The Structure of a Policy Argument

Policy arguments are the main vehicle carrying debates about public policies.46 Although social scientists may rightly pride themselves on methodological specialization, they too often forget that “public policy is made of language. Whether in written or oral form, argument is central to all stages of the policy process.”47

The structure of a policy argument can be represented as a set of seven elements

Policy claim (C). A policy claim is the conclusion of a policy argument. Arguments also include other elements, including policy-relevant information (I), warrants (W), backings (B), qualifiers (Q), objections (O), and rebuttals (R). The movement from policy-relevant information to claim implies therefore, thus, or so. Policy claims are of different types.

Some are normative: “Congress should pass the amendments to the Fair Employment Practices Act.” Some are descriptive: “The use of the Internet will double in the next ten years.”

Policy-relevant information (I). Policy-relevant information provides the grounds for a policy claim. These grounds may be statistical data, experimental findings, expert testimony, common sense, or political judgments. Policy-relevant information is a response to the question: What information is relevant to the claim? Information is the starting point of a new argument and the end of a previous one. Policy arguments may lead to complex argument chains, trees, or cycles.

Warrant (W). The warrant is a reason to support a claim. Warrants may be economic theories, ethical principles, political ideas, professional authority, and so forth.49 A warrant answers the question: Why does this reason support the claim? Different types of warrants are related to arguments made in different disciplines and professions. For example, law uses case comparisons and rules of evidence, whereas economics uses theories and component laws such as the law of diminishing utility of money. Policy makers as well as social scientists employ causal warrants such as “Ethnic cleansing will be deterred by air strikes that establish NATO’s credibility in the region.” The warrant, which provides a justification for accepting a claim, answers the question: Considering the information, what reasons make the claim true?

Qualifier(Q). The qualifier expresses the degree to which a claim is approximately true, given the strength of the information, warrants, and backings, as well as objections and rebuttals. Although social scientists may state qualifiers in the language of formal probability (p \_ 0.01 or t \_ 2.24), ordinary language is the normal mode of qualifying claims with such terms as certainly, absolutely, necessarily, probably, in all likelihood, presumably, apparently, and barring unforeseen circumstances . The qualifier answers the question: How strong or credible is the claim? It is primarily through processes of argumentation and debate that policy makers, policy analysts, and other policy stakeholders adjust or even abandon arguments. Such changes, when they occur, are motivated by the strength of objections and rebuttals offered by those who have a stake in policies.

Backing (B). The backing is an additional reason to support or “back up” the warrant. The backing answers the question: Why does the warrant support the claim? with a more general reason, assumption, or argument that begins with because. Different kinds of backings are characteristically employed by members of different disciplines and professions. Backings may be scientific laws, appeals to the authority of experts, or ethical and moral principles. For example, consider the warrant presented earlier: “Ethnic cleansing will be deterred by air strikes that establish NATO’s credibility in the region.” The backing for warrants advocating the use of coercive force is frequently an informal statement of the law of diminishing utility: “The greater the cost of an alternative, the less likely it will be pursued.”

Objection (O). An objection opposes or challenges the information, warrant, backing, or qualifier by identifying special conditions or exceptions that reduce confidence in the truth of the information, warrant, backing, or qualifier. An objection answers the question: Are there special circumstances or exceptions that threaten the credibility of the warrant? Analysts who pay attention to objections are more likely to take a critical perspective toward a policy argument, identifying weak or hidden assumptions, anticipating unintended consequences, or questioning possible rebuttals to objections. Thereby, analysts can be self-critical, challenging their own assumptions and arguments.

Rebuttal(R). A rebuttal is an objection to an objection. Rebuttals oppose or challenge objections by identifying special conditions or exceptions that reduce confidence in the truth of the objection. Rebuttals answer the question: Are there special circumstances or exceptions that threaten the credibility of the objection? Most policy arguments have objections and rebuttals, because policy making involves bargaining, negotiation, competition, and compromise among opponents and proponents of policies. The frames of reference, perspectives, and reasons of policy makers and analysts are found in their underlying warrants, backings, objections, and rebuttals.

Therefore, identical policy-relevant information is interpreted in distinctly different ways. A decrease in crime rates in urban areas may be welcomed by the urban poor, viewed with skepticism by owners of central city businesses, rejected by criminologists who attribute urban crime rates to changes in unemployment and homelessness, and hailed as an achievement by elected officials. By examining contending arguments and their underlying assumptions, analysts can uncover and critically assess reasoning and evidence that otherwise goes unnoticed. Equally important is what it brings to analysts themselves—they can probe their own assumptions by examining the objections, qualifications, and exceptions to their own conclusions