

**GUIDANCE FOR GOVERNANCE: COMPARING  
ALTERNATIVE SOURCES OF PUBLIC POLICY  
ADVICE**

**R. Kent Weaver and Paul B. Stares, Eds.**

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Alternative to what? That question is never fully discussed. The assumption of this book is that governments have traditionally received their main policy advice from civil servants in their line departments. In recent years, this book suggests, that advice has become inadequate—narrow perspective, capture by sectional interests, and lack of expertise—and other sources have been drawn on. This book focuses on these other sources, which it calls APAOs—alternative policy advisory organizations—that is, “organizations outside of line government departments which serve as institutionalised sources of policy expertise for government policymakers”(3).

This acronym and definition are flawed. The word alternative should strictly be limited to only two, since alternative implies only one other to the main one. A more appropriate acronym is EGPAOs, extragovernmental policy advisory organizations, or, as suggested by Mo Jongryn, the Korean contributor, nongovernmental sources of policy advice, NGSPAs.

More seriously, although the book does not examine the policy-advice mechanisms within line departments, it includes as APAOs some institutions within government, namely those within the central core executive engaged in policy review and advice. The authors indeed see them as one of the most important, and most common, type of APAO.

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If so, then the approach of the authors is defective. They should have examined, first, sources within government, certainly including those inside line departments as well as those in core executive bodies, exploring their interactions, strengths and weaknesses, duplications and frictions. Then, second, after explaining the limitations of these sources, the authors should have explored those sources extraneous to the executive, again considering their interactions with the two categories of internal policy advice. By concentrating on outside-government sources, with only a little on core-executive sources and nothing on line-departmental sources, the book fails to be a comprehensive survey and assessment of sources of policy advice to government.

Perhaps a later study will focus on governmental sources of policy advice, analyzing their composition, locations and functions. In the core executive it might distinguish between those concerned with advice on specific policies, like those inside line departments, and those tackling cross-departmental issues, and assess how effectively different countries have solved the problem of achieving good relations between the line departments and the core executive. What is needed is an updating of William Plowden, ed., *Advising the Rulers* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987) and B. Guy Peters, R.A.W. Rhodes, and V. Wright, eds., *Administering the Summit* (London and New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

This book is a useful complement to these earlier volumes, providing new information about policy making in a range of countries and analyzing the different institutions delivering advice. The opening chapter by the two editors presents, first, a sensible typology of the organizational forms of APAOs that exist around the world:

- central policy review and advisory organizations;
- legislative support organizations and independent audit agencies;
- legislative committee staffs;
- permanent advisory bodies;
- temporary blue-ribbon commissions;
- contract research and ministerial think tanks;
- academic think tanks;
- political party think tanks and research bureaus;
- advocacy think tanks; and,
- research-oriented NGOs.

Second, it considers cross-national variations in APAO activity, explaining them as byproducts of their legal, financial, labor market, information/expertise, and cultural environments, and of their political institutions, which encompass whether the legislature has a big or small role in policy making, whether the government is centralized or federal, and whether political parties are strong or weak. It then discusses the robustness of APAOs under the heading, Are APAOs Immortal? It assesses their influence, their prospects, and the lessons to be learned.

Then follow eight chapters on the separate countries, all packed with information and structured by the analytical framework of the introductory chapter. Each is well written and without disfigurements of jargon. The countries examined come from different regions and are at different stages of development: the U.S., Japan, the United Kingdom,

Brazil, Germany, India, Poland, and the Republic of Korea. There is no chapter of conclusions. They are included in the first chapter's section on opportunity for drawing lessons. It would have fitted better at the end of the book.

The editors have five main conclusions. First, there is no single model of APAO appropriate for all societies. APAOs grow out of their own distinctive national environments, especially their funding sources, political demands for policy advice, and labor markets for expertise. Attempts to improve a country's capacity for policy advice have to be tailored to suit each nation's unique context. The editors do not mention at this point a feature that has been significant in the country chapters: whether the legislature has a strong or weak role in policy making.

The second lesson is that the U.S. has special conditions that sustain APAOs—a strong philanthropic tradition, an extensive university system that trains policy experts, separation of powers, weak legislative parties, and federalism. Since in no other country is there a similar combination of these factors, copying U.S. institutions is not likely to work.

The third lesson is that having more APOAs will not necessarily mean they will have greater influence. They may lack resources, visibility, and credibility. More does not mean more effective. This observation leads the editors to suggest consolidation of APOAs to achieve more stable funding and critical mass, which should offer better career paths and higher status. Bigger, the editors imply, means more effective. But such consolidation reduces competition between APAOs, which should be valued by those who perceive the world of APAOs as comprising a market for policy advice.

The fourth lesson is that countries should remove obstacles to creating civil society based APAOs by ending restrictions on freedom of association, on the incorporation of nonprofit organizations without the sponsorship of ministries, and on donations to such bodies.

The fifth lesson is that multilateral funding bodies should encourage the development of APOA capacity and sponsor country-specific evaluations of that capacity. Here is the call from researchers for more funding for their research. The editors' justification is that in doing so "the salience of policy advice for governments" will be increased as well as "the importance of a freer flow of information, which is essential for an effective democracy and, with it, good governance" (28).

In addition, some further lessons can be drawn. First, the proliferation of APAOs means that intragovernmental advisory sources, i.e., the line department civil servants and bodies in the core executive, need strengthening to absorb the increased streams of policy advice flowing into government. Having more APAOs does not entail a reduction in or a diminished role for intragovernmental advisory sources. This point makes it more regrettable that the totality of intragovernmental advisory capacity was not treated in this book.

Second, the phenomenon of APAOs may damage the public interest. They are rarely broad in scope. They tend to reflect sectional interests and causes, whereas generalist civil servants, like the senior civil service in the UK, seek to promote the general shared public interest, synthesizing the varied pieces of policy advice streaming into government. The public interest would be better served by enhancing the pressures that sustain the common public interest, like governmental advisory sources, than in encouraging sectional interests to be even more assertive. It is, in fact, very helpful that

policy ideas are filtered through the concerns of political and administrative feasibility. That is not choking off policy advice, but injecting into it a strong dose of the public interest.

Third, there needs to be greater skepticism about APAOs. In a democracy, elected representatives are better placed to decide policy than are appointed, nominated, and self-selected APAOs. Elected representatives are sensible to pay more attention to their voters, opinion polls, and focus groups, which will probably express more wisdom than will desk-bound specialists from outside the public service. As Martin W. Thunert, the German contributor, notes, “the best advice is often given unofficially, by word of mouth” (202).

A glossary explaining bully-pulpit, op-ed, and blue-ribbon would help non-U.S. readers, and an editor sensitive to grammar and style would not have allowed split infinitives (due to, quite, in terms of, and this) without a following noun. Diane Stone, the British contributor, errs in stating that The Policy Unit, serving the prime minister, was “established shortly before the announcement of the closure” (101) of the Central Policy Review Staff, another core executive advisory body. The Policy Unit was established in 1974, which is not shortly before 1983 when the CPRS was abolished.

This book is essential reading for both students of comparative public administration and comparative public policy, and for practitioners concerned with presenting sound policy advice to governments, speaking truth to power.