5.5: The Seven Stock Issues of a Policy Claim

A Claim of Policy has 7 unique groups of issues.

1. The first set of questions we ask determine if there is actually a problem that needs to be fixed. Is the perceived problem just a minor difficulty in the status quo? Is an increase in the murder rate in the U.S. a real problem or just a temporary anomaly? Is the problem being suggested a real problem or a misinterpretation of information. Is there voting fraud or a person's bias of their interpretation of information they have read?

Once you decide there is a problem, then you need to determine the magnitude of the problem.

2. One set of questions examines the impact of the problem. Just how important is the current problem that is being addressed by this claim? Is the claim focusing on a major problem or just an inconvenience? If the current situation is costing you or others money or time you need to ask questions to determine how much and if that is a significant number. Is the problem significant enough to warrant the resources needed to solve it? This is actually a type of cost/benefit analysis.

A second set of questions may look at the future significance of the problem. The problem may not be bad now, but if untreated, how significant can the problem become. This is the area of questions that is being used to examine the vaccination discussion. Since few parents do not vaccinate their children, the problem is not that significant in most areas. The issues here are how widespread will the problem be in a few years and what will then be the impact of not vaccinating children. Many people advocating for solutions to “Global Warming” do not argue the current effects of global warming, but instead argue that there are potential devastating effects of Global Warming.

A problem might exist with the status quo, but if the problem is insignificant we may not want to contribute significant resources to solve that problem and thus reject the claim.

3. Is the source of the problem structural, caused by rules or regulations, or is it attitudinal, caused by what people think or their traditions? If the problem is based on an actual structural problem, then the issues examine what are
the structures involved that create this situation. If the problem is caused by attitudes, then the issues ask how deep are the source of those attitudes and can they be changed through persuasion or is a change in the law or procedures needed?

Smoking is still the number one cause of lung cancer. To decrease this problem massive advertisement campaigns were begun in the 1960’s and the rate of adult smokers went from 42% of adults down to 17%. In this case, the answers to the issues led people to believe that a structural change was not needed, but instead attitudes could be changed by an awareness campaign. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016)

Injuries and fatalities from traffic accidents are considered a significant problem. One solution to this problem was to increase the number of drivers using seat belts. Although there was no structural reason prohibiting people from wearing seat belts, people chose not to use them. The issues in this argument led people to believe that the attitudes of enough people could not be changed through an awareness campaign. Thirty states have mandatory seat belt laws now and the result has been a decrease in fatal and injury accidents.

If the problem is structural we need to change the rules or pass legislation. If the rules of the golf club say that people of color are not allowed to join, then a structural change to the rules must be made in order to solve the problem of discrimination. If, however there is no rule denying admittance, then it is the attitude of the members that needs to be changed.

If the answers to these issues have determined that a structural problem exists, we can move on to ask questions to determine if that problem can be solved in the current system or "status quo" or do we need to create an entirely new system.

4. Instead of adopting the claim, can we just make minor adjustments in the status quo to reach the goal of the claim? These are sometimes referred to as a “minor repair.” For example, assume that we find it is a problem that not enough people are voting in the national election. We are arguing the following claim; A national holiday should be created so every citizen can have the day off to vote. Instead of adopting this claim, we might ask,
   ◦ Can extending the hours of voting significantly increase participation?
   ◦ Could extending voting over two days significantly increase participation?
   ◦ Could encouraging more absentee ballots significantly increase participation?

Answers to these issues might suggest repairs needed to remedy the problem that the claim attempts to solve. And if only these minor repairs are needed to solve the problem, then we can initiate them and reject the claim.

Let’s assume that the answers to these issues suggest that the problem cannot be fixed within the system. We then move on to ask questions about the possibility of a solution.

5. Does the person advocating the claim have an actual plan to solve the problem that the claim is attempting to solve? Assume there is the claim, The Federal Government should eliminate terrorism in the United States. Does the advocate have an actual plan to fulfill the claim? Additional questions are then asked:
   ◦ Is the plan actually workable?
   ◦ Is the plan legal?

Part of the plan for this claim may include wiretaps. The issue could be asked if these wiretaps are legal or could they be implemented. Other questions would include do we have the manpower and other resources that the plan needs?
Assuming that the answers to this plan suggest that the plan is workable and that there are no barriers to implementation. Now we need to know if the plan will actually solve the problem.

6. It is not enough to just have a workable plan; the next series of issues explores the effectiveness of that plan.
   ◦ Can that plan actually reach the objective in the claim?
   ◦ Are there other aspects not covered by the plan that would interfere with the solution suggested in the claim?

We could change the rules in the golf club to now allow for the admittance of color, but would the attitudes of the membership continue the denying of membership?

The answers to all our issues up until now suggest that there is a significant problem that the claim has a plan that will work and solve the problem. The one set of issues remaining examines the negative ramifications that could occur.

7. Finally, we look at the undesirable results that could occur if the plan was adopted and the claim affirmed. Any action that is taken will cause additional aspects to be affected. You see this all the time in advertisements for prescriptions. After they tell you what the medicine can do for you, they then list all the possible side effects. You would then look at this list and see if it is really worth taking that medication. Here then you would ask a series of questions that would determine:
   ◦ What are the ramifications or side effects of implementing the plan?
   ◦ “How significant are those ramifications?”
   ◦ Does the significance of the ramifications outweigh the benefit of solving the initial problem?

If these negative ramifications outweigh the positive results obtained by accepting the claim, we would then reject the claim.