

*Policy makers: Don't forget Implementation and Experimentation*

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Every few days or so the national press in the US is likely to compare political solutions to deal with the current problems today with those of the New Deal. Occasionally (actually rarely) there is some acknowledgement that the contemporary problems are set in the context of a very different political and economic environment than FDR faced in the 1930s. While both eras dealt with pain and suffering, the solutions of the New Deal were largely embedded in uncharted territory. As a result, many new programs were crafted relatively easily with minimal constraints because political partisan conflict resulted in a perspective that gave Democrats clear power.

That is not the case today. The political polarization surrounding much of contemporary debate is not only close in terms of political margins but it is located in a very crowded policy environment. Discussion about a range of policy issues cannot escape from polarized political perspectives that are difficult to negotiate and bring together. In addition, political actors are likely to bring their own experience to the bargaining table. That frequently makes their experience and expectations drawn from their own states and localities difficult to move to a single national perspective. In some cases, participants in the policy development process find it hard to acknowledge that contemporary problems rarely have a single solution that meets the variety of needs, population expectations, structures and values found within the US society. As a result, it is very difficult to anticipate how a new program will develop.

The process of making policy related to covid 19 is a good example of difficult decision-making. Although the issue was a life or death situation the policy making process never escaped from the “who is in charge” dilemma. Was it the federal government or the states and sometimes localities? Neither direction was without controversy. The issue moved back and forth between between a one-size-fits all approach usually argued by the federal govern-

ment to providing discretion to states to decide what to do next. There were few instances (especially at the beginning of the process) where advocates of different perspectives sat at the same table.

Many basic issues arose as the process developed. But a number of the differences between perspectives are likely to emerge during the next stage of the policy process. That stage often is called “implementation” and thrives on an experimental or experiential mind set. That mindset usually consists of three steps: learning, testing, and evaluating. It is a way of moving beyond the dynamics and politics of creating new requirements.

We are faced with conflicting and confusing elements if we stay within the traditional policymaking role. Is there a way to craft the implementation of programs in a way that begins with identification and acknowledgement of specific aspects of differences? Is it possible for that stage to become an attempt to identify both agreements and differences within the US? Such a process would stay within the general parameters of legal requirements of legislation but would include a search for differences that are legitimate and can lead to change. This would provide a way for those who are charged with implementing the program to build their implementation strategy as a part of a process of experimentation.

This is not a new approach. When the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program was created in 1974, it gave local governments that met the program’s general criteria the opportunity to define what they defined as *community development*. Because the recipients of the funds were local (and eventually state) governments, they were given the authority to define the field in a way that was most effective for their citizenry. It resulted in programs involving public infrastructure, housing, administrative and planning, public services, economic development and property acquisition. While different, all of these definitions were seen to be legitimate. Not everyone sitting in the Office of Management and Budget agreed with this approach and some argued for a clear-cut focus on economic development.

Other federal programs have developed similar strategies that balance federal goals with unique aspects of the needs of players in state and local settings. The current focus on infrastructure policies provides an opportunity to deal with a number of diverse approaches that might be appropriate in very different settings. This strategy allows federal program managers to acknowledge the diversity of players involved in program implementation. It gives them the ability to find ways to encourage these players to work together because they all have a relevant and important place at the table.

This strategy allows the players at all levels to see themselves as parts of an experimental system, not one that simply conforms to single, abstract national goals. Such a system has the ability to produce information that can be used beyond narrow compliance relationships.

While some would see this strategy as a general way of avoiding federal control, there are

others who see it as a way to develop approaches that address the diversity of situations across the continent. From the beginning it was clear that the choice of strategy provides a way for these complex players to identify practices and problems within a federal system. It reflects the complexity of the American society where policy boundaries are constantly moving and creating both overlapping and conflictual relationships. Conflict should be expected but it helps when major players are sitting at the same table and attempting to share very diverse perspectives.

Such a strategy makes sense in a society where traditional policy lines have been modified because of changes in both global and internal political and economic settings. It's a way of respecting those officials and citizens in state and local settings who are trying to improve the society in which we all live. And it may be a way to develop experience, information and strategies that are useful to the political and administrative system both in Washington and across the nation.