

FRST 415 – Policy Analysis for Advocacy Tutorial 2: Criteria and Alternatives

Step Two: Criteria Identification

The second step in policy analysis is to identify the criteria that will be used to compare, measure and select among alternative policy options. Criteria are essentially the values that you will be using to judge the success or failure of a particular policy option.

Some of these criteria will be determined by the policy analyst's client. For example, a politician is going to want to ensure a policy is politically acceptable. A business will be concerned that it won't hurt their competitiveness, and an environmental group will be concerned about minimizing environmental impacts. Other times, criteria will need to be inferred from the problem context

For the policy analyst, criteria should include factors relevant to the primary stakeholders, but also consider the public interest, groups that may be involved in the future, and opposing interests. For the policy advocate, criteria should be driven by the group's mission.

Some common criteria are policy effectiveness, efficiency or cost-effectiveness, equity or fairness, political acceptability, and robustness and improvability. For environmental and resource management issues, some combination of economic, social, and environmental criteria are usually appropriate. For environmental and resource management issues, some combination of economic, social, and environmental criteria are usually appropriate.

Generally, the more specific the criteria the more useful it will be for comparing policy alternatives. For example, "jobs gained in the oil and gas sector in Alberta" is a more useful evaluative criterion than something more general, like "benefit to the Canadian economy." Some criteria can be measured numerically (i.e. number of jobs gained), while others are more difficult to quantify (i.e. biodiversity loss). Establishing a set of criteria early sets up rules to follow for comparing alternatives, which is important for avoiding the temptation to rationalize preferred options later.

You should be sure to consider multiple criteria, but not so many as to become unwieldy in the analysis and its presentation. Try to limit the number of criteria to three or four. If you find you have more than this that seem important, try to think of ways to consolidate them to reduce the number.

Step Three: Alternative (or Option) Specification

Alternative specification is the process of generating policy options for the decision-maker to consider. These are potential solutions to the policy problem. These alternatives can be generated from client and stakeholder preferences, as well as from consideration of the list of criteria developed in step two. The goal of this stage is to generate as many good alternative solutions to the policy problem as possible, taking into consideration the full range of relevant stakeholder interests.

I find that some students-as-analysts get confused by the use of the words “policy alternative” because they think it either needs to be something that is different from what’s happening now, or something they can agree with. But it’s important to realize that the status quo—doing nothing—is also an alternative, and you might find it very useful to include that in your analysis.

You don’t need to agree with an alternative to include it in your analysis, even if you are a policy advocate. An effective advocacy tool can be to include the alternatives preferred by your opponents, and use your criteria and analysis (step 4) to show why your preferred alternative is superior. If you find the term alternative a bit confusing, you can use “policy options” or “policy choices” instead.

Lists of alternatives can start out quite long as most policy problems are highly complex with a multitude of possible responses. Try to avoid prematurely settling on only few options early on, as this may rule out other effective, but perhaps less obvious, options. The challenge at this stage is to think hard, and be creative. Brainstorming sessions are often the best way to quickly generate options. If the options seem limited at first, further research and analysis may be necessary to discover new possibilities. Work on starting comprehensively, but as you progress in your thinking, narrow down the alternative to between two and four options.

Different problem structures will require different approaches to generating alternatives. If the issue is a binary one (a yes or no policy decision), it may be necessary to consider linking issues to more appealing options. For example, perhaps environmental groups would be less opposed to a pipeline project if its approval was conditional on a more robust carbon pricing scheme being put in place. This process can often lead to a redefinition of the problem as new angles and challenges are discovered.

Tasks for criteria and alternatives tutorial (in class):

1. Select 3-4 criteria for your group to use to measure the desirability of alternative policy options. By 11:30, be prepared to present 3 criteria to class.
2. Identify at least two, preferably three, alternative policy options to address the policy problem you’ve identified. By 12:05, be prepared to present two alternatives to the status quo to class

Resource: Eugene Bardach, *A Practical Guide for Policy Analysis*, 3rd edition, Washington, DC: CQ Press, pp. 15-37.