

Why Policymaking Won't Work for Complex Societies (and Why Principles Will) – Part 2

In part one of this argument, I explored how the methodology of political policymaking – cost/benefit analysis – fails to work at large scale. TLDR? Societies are much too complex for it to be easy or even possible to know the true costs and benefits of a rule.

Policy comes from limited individuals with limited information. Policy mandates large, complex solutions to large, complex problems. The problem lies in that mismatch.

There is a large margin of error with policy, precisely because it hits or misses on the basis of a small, time-bound data set. The more specific the policy recommendations, the more things can go wrong.

Principles counter the knowledge problem of policymaking. They are short, pithy ground rules for engaging with a wide variety of situations. They do not suggest specific actions, but they do suggest specific kinds of actions.

A common example of a policy debate is the health care issue. Many people right now are interested in the question of how healthcare should be provided, and most people are pretty adamant about their own policy recommendations.

Most people on just about every “side” to this issue jump straight to policy recommendations based on a minimal (or no) amount of research into the current state of medical insurance, medical provision, and the drug industry. Policies typically involve hundreds of pages of recommendations from dozens of authors or lobbyists.

This policymaking makes the same flawed presumptions I criticized in part one.

To make my point about the importance of **principled** decision-making for complex societies, let's look at a couple of principles involved in the healthcare debate.

Assuming you value human life, “it’s good for humans to be healthy and alive.”
Assuming you value human life, “you shouldn’t harm other humans in order to get what you want.”

Just about everyone on any side of the healthcare debate would agree to these. Naturally, you're probably curious about how they help us make any progress.

Let me break down some of these reasons principles win as starting points and guideposts in solving a problem like healthcare provision.

1. Principles are clear.

Principles like “do no harm” or “protect life” are pretty straightforward. It’s not obvious exactly *how* to best implement them (more on that later). But as starting points and intentions, they’re hard to mistake for anything else.

Clearly, in our healthcare example, making healthcare illegal or harder to obtain or dangerous to obtain would all be violations of our guiding principles.

2. Principles are usually subtractions, not additions

Removing negative courses of action is usually much easier than finding the exact right way to act. Fortunately, principles typically tell you not *what* to do, but what not to do.

In the case we’ve chosen, “don’t harm another human being to get what you want” is a pretty clear instruction of what *not* to do. If we eliminate options for healthcare funding or provision that involve violence or destruction, we narrow down the policy field considerably.

3. Principles are pluralistic.

Principles are broad. They can allow for different interpretations without conflicting interpretations.

“It’s good for humans to be healthy and alive” does require real thinking and work about how to provide better healthcare. But unlike a policy recommendation, it allows for an unlimited number of ways to reach that goal. Think we need a chain of small drive-through pharmacies? Cool. Go start it. Think we need more insurance options with fewer insurance oligopolies? Por que no las dos?

4. Principles distill collective wisdom.

Principles like “don’t use violence” distill the collected experiences, memories, and insights of hundreds of generations of human beings. Principles are deliberately simple because they retain the core insight from all of those memories, experiences, and insights. Time and repeated use are very good at shaving off the bullshit from principles. Fresh policy recommendations typically have little collective wisdom behind them.

5. Principles are stable.

You can trust that principles aren’t going anywhere. They’re very simple observations that have taken humans a very long time to learn. They describe human nature, not the human situation of the moment, not the news, and not the political hysteria of the day.

This argument still needs some fleshing out. I get it. But I think it’s clear that if we’re going

to say anything at all about a society as complex as ours, we have to start at principles long before we touch policy.

Principles will never give us the final answers, or the one-size-fits all answers that policymaker types love. But they will help us avoid the simple mistakes of arrogance, short-term thinking, or contradictory rulemaking.