

Chapter 59

Infusing Innovation in the Policy Analysis and Evaluation Phases of the Policy Cycle: The Policy Compass Approach

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces an innovative approach for more factual, evidence-based and accountable policy analysis and evaluation, based on open public data, prosperity indicators, fuzzy cognitive maps and argumentation technology. The approach is inspired by the Policy Compass FP7 project and assumes to make better use of Europe's open public data resources, so as to enable both the lay public and domain experts to create, apply, annotate, share and discuss progress metrics and causal models of policies. The aim is to empower stakeholders in assessing the governments' course of actions and contribute in transforming government structures to a more participatory and democratic form. The paper attempts to make a rather complete and comprehensive statement for policy analysis and evaluation, as it provides a thorough description of the proposed approach, including both its theoretical framework and technical approach, as well as a series of indicative use case scenarios and anticipated benefits. The paper concludes with relevant implementation concerns as well as future plans for the validation of the approach and its benefits.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Engaging and involving citizens in political life is a considerable challenge at both EU and international level (Chadwick, 2009); this challenge is nowadays reinforced and magnified by the latest developments in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and the advent of the Web 2.0 paradigm (thematic blogs, wikis, online polls, discussion fora, online communities, etc.) that are currently transforming the way citizens and the civil society interact, debate and participate in public life (Wilhelm, 2000). Today, ICTs and the World Wide Web play in fact an essential role in making participation in policy making and political processes (Milakovich, 2010) possible at large, by fostering communication and interaction between politicians and the civil society, simplifying decision making processes, demystifying legislative texts and allowing to effectively visualise arguments and impacts of proposed decisions; thereby enabling citizens to reach more informed opinions, on the political decisions being taken and the way in which the latter affect their lives. In this context, eParticipation, defined as the ICT-supported participation in governance procedures, is about connecting ordinary people with politics and policy making, and thereby rendering decision-making processes easier to understand and follow (Macintosh, 2006).

Broadening and deepening political participation through the use of ICTs, thus enhancing the eParticipation phenomenon, is in fact quite essential, since in representative democracies, citizens elect candidates for public office on the basis of the values, goals and policies put forward by them during political campaigns. To hold elected officials accountable or effectively exercise their voting rights, citizens need to evaluate, based on empirical facts and evidence, whether government policies are working and elected representatives have promoted the values, achieved the goals and implemented the policies promised in their campaigns.

The relationships though amongst policies, their theoretical foundations and their outcomes are often difficult for citizens to assess: internet has made readily available a wealth of information, cultivating though in parallel misinformation and intentionally propagated falsehoods from questionable sources, making it increasingly difficult for citizens to come to a common understanding of facts (Mintz, 2002). At the same time, the criticism received by existing metrics (Talberth, Clifford, & Slattery, 2006), (Bergh, 2007) for measuring progress and prosperity have hindered the establishment of a suitable and comprehensive framework for that purpose. Finally, the difficulty of tracking political events, such as the election of government officials and representatives or the enactment of legislation to their practical effects has been a factor greatly preventing citizens from reaching well-informed opinions about the effectiveness of applied policies.

In this context, and assuming that the policy cycle encompasses the phases of agenda setting, analysis, adoption, implementation and monitoring (Knoepfel, Larrue, Varone, & Hill, 2007), (Jann & Wegrich, 2006), better and more precise tools are required for critically assessing the causal models or theories underpinning policy proposals for achieving government goals in the policy analysis phase, so as to compare alternative policy scenarios and approaches. Accordingly, better and more precise tools are needed for evaluating whether some implemented policy has in fact produced the promised benefits in the policy monitoring phase, so as to hold elected governments accountable and better inform voters during elections, but also in order to help policy makers to take corrective action (Mureddu, Osimo, Misuraca, & Armenia, 2012).

Along the above lines, the present paper aims at presenting a new and innovative approach for improving the quality and transparency of the policy analysis and evaluation phases of the policy cycle for both the lay public as well as for professional policy makers. Inspired by the Policy Compass

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