

The Democracy Center - Citizen Action Series

Excerpts from *The Democracy Owners Manual*
(To preview or purchase the book visit www.democracyctr.org)

Policy Analysis – A Primer

Public policy debates are concerned primarily with two basic questions: What is the problem and what is the solution? Policy analysis is a step-by-step method for looking at looking these questions in a deliberate way.

Step One: Define The Problem

First, define the problem in a very basic way (i.e. more families are poor). Then add some more detail. Why are there more poor families now than before -- is the economy in decline, have government benefits been cut? What are the effects? Does family poverty create health and educational problems for their children?

Step Two: Get The Information You Need

Begin by getting some information about the history and context – what are the long-term trends, how does government usually address the issue? Then get some basic facts – how many children live in poverty, how much is it increasing, etc.? What new proposals are being suggested for addressing the issue? Be careful to make sure the information you use is accurate.

Step Three: Develop a List of Potential Alternatives

Ideas for policy solutions can come from many sources. You can look at how other communities have addressed the same problem. You can look at how your own community has addressed a similar problem. You can also brainstorm ideas from scratch. In the case of family poverty, for example, you could advocate raising the minimum wage, or increasing government welfare benefits, or giving tax breaks to businesses which hire the poor.

Step Four: Judge the Alternatives and Choose Among Them

Judging alternatives is about looking at several considerations all at one. Which will most likely solve the problem? What would each cost? What other problems will each solve or create? Are they winnable? Can they be implemented? Does giving businesses a tax break really create new jobs? Will the poor really receive them? Will raising the minimum wage cause employers to reduce minimum wage positions? Does increasing welfare cause dependency or lift people out of poverty?

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