Arguments for Change in Social Policy:
Evidence or Persuasion?

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Abstract

Incentives-based social policy is controversial. “Rewarding” specific behaviors such as taking their kids to the doctor (for parents) or getting good grades (for children) require justification. Decision, implementation and evaluation of such programs go with specific arguments. What legitimates the use of more public money to “solve” poverty? Is private money more appropriate to tackle this issue? To what extent a new kind of incentives can renew anti-poverty initiatives? Based on field research, this paper analyzes two reform strategies involving a mix of evidence and persuasion.

The first comes from Michael Bloomberg in 2007. As the mayor of New York City, he decided to implement “innovative solutions” to fight against poverty by getting the poor “to do the right thing”. His persuasion technique consisted in an unusual “South-North” policy transfer (a Mexican conditional cash transfer program or CCT). The second comes from France, where the welfare system has been recently reformed. The change also consisted in financially “incentivizing” the poor. The RSA (Active Solidarity Income) ended social assistance as an entitlement. Experimented in 2007, the law was enacted in 2009. It proposes a financial incentive so that people who “work more, earn more”. Solidarity, the French style of social policy making, was thus put into question.

In the course of those two experiments, several sets of arguments have been used to shape the public debate. What exactly are they? What can we learn from their content and the way they have been used? This paper proposes some answers to these questions, putting an emphasis on communication techniques, argument crafting, and their political uses. These results are drawn from a doctoral dissertation in political science published last year (Chelle 2012).

Introduction: A Comparative Case Study of Social Experiments

What kind of arguments is used in order to pass a new social policy? What makes them politically sound? What can we learn on this topic from a comparative perspective between the United States in France? Putting an emphasis on argumentative strategies (Forester & Fischer 1993; Gasper 1996), this paper regards “social experiments” as a mix of evidence and persuasion (Majone 1989).

Social experiments are temporary small-scale programs that are used to test the efficiency of a given policy. That’s for the evidence part. Design involves professional policy experts. By
crafting data and protocols, their specialized knowledge is dedicated to make programs scientific. These, in turn, can be invoked as arguments for change (“If the program shows results…”). Why is that? For an ideological rhetoric is not so powerful as a scientific one. The reputation of the latter is not to be made: objective, value-free, neutral. That’s for the persuasion part.

I take two examples to unfold this assumption. Both are anti-poverty pilot projects that have been used as an argument for a broader reform. One succeeded to bring about such a change. This case is French, and the program called the Active Solidarity Income (Revenu de solidarité active). The other failed (or not yet succeeded) to be scaled: it is American and has been named Opportunity NYC. The purpose of this paper is to open the black box of each sequence of “crafted arguments” (Stone 2011), or argumentation strategies.

**The New York City Strategy: Experimentation Leadership**

To advance his agenda on anti-poverty initiatives, Mayor Bloomberg and the cabinet he appointed provided several arguments. They were mainly focused on the experiment in itself, meaning the fact of experimenting more than the social experiment. This kind of strategy is politically relevant in a context of federalism (Walker 1969; Greenberg, Mandell & Onstott, 2008) and considering the peculiar role and history of New York City within the U.S. (Shefter 1993; Anheier, Lam & Howard 2013).

First argument falls into the category of what we could call “inspiring arguments”, or what policy analysts call learning, lesson-drawing or policy transfer. The program Opportunity NYC has been named after a Mexican conditional cash transfer program (CCT) called
Oportunidades. The imitation is not restricted to a name. City officials also claim to have been inspired by the core principles of such a CCT. That is, rewarding good behaviors with fixed amounts of money. Mayor Bloomberg went on an official trip to Toledo, Mexico, to make manifest the fact that he was importing “good practices” from the South\(^1\). In a majority-minority dominated city, the display of such “North-South relations” turns into a powerful argument.

Second set of arguments: outside sources funding, or blame-avoidance. Bloomberg’s multiple positions, as mayor, philanthropist and businessman allowed him to advance a social agenda without using public money. The City Hall argued that the social program could be as experimental, as “innovative” or “out-of-the-box” because the Mayor could afford to fail. Since no public money was involved, the taxpayer could not be legitimately upset whatever the results. The program happens to be completely privately funded, by different types of foundations (Rockefeller, Robin Hood, AIG, New York Community Trust…) including Bloomberg Philanthropies, the mayor’s own foundation. It should be noted that this last feature raised no particular controversy or question among the public debate.

Still, private money requires monitoring and accountability to the funders, in order to justify the expense and follow-up the results. That’s the third set or arguments. This data-driven culture is sometimes qualified as smart policy. Foundations are indeed used to measure their performance and impact on society. Hence all the numbers and data. Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC), an American national nonprofit, was hired to do the research on this program\(^2\). Implementation and impact measures have been made. Not only directed to prove efficiency, these data have also been used to communicate in the
media about the program – before and after the 2009 mayoral election. Evaluation was first used as an argument to convey the idea that anti-poverty was taken seriously by the Bloomberg administration. Then, after the program failed to show convincing results, evaluation remained a good asset “to learn from failure”\(^3\).

The last argument is one of moral rhetoric that virtually goes along with every social program. The political slogan or motto to promote Opportunity NYC was “do the right thing”. Meaning that the poor concentrating their efforts in the expected direction were just being rewarded for following commonsense principles. Taking their kid to the doctor for preventive checkups, working more hours or getting a GED appeared as exemplary behaviors that any rational person would take on. On the flip side, the “do the right thing” narrative (Roe 1994) was also a way to show the public was money was not going to “any poor in need” but to the deserving poor, “really” trying hard to get ahead (Katz 1989, Schram 2012). Thus, morals had to do with the justification of “money well spent”.

**The French Government Strategy: Reinventing Tradition**

Elaborating on French policy-making, it becomes difficult to straddle the role of public authorities, as it happens, the State\(^4\). France is a country with a long history of administrative rule. We also have a divided tradition as far as poverty and welfare are concerned. Catholicism and republicanism à la française have one common point though. This can be seen as typically French. As opposed to the conception of personal responsibility that prevails in the U.S., poverty tends to be perceived as a non-voluntary condition. By the same token, the State must protect the “weakest” citizens. Nonetheless, over the last three decades,
the activation trend made it to France (Béland & Hansen 2000; Barbier 2009). That resulted in several substantial changes in the way social policy reforms are defended and implemented (Gilbert 2013).

The contentious assumption “Not a single dime will go to idleness” has been a prominent feature of the right-wing government rhetoric in passing the Active Solidary Income. Deservingness is the first argument here. Work is henceforth held as a condition for help, somehow in the vein of “a hand up, not a handout” or “ending welfare as we knew it”. A truth so powerfully became self-evident that the left-wing opposition leveled only but poor criticism about it. Since it is virtually impossible – for them as well as for any political party – to be against “something new for the poor”, they accomplished little in that area. The initiative was merely blamed for not engaging enough money to be effective. Why is that? Merit stands as a very strong myth. Work remains a way to accomplish success, morally superior to birth and wealth. This value-configuration calls for an emulative demonstration of (willingness to) work within society. That is the reason why the widely spread political slogan “work more to earn more” – that goes along with the first one above – consolidated large segments of support.

The Active Solidarity Income has also been justified on the basis of the complexity of the then-current administrative system. That is the second set of arguments. This technocratic justification came from what is called in France “central administration”, meaning State departments based in the capital. Their historical role is to provide advice to ministers when a reform is undertaken. French social benefits are fragmented in a number of subsidies targeting different subcategories of the population: handicapped, unemployed not entitled to unemployment benefits, single mothers with dependent children, negative income tax…
Thus, the argument used by the reformers was to make a single benefit from five others. This strategy failed but was prominent at a certain point of the public debate, before the law was passed.

When it comes to tackling poverty in France, one has to remember the historical and ideological setting or legacy involved: solidarity. Catholics and Republicans, both trends that shaped our political culture, agree on the necessity of solidarity, even though they understand it differently. Their common point is that the poor should be blamed for being poor, and society has to help them. Solidarity, therefore, serves a political symbol (Edelman 1964) in a French context. This ideological background matters a lot when adopting what we could basically call a workfare reform. The Active Solidarity Income actually made work mandatory for the “able-bodied” to receive assistance from the State. Hence that very name of “active solidarity”. For the reform not to be regarded as downsizing the historical tradition, policy was qualified as being “active solidarity”. The abstract goal of reducing poverty (“solidarity”) got supplemented with this implicit reference to the behavior expected from material recipients of benefits (“active”). Social justice was whence presented as social fairness, and not social equality. A small but significant shift in meaning.

Last repertoire of change to be noted in France: social experiment. Whilst very common in a federal and fragmented U.S. political system, this model has been imported to France only over the last six/seven years. Far from being only a series of protocols and procedures, social experiment can be understood as a “shadow institution” (Brodkin, Kaufman 2000). Except that France remains to have a centralized administration, even though local devolution occurred over the past thirty years. The Constitution says that the law shall be the same and equally enforced everywhere on its territory. Since experiments rely on provisional and
highly selective measures, they came off as something quite unusual in France. The Constitution was actually changed to include the possibility of experimenting a social program. Reform-minded groups saw in this a innovation. They claimed “evidence-based policy” to be the state-of-the-art policy design.

**Conclusion: Controversy and Consensus in the Reform Process**

The analysis of American and French cases sheds light on two different reform strategies around social experiments. New York City officials put an emphasis on innovation, leadership and accountability, whereas the French initiative appears much more path dependent and incremental, relying on bureaucratic structure and solidarity legacy.

Achieving a reform requires a balance between controversy and consensus. On the one hand, using contentious arguments gives visibility and creates interest in the process. Being criticized is also a sign that what they undertake matters. By framing the debate with specific arguments, officials sort of pick the critics and left out other undesired topics. This is where persuasion techniques come in. On the other hand, consensus pigeonholes possible alternatives and gives credit to what is being done, whatever the results. Evidence is the most useful tool here. Even more, the use of evidence is what makes it so powerful within the political field.
References


Endnotes

1 Opportunity NYC served as one of the examples circulating within the international policy community to build a consensus around conditional cash transfers (Peck and Theodore, 2010: 204).

2 Building evidence is MDRC core mission, as most recently showed by Gueron & Rolston 2013.

3 Another illustration of “word that succeed, policies that fail” (Edelman 1977).

4 Even though local authorities get more and more involved in the administration of social services (see Reiter et al. 2010).

5 Further information on Nicolas Sarkozy’s platform in Knapp 2013.

6 For more detailed information about the incentives of the RSA, see Anne & L’Horty 2012, as well as Vlandas 2013.

7. If work has became a religion in and of itself, this political rhetoric certainly pertains to the category of “secular prayers” (Burke, 1945: 393).

8 This debate emerged with the industrial society. Thorstein Veblen (1898: 190) mentions this conception of an “industrial” or “economic merit”, embedded in his dichotomy between “instinct of workmanship” and “irksomeness of labor”.
