

PLS 505 – Policy Analysis
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Exercise: Problems, Data, and Information

Background:

Defining problems is a crucial element of the process of policy analysis. But what makes something a problem? What makes some problems more important than others? Why do we like to use numbers, trends, and other types of data to frame problems and argue about a problem's importance? This exercise is designed to get you thinking about how problems are framed and how analysts use numbers and other forms of data to support their arguments.

Directions:

On Wednesday night September 8, 2009, President Obama will take the rare step of calling a joint session of Congress to make a speech that presumably will argue why it is important to pass his version of health reform. While President Obama has not yet released his own reform plan, his speech should include some details about the health care reform proposals he is seeking. Moreover, while his speech will clearly be political and designed to build support for his proposals, he will likely use a variety of statistics, data, and other types of "facts" to support his arguments. However, numbers, trends, statistics, and other forms of data can sometimes be inaccurate or used in misleading ways.

For this assignment you are required to watch the President's speech. If you have class or a personal commitment, the speech will be archived on C-SPAN (<http://www.c-span.org/>) and you can watch it at your leisure. The text of the speech will likely be available on various news websites as well. After watching the speech, you should come to class the week of September 14th prepared to discuss the following questions and hand in a summary of your answers on 1 sheet of paper. You can complete the exercise individually or as a group.

- President Obama will make a variety of arguments as to why health care reform is needed and will likely state his support for a variety of reform efforts. Based on the speech, what are the two most important policy problems that the President's reform proposals are trying to address? Define each problem in no more than 1 sentence.
- President Obama will likely use a variety of data to support his definition of the problem and to make the case that health reform is needed. Identify three "facts" or pieces of data that the President uses to advance his arguments. For each of these purported "facts", come prepared with the following critiques:
 - Where does the data (e.g., number, statistic, trend, etc.) come from? Who generated it? How was it generated? Is there any reason to distrust the data?
 - What does the data (e.g., number, statistic, trend, etc.) mean? What information is conveyed? Is the information misleading or presented in misleading ways?
 - Does the information support either of the problem definitions formulated above? Does it suggest an alternative problem formulation?
 - Does the information support the notion that health reform is needed? Could you use the same information to make the counter argument?