

Trends

Hard data on trends in government learning, differentiated by the five types and seven agendas discussed earlier, are not available. But let me report several observations beyond those embedded elsewhere in the text. First, there seems to be an increased capacity for differentiated discussion of substantive domestic problems among some career specialists, who typically assert that they do understand the world better today than they did 20 years ago. What is less clear is whether they have differentiated and sophisticated maps of differences across the state and local political systems within which they seek to implement programs and torque responsiveness (e.g., to the poor, to health cost control concerns), whether there has been much progress in foreign policy, whether there is an overall intellectual integration in either the foreign or domestic area, whether the organizations know what the best specialists know, or where (we ve been learning **what doesn t work**) **there is increased effectiveness.**

A growing descriptive base for scientific causal analysis of American social and economic processes is reflected in the massive growth of statistical time series tabulated and published regularly by the federal government and in the social indicators movement (see the journal *Social Indicators*). The number of basic federal economic and census time series on computer was about 100,000 in 1979; DRI, a consulting firm with government contracts had about 5,000,000 (the reliability of some of these numbers is a matter of dispute, see, e.g., House & Williams, 1978.) There are important gaps, probably attributable to fear that accurate knowledge could either undercut desirable or motivate unwanted political action - there are, for example, no reliable data on the effective income of poor people (counting welfare benefits, transfer payments, public services) (Ginzberg, 1979, p. 32), no reliable data on the number of Americans without any health insurance, and no reliable current data on the distribution of wealth.

The most important development in the political arena has probably been the wide

adoption of public-opinion polling to aid electoral and policy decisions, It is unclear how much such polls affect decisions or how accurate they are as guides to public-opinion processes. It is also unclear whether, if they do have an effect, they increase genuine democratic responsiveness, shift concern away from substance and genuine leadership toward an image, public-relations approach, or in different ways, achieve both of the above.

In foreign policy, the trends in accurate factual knowledge are often cloaked in national-security secrecy. Defense policy informants, however, are virtually unanimous in attributing major increases in factual knowledge of Soviet weapons development, troop movements, and agriculture to observation satellites and other advanced technology aids.

It is probably true that many elites and the press discuss most issues in more sophisticated terms today. But whether this also reflects a growth of accurate sophistication about how the world really works or is something other than more sophisticated rationalizations is unclear.

It is common, as of this writing, to attribute deficient political intuitions, psychodrama skills, creativity, and vision to the Carter Administration and to tentatively assert that there is a new sensitivity to moral and ethical issues in the aftermath of Vietnam, the CIA revelations, and the Watergate and Koreagate scandals. But it is not clear that substantive competence is lower than under Nixon or Ford (on increasing situational constraints see Wildavsky, 1975). Also uncertain is whether there is a new, genuine, and enduring height of moral sensitivity or only an episodic and superficial moralism adopted for pragmatic and imagery concerns,

The long-term story of government innovations lacks a systematic list (analogous to that of Deutsch, Platt, & Senghaas, 1971) of what would count as genuine creativity, although clearly there have been enduring innovations in programs (e.g., the Great Society), technological aids to decisions (see M. M. Gray, 1979), weapons, political phrases and

imagery (Safire, 1978), campaign techniques (Hess, 1978), institutions (e.g., Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Congressional Budget Office, Department of Energy, Senior Executive Service), and analytical tools (e.g., cost/benefit, PERT, PPBS, systems analysis, MBO, ZBB; but see Hyde & Shafritz, 1978, and Sapolsky, 1972, for skeptical accounts of impact). There is also the beginning of sophisticated studies on the origins and diffusion paths of public-policy innovations (Aaron, 1978; Berman, 1978; G. D. Brewer, 1973; Garet, 1979; C. O. Jones, 1975).

Whether government does its job more wisely today than 25 years ago must be left to the reader to judge. One notable gap is the absence of knowledge of the actual learning agendas for individuals and agencies. Some agencies seem to be alive with people explicitly trying to learn (e.g., Department of Energy), others to be routinized into standard operating procedures without any urgent collective feeling that qualitative increases can be made (Department of State), still others to constrain learning within single paradigms (Council of Economic Advisers).

I should also report that a significant number of people in Washington think they understand the world quite well and believe no fundamental increase in intelligence is necessary or (since they believe we are there already) even possible. This confidence seems especially high in self-attributed understanding of American political processes. These self-reports run counter to Braybrooke and Lindblom's belief that "Decisions . . . not guided by a high level of understanding . . . are the decisions typical of ordinary political life" (C. O. Jones, 1975, p. 316).