**? It may be helpful to think of a transaction that involves a *get and a give*. For example, you go to the grocery store to stock up for the coming week. You *get* a bag's worth of groceries and you in turn you *give* a chunk of your hard-earned cash to the store.

Let's apply this concept to the policy world with another example. I recently heard a news story about bike and pedestrian safety near a subway station. On-street parking didn't leave enough space for everyone to get by safely, leading to accidents. The city decided to remove 29 parking spots on the streets around the station. Doing so sounds like it was probably a good idea, but even in this simple case, there was a trade-off, a *get and a give*. The *get* was lower risks for bikers and walkers, while the *give* was reduced convenience and mobility for drivers, who could no longer park near the station.

Your trade-off analysis will be built upon the completed criteria-alternatives matrix. The first step in trade-off analysis is to revisit the CAM and investigate whether there are

any ways to simplify it. You should begin by checking whether you've inadvertently given a policy alternative more credit than it deserves because its predicted outcome exceeds a desired performance **threshold**. By way of example, consider two approaches to a post-disaster assistance program. Suppose that Option A can deliver 500,000 meals per day while Option B can deliver 600,000. Option B is better, right? Perhaps not. If there are only 500,000 people who need to be fed, then both options clear the threshold and we should be indifferent between the two (at least with respect to number of meals per day).

After adjusting the CAM to ensure that all options are treated similarly with respect to relevant thresholds, the next check is for **dominated options**. A policy option is dominated when its performance is *inferior to another option on at least one evaluation criteria, and equal to or inferior to, that same option on all other criteria*. If a policy option is dominated, it can be dropped from analysis on the grounds that there is at least one unambiguously better option available.

Take a look at [Exhibit 1-7](#), where you will find two dominated options. The Rent Control option is dominated by Developer Regulations: it provides fewer affordable units, has the same cost, has a greater adverse impact on incentives for development, is more difficult for the city to administer, and has the same impact on social disruption. In other words, there is no criterion on which Rent Control outperforms Developer Regulations, and at least one criterion where its performance is worse. As long as we're sure we haven't left out any important evaluation criteria, we can safely say that Rent Control is a dominated alternative, not worth continued analysis. The Public Housing option is also dominated, both by Vouchers and by Developer Regulations. Take a minute to review [Exhibit 1-7](#) and make sure you understand why this option is dominated.

New analysts sometimes make the mistake of incorrectly identifying an alternative as dominated. This typically occurs when, as they consider each criterion, they find other options—but not always the same option—that are superior. Remember, *the check for dominance is a series of pairwise tests*; you compare one option in its entirety—across all criteria—to another, one pair of options at a time.

Having eliminated dominated alternatives from your CAM, you next want to see if one or more criteria can be dropped. *If all options are rated equally on a criterion, then that criterion is no longer relevant to the decision-making process*. Again, consider [Exhibit 1-7](#), but this time imagine that Ease of Administration had been rated as 'High' rather than 'Moderate' for the Vouchers option. Then, after eliminating the Public Housing and Rent Control options as dominated, the three remaining alternatives would all be rated the same on Ease of Administration (i.e., 'High'). In this example, no matter which option we select, we would be left with a program where the Ease of Administration is 'High,' meaning that our desire to maximize administrability will not help us select among the available alternatives.

Having cleaned up the CAM by recalibrating options that exceed threshold levels, discarding dominated alternatives, and removing any evaluation criteria on which all alternatives perform identically, you can begin the process of making **trade-offs**.

When it comes to trade-off analysis in the classical model, there are at least four methods you might use. Some scholars refer to the first three as **solution methods** (Weimer & Vining, 2017). The implication is that, having started with a problem definition, our ultimate goal is to solve the problem. While this vocabulary has an internal logic to it, it can also be misleading. Rarely, if ever, can a policy analysis alone be used to *solve* social problems. It's more appropriate to characterize a well-executed policy analysis as a helpful product that can inform policymakers' thinking about what actions they might take.

The first approach to evaluating a completed criteria-alternatives matrix—shown at the top of [Exhibit 1-8](#)—is **cost-benefit analysis** (CBA). This approach is used when

Exhibit 1-8 Illustrative Examples of Trade-off Analysis					
Cost-Benefit Analysis All Impacts Monetized Decision Rule: Select Alternative With Highest Net Benefit					
Alternative	Total Benefit	Total Cost	Net Benefit		
A	\$50 million	\$100 million	−\$50 million (net cost)		
B	\$200 million	\$75 million	\$125 million		
C	\$150 million	\$50 million	\$100 million		
Cost-Effectiveness Analysis All Impacts but One Monetized Decision Rule: Select Alternative With Highest Cost Effectiveness					
Alternative	Net Cost	Benefit Metric	Cost per Unit of Benefit		
Q	\$15 million	10,000	\$1,500		
R	\$25 million	7,500	\$3,333		
S	\$18 million	12,500	\$1,440		
Multiattribute Analysis All Impacts Scored From 1 to 10 Decision Rule: Select Alternative With Highest Aggregate Score					
Alternative	Metric 1	Metric 2	Metric 3	Metric 4	Total Score
X	8.0	6.2	2.3	9.7	26.2
Y	4.2	8.8	9.5	7.8	30.3
Z	6.5	7.3	5.5	8.2	27.5

all aspects of the problem can be convincingly monetized. In CBA, you replace every entry in the CAM with a dollar figure, positive for benefits or negative for costs. Once everything has been monetized, you add up the costs and benefits of each alternative. The decision rule is to *select the alternative with the highest net benefits* (or lowest net costs, depending on how the problem is framed). In [Exhibit 1-8](#), Alternative B, with net benefits of \$125 million, would be preferred to Alternative C (net benefits of \$100 million) and to Alternative A (net benefits of *negative* \$50 million, meaning that it has more costs than benefits).

The second approach—shown in the middle of [Exhibit 1-8](#)—is **cost-effectiveness analysis** (CEA). With CEA, all attributes except one are monetized. The remaining attribute—usually the one where monetization would be most conceptually difficult or politically controversial—is left in its natural units. A classic application of the cost-effectiveness method is in traffic and highway safety programs where various infrastructure projects affect the probability of a fatal accident. In such cases, the metric of interest is a statistical estimate of the number of lives that would likely be saved by the alternatives under consideration. When combined with the net cost of the project, we can compute the cost-per-life-saved (i.e., the cost-effectiveness metric), and *select the option with the highest cost-effectiveness* (i.e., with the lowest cost per life saved). In the case of [Exhibit 1-8](#), this would be Alternative S.⁴

The third technique—shown in the lower portion of [Exhibit 1-8](#)—is **multiattribute analysis** (MAA) where, instead of monetary metrics, a score (typically from 1 to 10) is used to capture the performance of each policy alternative with respect to each evaluation criterion. For the method to work, you must ensure that a “10” always represents the most advantageous result for all criteria. The scores of each alternative with respect to each criterion are then summed to generate an aggregate score for each alternative. The decision rule is then to *select the option with the highest score*. In [Exhibit 1-8](#), Alternative Y, with its score of 30.3, is thus preferred over Alternatives X (26.2) and Z (27.5).

These three techniques (CBA, CEA, and MAA) are intended to create **commensurability** across options. *Commensurability ensures that each predicted outcome is valued with a metric that has the same intrinsic meaning regardless of the alternative or criterion being assessed.* In CBA, it is ensured because all results are reported in monetary terms (e.g., a dollar of benefit under one option has the same value as a dollar of benefit under another). With CEA, everything is also monetized except for the effectiveness metric, which itself is calculated in a commensurable fashion for all

⁴A cost-effectiveness metric, however, doesn't capture the scale of the policy option. A very cost-effective highway safety measure may, for example, only be applicable to a very small part of the roadway system.

alternatives (i.e., we use the same methodology in a consistent way to estimate the effectiveness of each alternative).

Finally with MAA, the scoring system aims to ensure that a one-point difference in the rating of one option has the same value, or importance, to the decision as a one-point difference in another option's rating. If we succeed in ensuing commensurability, then finding the optimal decision is simply a matter of selecting the option with the highest net benefit, cost-effectiveness, or score.

You will, however, *often find it impossible to combine all relevant aspects of a policy alternative into a single, commensurable metric*. Sometimes, the problem is a technical one. Suppose you hope to use CBA to identify the right policy choice. There may not be sufficient data or a suitable method, or perhaps simply not enough time, for a microeconomist to attach a dollar figure to policy outcomes like the gentrification of a neighborhood and the displacement of long-time residents. More often, the problem is a paradigmatic one. You may convince yourself that your adroit and sophisticated use of CBA, CEE, or MAA has established commensurability across options and pointed to a singularly optimal alternative, but you may very well find that your audience—the policymakers you aspire to advise—don't find your methods intuitively understandable, or at worst, reject them as fundamentally flawed.

Nonetheless, even if you can't use CBA, CEE, or MAA as a solution method for your analysis, all is not lost—far from it. Your CAM is a gold mine of insight from which you can extract a great deal of information that will help you frame a clear trade-off statement.

Take another look at the completed Criteria-Alternatives Matrix in [Exhibit 1-7](#) and think about how you might describe the get and the give of the policy options for addressing affordable housing. Recall that we dropped Public Housing and Rent Control as dominated options. Our task now is to describe the decision choice (and its attendant trade-offs) in succinct, plain language. There is no one right way to do this, but take a look at what I came up with:

If the city chooses to address the affordable housing issue, it could use Vouchers or Developer Regulations. Developer Regulations are predicted to add 500 more units of affordable housing than would Vouchers, while also avoiding the \$240 million cost and increased administrative burden of Vouchers. This regulatory approach will, however, likely undermine incentives for development—a city priority—in a way that vouchers probably won't. Strong incentives for development can also be preserved by the current policy, though at a cost of 1,000 to 1,500 fewer affordable units. The city must trade off the importance of protecting development incentives against fewer affordable units and against the cost and burden of administering the vouchers program.

Clearly, these 125 words of narrative prose on trade-offs lack the precision of a solution method that simply identifies *the* optimal policy choice. On the other hand, *prose-based trade-off statements bring to the fore the kinds of information that almost all policymakers are likely to care deeply about.*

So, am I saying that the three solution methods—CBA, CEE, and MAA—have no value? Absolutely not. All three methods impose a discipline and rigor on the analytic decision-making process that are antecedents to a well-crafted narrative trade-off statement. And, in many cases, the analytic assumptions and data needs of these methods can be satisfactorily addressed. In such cases, the optimum solution identified by the method may indeed be the best choice for policymakers to adopt.

At this point in the sequential approach of classical policy analysis, many policy analysis textbooks tell readers that it is now time to recommend a preferred option. For reasons detailed in Chapter 3, I argue that it is rarely possible to use policy analysis to unambiguously identify *the* optimal response to a policy problem. So, *if you do make a recommendation, don't oversell it.*

1.6 COMMUNICATE THE RESULTS

The final step in the classical policy analysis framework is to convey your results to the appropriate audience, usually your client but often other interested folks as well. A traditional mechanism for doing so is the “policy memo,” a short communication of two to three pages (certainly less than 1,500 words) from you to your client or boss.

Policy writing is very different from the academic writing that appears in scholarly journals or the essays you wrote in Freshman English. It's also unlike fiction writing, where intricate plotting, broad scene-setting, and rhetorical flourishes are commonplace. Instead, a policy memo is meant to be read and understood quickly. It is written in a succinct and to-the-point fashion, with simple wording, short sentences, brief paragraphs, and explanatory headings. Jargon that the reader may not understand should be avoided. The analyst's conclusions are traditionally presented in the first paragraph of a policy memo rather than at the end. A more extensive written report describing the analysis might also be required.

Either in lieu of or in addition to a policy memo, you may need to provide the results of your analysis in a verbal briefing, often supported by a set of slides. A policy analysis presentation is not like the Gettysburg Address or a Shakespearean soliloquy. You need to get and hold the audience's attention *without manipulating their emotions.* At the same time, you need to deliver complex analytic results *without putting the audience to sleep.* In short, you need an engaging yet substantive style as you deliver a credible but neutral and evenhanded presentation.

Communicating your results also happens to be the final step in the retrospective policy analysis framework described in the next chapter. The guiding principles of clear communication are similar in both cases. Rather than repeat the same material, I've integrated the discussion of how best to present analytic results—prospective and retrospective—into a single section that appears in Chapter 7.

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CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter began by noting that even though the classical model of prospective policy analysis has multiple shortcomings, all aspiring policy analysts need to master it. By doing so, analysts can take advantage of the model's many capabilities while being careful not to apply it in situations to which it is not well suited.

We then worked through the six steps of the classical model, starting with the problem definition process. We next looked at some suggestions for developing potential policy alternatives that might mitigate a problem and considered the process of coming up with a comprehensive set of evaluation criteria to sort out the pros and cons of the alternatives being debated.

We then considered how a criteria-alternatives matrix can be used to systematically capture our predictions of how each alternative might perform with respect to each criterion. Four methods of making trade-offs across alternatives were described. The chapter closed with some of the key features of policy writing and communication, noting that Chapter 7 takes a deeper dive into the process of effectively sharing analytic results.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Pick a policy issue you care about. What do you think the problem is? How does the status quo differ from your preferred situation? Why does the problem exist? What are its most important consequences?
2. What are some of the ways you think we could tackle the problem you identified? Do you already have a favorite proposal? Can you get past your predispositions to identify other reasonable options? Can you identify each policy choice in a detailed but succinct fashion?
3. What are the most important considerations relevant to the choice of a policy option to tackle your problem of concern? Will the set of criteria you've identified surface all of the important pros and cons of all the options under consideration?
4. Try to predict the future performance of each alternative with respect to each criterion. How would you defend the validity of your predictions? Where did you encounter difficulty in coming up with a prediction? How confident are you in your predictions?

5. Develop a succinct trade-off statement that captures the consequences of picking one alternative over another. Were you able to admit the shortcomings of the alternative you most prefer? Were you able to acknowledge the strengths of the alternative you most dislike?
6. How helpful do you think the classical model of prospective policy analysis will be during your career? What are its strengths and weaknesses?

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