

# American Thinker

August 18, 2022

## Can Any Good Come Out of the Bureaucracy?

By [Stephen F. Gambescia and Stew Bolno](#)

*Stephen F. Gambescia is a professor of health services administration at Drexel University. Stew Bolno is an organizational effectiveness consultant in Philadelphia.*

### The early bureaucratic state

It has been well over a hundred years since German social theorist [Max Weber](#) (1864–1920) coined the term "bureaucracy," delineating at length its characteristics and discussing its benefits and shortcomings. Thereafter, students of social theory, organization theory, and management, among others, have read in part his influential works, and practitioners have been wise in understanding just how bureaucracies run.

The six major [characteristics of bureaucracy](#) are 1) task specialization, 2) formal selection and training of personnel, 3) impersonal approach to the work at hand, 4) hierarchical system of authority, 5) many rules and regulations "on the books" that must be followed, and 6) career advancement and ambition.

While references to "the bureaucracy" and "the bureaucrats" are generally pejorative, there are impressive feats that bureaucracies can accomplish, such as building public works, running school systems, training a readied army, or creating a devotion to a religion. Such entities, at times, get high marks for efficiency and effectiveness metrics in accomplishing organizational goals.

Modern social theorist James Q. Wilson (1931–2012) continued to study bureaucracies. Like earlier thinkers, he found that bureaucracies are remarkable in accomplishing major social goods but wanting in their responsiveness to acute needs of the people. Wilson, in his tome [\*Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It\*](#), focused on government bureaucracies. Much has been written about "the rise of the bureaucratic state" and the rise of big government at all levels in the U.S. The Founders, and certainly the Anti-Federalists, wanted assurance that the Executive Branch, through the morass of its unelected operatives, would not be telling us how to live our lives.

### **We are our brother's keeper**

The Founders of our country clearly wanted government to be limited. They would be disappointed to learn how massive government has grown at all levels. One reason for wanting less government is that part of our American ideology is we generally believe "we are our brother's keeper." While shifting over the years, the conventional thought was that we don't expect government to be at our beck and call. We were founded in a [\*spirit of community\*](#), with shared values and a penchant to help others. Aside from our well known principles of liberty, equality, and democracy, we are a fraternal people.

This sense of fraternity is operationalized through our many [\*nonprofit organizations\*](#), whose health, welfare, and charitable works complement what government can do. This aspect of the American character was apparent to Alexis de Tocqueville, the famous French visitor to America, who wrote in [\*Democracy in America\*](#) that "Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions, constantly form associations. ... Wherever, at the head of some new undertaking, you see the Government in France, or a man of rank in England, in the United States you will be sure to find an association." Generally, regardless of one's political party affiliation, Americans welcome nonprofit organizations that can do good work, relieve government of the burden of such work, and reduce the need for the public to fund this work via taxes.

### **Enduring problems need policy responses that work**

Poverty is not a new problem for government and organizations to ameliorate. Jesus Christ spoke about the poor, and Charles Dickens used this population as a basis for many bestsellers. Marvin Olasky, a prolific author of books on socio-economic and political policy, in his seminal work on welfare and social policy, [\*The Tragedy of American Compassion\*](#) (1996), quotes Charles

Chauncey in 1752, who said a clear distinction must be made "between those needy people who are able and those who are unable, to employ themselves in Labour." It was based upon a theological view that stressed man's sinfulness. Olasky continued by stating that "enforcing work among the able-bodied was not seen as oppressive. The objective was to treat all human beings as members of the community with responsibilities, rather than as animals. There was an expectation the poor should be educated to believe they had a responsibility to society more than the reverse."

In the social health and welfare work today, it appears that the public welfare bureaucracy may be more interested in maintaining itself than reducing the need for it. The employees can become trapped in the profession as becoming an agent of the individual, over and above being an adviser focusing on helping people to improve their condition. This type of role conflict diminishes the ability of the professional to be objective, critical, and a facilitator for change. Inevitably, the "expert" will become cynical, and the "client" will become obstinate. This outcome benefits no one.

### **Return to authentic policy analysis**

Today, even after decades of attempts at "social experiments" to solve our social problems, our cities are still filthy, the extent of the homelessness rises, drug overdoses pile up, suicide rates are increasing, serious crimes are getting worse, and there is an overall penchant for lawlessness — even among our youth! Perhaps the "experts" in public health and welfare policies should liberate themselves from policy alternatives that are questionable, but in vogue, and return to age-old approaches of systematic policy analysis that were tossed out during the past couple of decades.

Similar to the conventional disdain for the bureaucrats, the rise of the *technocrats* did not fare well in the public's eyes. Calls by scientists and engineers to scratch the human project and build a new system were challenged by popular novels, led by Aldous Huxley's [\*Brave New World\*](#) (1932) and George Orwell's [\*Nineteen Eighty-Four\*](#) (1948). However, the technocrats encouraged professionals to consider revisiting *policy analysis*, lest we err by throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Understandably, people have grown tired of being bossed around by the self-proclaimed enlightened politicians. Today, these characters promise either silver-bullet fixes or extreme measures to problems, thus risking a world run by the [\*Leviathan\*](#).

We have negated the art and science of policy analysis to help solve new and enduring social, health, and welfare problems. Policy analysis is a longstanding approach designed to find "the best" public policy measure to inform policymakers. We're aware that political circumstances will generally affect government decision-makers; however, it is fair to say that today's policymaking influencers, such as legislators, bureaucrats, interest groups, and corporate executives, often marginalize rational policy analysis. Worldviews, political power, and emotion often rule the day, leaving behind the well vetted approach to making policy within the well recognized stream of influences: [problem definition, policy alternatives, and political circumstances](#).

Policy analysis is a system or set of steps to arrive at an agreeable policy measure with a positive outcome. There are several systems used by policy analysts, such as the classic "eightfold path to more effective problem solving" outlined by university scholars [Eugene Bardach and Eric Patashnick](#). The system moves through these steps: problem definition, assembling evidence, looking at alternatives, selecting criteria for review, looking at outcomes, understanding trade-offs, making the decision, and telling the story of "why this choice."

Policy analysis needs to be undertaken in an objective, disciplined, unbiased, and politically neutral manner. This does not mean that the analysts and advisers need to be disinterested and impersonal. In fact, a high-quality policy analysis system looks at the breadth and depth of components ([inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes](#)) and how these collectively impact shareholders and stakeholders. Furthermore, there should be a sharp eye toward unintended consequences.

### **We should demand "the best advice"**

[Politics is about who gets what, why, when, and how](#), plus the all-important "who pays." The who, what, why, and who pays are generally in the hands of lawmakers. The when and how are generally in the hands of the administrative agencies. Invariably, there is some overlap. This is when bureaucratic discretion appears.

Historically, influencers of lawmakers play the role of analyst, adviser, or advocate. Yet today, it appears the public has lost patience with the objective function of analyst, which has prompted influencers and decision-makers to take a "storm the gate" attitude toward a problem. As stated above, passion may be a real asset in working to ameliorate or solve health and welfare problems; however, that

emotion should serve as a complement to evidence-based, conceptually sound, and intuitive choices for what to do next. Furthermore, what was once a relatively limited decision-making cadre of professionals and policy wonks is now shared with a cacophony of opinions by "knee-jerk experts" and political pundits.

The conventional steps in policy analysis include alternatives that disallow critique before all the options are considered. This serious effort to consider options should not negate solutions from the past or variations of such. Like fashion items being re-introduced, it's possible that an application from the past, or variations of it, will result in a significant contribution to overcome a current challenge. This step must be re-introduced into the process of responsive and responsible policymaking.

If a social scientist wishes to be known as a professional, emphasis must be placed on "the science." There are no shortcuts to guaranteeing a carefully developed hypothesis, strict objectivity, and the comparison of control and experimental groups, as well as orthodox application of the scientific method. The key question is, does the public bureaucrat of today wish to continue to place emphasis on the "social" or the "science"?

In our efforts to be passionate, are we elevating "satisfying" above optimizing? The response will reveal all we need to know — about how we choose to solve the current major social issues of today, such as mental health, abused children, homelessness, sex-trafficking, criminality, and drug dependence, among others.

*Stephen F. Gambescia is a professor of health services administration at Drexel University. Stew Bolno is an organizational effectiveness consultant in Philadelphia.*