Influencing policy and budgets in Washington: Bunn's commandments

Matthew Bunn
Harvard Kennedy School

Managing the Atom, "Nuclear 101" Seminar

22 July 2010

http://www.managingtheatom.org

Influencing policy – a learned skill

- How to make recommendations happen requires as thorough thinking as developing them
  - In fact, the two are related…
- Everyone gets better with practice
- A few simple rules can steepen the learning curve
- In broad terms, key rules apply to influencing policies in other democracies as well – institutional and cultural specifics differ
- Indeed, similar rules apply to statecraft – states influencing other states to change their policies

I: Develop specific, actionable recommendations on important problems

- Recommendations the policymaker doesn't know how to do – "do this function better" – don't help much
- Need to be specific – which programs need how much more money, which countries should we make what proposals to
  - The easier you can make it for the policymaker to adopt your recommendation – to the point that they can simply say "do what they say" – the higher the probability you can get it adopted
  - *But*, remember that the policymaker knows more about his/her decision-making environment than you do; once they agree on the proposal, they may have a better idea of how to implement it, or may adapt it (sometimes in ways that may spoil it…)
- Need to identify a problem and propose a solution
  - Need a good argument in favor of your recommendation
  - Need to anticipate likely counterarguments, have answers

A good argument for a good idea is essential – but not enough

II: Identify who would have to decide to implement the recommendation

- Depends on the scale and specifics of the idea
  - "Adopt a single-payer health care system" requires President, both houses of Congress, etc.
  - Hence would require grass-roots campaign in all 50 states, getting many interest groups in a coalition to support it, overcoming fierce opposition, etc.
  - At other extreme, an idea to increase a program's budget by a few million dollars may be possible to get implemented by convincing one staffer on an appropriations subcommittee to write it into the bill
- Once you've identified the key decision-makers, develop a *plan* to influence them to adopt your policy
  - Convincing: briefings, papers, letters, etc. presenting arguments
  - Pressuring: getting constituents, other officials, influential individuals, the media, Congress, organizations, businesses, etc. to lean on them

III: Understand the world of the key decision-makers

- What do *they* see as the problems *they* are trying to solve?
  - Can your recommendation help them solve a problem they already care about?
  - If not, can you reframe/adapt it so it does?
  - Otherwise, you need to convince them the problem *you're* trying to solve *should* be important to them (usually harder)
- What resources, constraints, and obstacles are they coping with?
  - Limited time
  - Limited analysis and idea-generation (very common)
  - Limited budgets
  - Limited authority
  - Limited personnel
- What are *their* incentives and disincentives?

IV: Develop a focused “ask”

- Develop a very focused version of what you want the decision-maker to do – and make the case for doing it
  - Find a concise way to suggest what they should do – and to make the case for doing it
  - Develop your “elevator speech” version, your briefing version, etc.
  - Put yourself in the place of the busy policy-maker with 1000 things to attend to – how can you convince them quickly to take action?
  - *Don’t* spend 20 minutes providing background, reviewing the literature – get to the point
  - For each meeting, assume only 1-4 key points will get through – figure out what you want those points to be, and emphasize them
- Different “asks” for different people
  - For a reporter – convincing them to run a story
  - For a congressional staffer – convincing them to have their boss call or write a letter calling for your idea to be implemented
  - Etc.

V: Build credibility and relationships with key decision-makers over time

- Build credibility through:
  - Getting your facts right consistently – doing good work
  - Providing information and ideas the policymakers find useful
  - Getting your ideas endorsed by credible parties (e.g., getting them considered in independent reviews, e.g from GAO, NAS…)
- Develop relationships through:
  - Focused cultivation of key decision-makers on the subjects you work on – regular meetings, e-mail, phone calls, etc.
  - Being friendly and trying to be helpful!
  - Work with both parties you agree with and parties you don't – look for whatever common ground you can find (easier to get ideas approved with bipartisan support, and today's majority may be tomorrow's minority)
- If you haven't yet built credibility and relationships with the key decision-makers, work with someone who has

VI: Build coalitions, find common ground

- Build coalitions
  - Identify people, organizations, who are or may be influential with the key decision-makers
  - Convince these “influentials” to push your idea
  - Media are often especially powerful tools to build a groundswell, get your idea in front of influentials and decision-makers – make use of them when you can (suggesting news stories, writing op-eds)
- Find common ground, be flexible
  - Identify points that different parties, groups can agree on – try to get them to work together (may need to postpone difficult points)
  - Be flexible – may need to adapt your arguments, modify your idea, negotiate with others who have different ideas
  - An art, not a science: how to identify what’s “the best you can get,” how much “watering down” of proposals is too much
  - Negotiation and discussion can also *improve* proposals – often does

VII: Understand the budget and policy cycle – time your recommendations

- A recommendation to increase funding just after a program's budget is decided won't be listened to
- A recommendation to completely change the U.S. approach to a foreign country is not much use if it comes in just *after* a major policy review is completed, the President has decided, and a new proposal has been made to that country
- Need to pay attention to the rhythm and schedule of policy in the area where you're making recommendations
- The budget process in particular has a regular rhythm offering several points for intervention with different participants

Budget is policy (but not the only policy)

VII: Understand the budget and policy cycle – time your recommendations (2)

U.S. Budget Process

- Programs develop budget proposals (summer of the year before)
- Departments review, modify program ideas, send budget requests to Office of Management and Budget (early fall)
- OMB reviews department requests, sends “passback” with proposed modifications (~Oct.)
- Departments may appeal OMB modifications – final budget requests agreed on (~Nov.-Dec.)
- President’s budget goes to Congress, with detailed “budget justifications” (~Feb. 1)
- Congressional authorizing and appropriating committees hold hearings (~March-May)

VII: Understand the budget and policy cycle – time your recommendations (3)

U.S. Budget Process

- Authorizing committees and appropriations subcommittees draft bills (~May-July)
- Bills voted on in House and Senate (~June-July, can be delayed)
- "Conference committee" negotiates differences between House and Senate bills (~July-October, can be delayed)
- New fiscal year begins: October 1
- If no appropriation passed by October 1, Congress passes a "continuing resolution" – typically funds programs at last year's level temporarily
  - Can be exceptions if House and Senate can agree particular programs need something different
- "Supplemental" appropriations happen off-cycle

VII: Understand the budget and policy cycle – time your recommendations (4)

U.S. Budget Process – Some Key Terms

- *Authorization* – Permits the government to undertake a particular program; permits the appropriators to provide certain amounts of funds for that program
- *Appropriation* – Real power to write checks up to the appropriated amount
- *Obligation* – Occurs when the government signs contracts promising to pay certain amounts for certain goods and services – actual payment may not occur until much later
- *Outlay* – Actual payments by the government for goods and services, real writing of checks
- *Unobligated/Uncosted balances* – "Unobligated" is a balance not yet committed in contracts at a particular moment (typically end of fiscal year); "Uncosted" means not yet actually paid (but possibly already obligated)

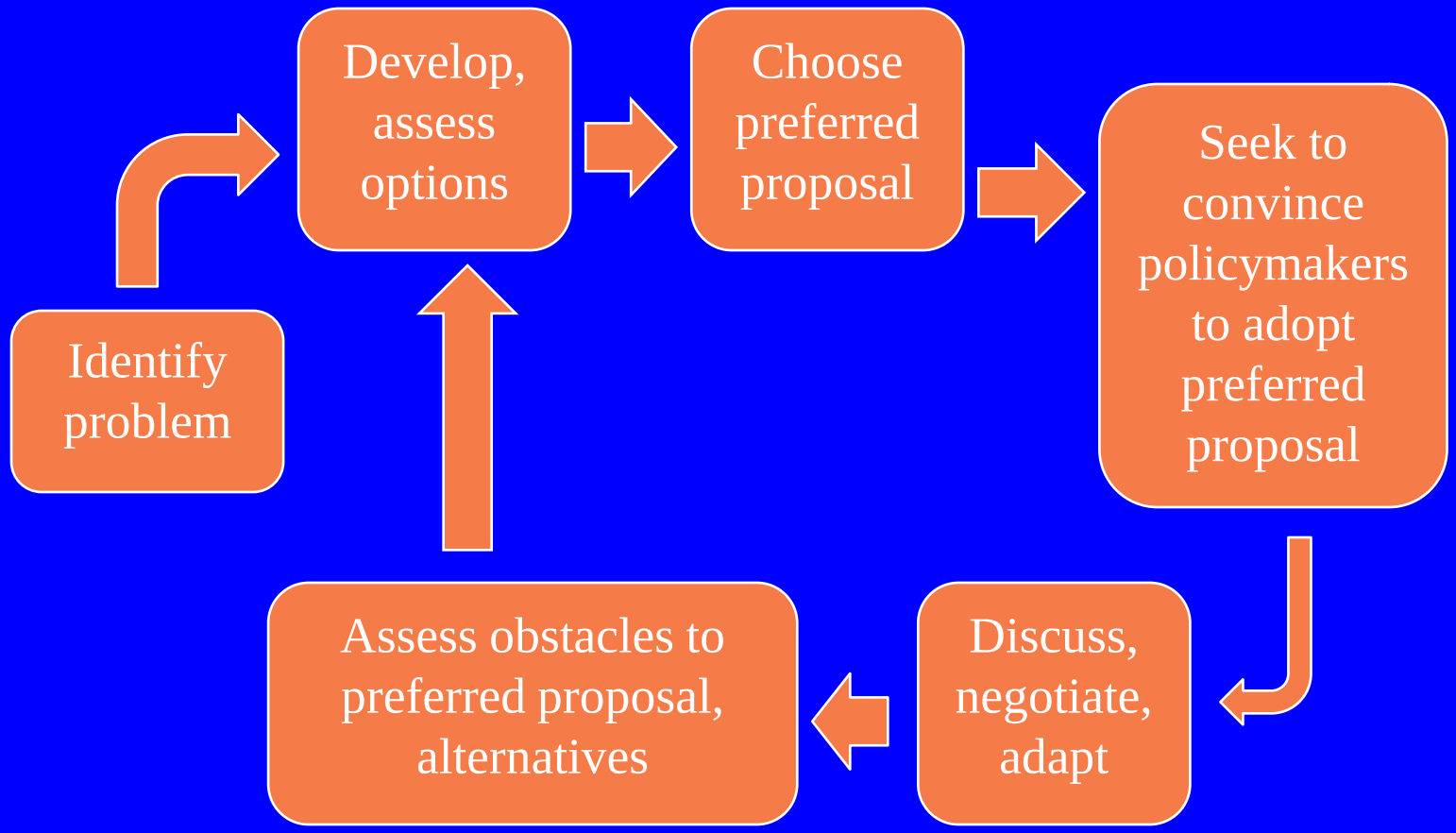
VIII: Work with both executive branch and Congress (and courts, in some cases)

- All 3 branches of U.S. government have significant power
- Work with executive branch agencies to understand real implementation issues they are dealing with, suggest opportunities, modifications, budget shifts, etc.
- Work with Congress to get them to prohibit, direct, or suggest certain activities, increase/decrease budgets, hold hearings on certain issues, etc.
- Executive branch will listen more if they know you're working with Congress – and vice versa
- Lawsuits (using the courts) can be highly effective in certain cases
  - Limited to NGOs with the resources to pursue them
  - Can be used to force agencies to take an action required by law, or stop/delay programs that arguably haven't followed the law

IX: Prepare for and seize key "decision moments" – try to generate if you can

- Particular events force policymakers to make decisions on a topic – create a "decision moment":
  - They have to decide on a budget
  - Need to respond to an action or proposal from a foreign country
  - Some disaster occurs, and they need to figure out what to do
  - A summit is coming up, they want to have an agreement to sign
- You can get attention and quick action on a topic when there's a decision moment for it that you can't get otherwise
  - Pay attention to schedules for decision moments you can know about in advance – budget cycles, summit meetings, deadlines for major program reviews, etc.
  - Try to have a plan for sudden, unexpected decision moments
- Decision moments can sometimes be created
  - E.g., a media story on major failures in a program (suggest to reporter); an Academy study suggesting a new approach is needed

X: Relentlessly focus on getting a *small* number of ideas across the finish line

- Pushing many recommendations simultaneously disperses your forces, makes it harder to succeed on each one
  - So identify a few you really want to work on, focus on those
  - Never try to push more than 1-4 ideas in any one meeting with a policymaker
- Don’t be afraid to be repetitive
  - Do a briefing version – give it many times
  - Do an op-ed version – see if you can think of a few different ways to argue the case for one particular idea
  - Push your idea at every appropriate opportunity
  - Repeat until you bore yourself
  - Note: the best way to influence policy is NOT necessarily the same as the best way to establish a strong academic reputation and get tenure

An interactive, iterative process