Abhandlungen/Articles

Dennis R. Young
Consumer Problems in the Public Sector: A Framework for Research

Zusammenfassung


Abstract

Studies of consumer problems to date have largely focused on the private marketplace. The purpose of this paper is to delineate the nature of problems faced by consumers of government services, and to set forth a research agenda for studying these problems. Public sector consumer problems are attributed to two basic sources of governmental ineffectiveness: "organizational failure" which stems from internal bureaucratic factors, and "political failure" which stems from conflicts in the body politic. These sources are seen to lead to four categories of consumer problems: disappointing goods, problems of awareness and coping, consumer preference problems, and problems of access and location.

Formally at least, the consumer movement to date has largely focused on the problems of consumers in the private marketplace. Recent government policy innovations such as truth in labeling and advertising, and product safety regulation, as well as private efforts such as consumer magazines, research journals, and other aspects of consumer advocacy, are all witness to this focus on the private sector. Indeed, a recent comprehensive review of consumer action research (Ölander & Lindhoff, 1975) is quite candid about this orientation:

"Consumer actions and demands in the public sector are largely left out of consideration in this review. Although it has often been maintained that it is in that sector that 'consumer' problems are most serious ... we have excluded this area. The exclusion is ... partly due to the fact that we find it rather questionable to conceive of citizens as 'consumers' of government services ..." (p. 147).

Although there is some conceptual difficulty (see below) in portraying the citizen as a consumer of government services, such difficulty certainly does not justify neglect of public sector consumer problems. It is, therefore, the purpose of this paper to delineate the nature of problems faced by consumers of government services, and to set forth a research agenda for studying these problems.
One stumbling block to viewing the citizen as simply a consumer of government services, in direct analogue to the consumer in the private sector, is that government output cannot purely be characterized as an array of conventional goods and services. Government performs a wide and bewildering array of functions—an array which has grown markedly in most countries this century. (Indeed, it is this growth in the role of government that brings special urgency to problems of the “public consumer.”) In addition to functions conventionally viewed as public “services” such as fire and police protection, public education, defense, sanitation, social services, and transportation, and even some seemingly “private,” market-type “services” such as tennis courts, postal service, and games of chance (lotteries), government also redistributes income via social security and welfare programs, regulates private sector activities such as pharmaceuticals, meat production, energy production, and communications, stimulates or protects industries through quotas, tariffs, and franchise designations, protects civil and constitutional rights, decides what is fair in cases brought to court in civil and criminal matters, and indeed formulates the very rules and laws by which society operates.

In a narrow sense, at least, such activities as income redistribution, regulation and protection of industry, deciding equity, and rulemaking, seem oddly characterized as ordinary “services or goods” produced by government and consumed by citizens. Rather they appear to be functions which set groundrules and rearrange political and economic power relationships within which services and goods exchange takes place. In a wider sense, however, all of these functions may be conceived of as policy “outputs” of the public sector production process, stimulated in some manner by the preferences of “consumers/citizens” as they constitute various parts of the body politic. McKean (1973), for example, interprets government output on such a broad scale, and Greider (1977) goes so far as to picture the (federal) government as a bazaar in which interest groups shop for special programs of all sorts!

Whether we interpret governmental activity in the broad sense of policy outputs, or we restrict our attention (as we generally will in this paper) to more conventional public goods and services, it seems clear that government “produces” in response to citizen/consumer “demands,” although the identities of the various consumer/constituents are highly diverse and the nature of demand articulation is much different than that of the marketplace. Furthermore, citizens can be viewed as “consuming” what government produces, both in the sense of receiving the benefits (or possible negative effects) of government output and in paying for these outputs, as consumers would in a private marketplace. Again however, the degrees to which individual consumers benefit and pay for particular government services exhibits a great deal of variability among consumers, and the methods of payment and receipt of benefits are very different from those of the private sector.

Another problem in conceiving of the citizen as a public sector “consumer” is the fact that through voting and other forms of political participation, the citizen appears to become part of the governmental machinery. Hence there is an overlapping of the consumer and producer roles. This is analogous to the situation of a consumer in the private sector who belongs to a consumer cooperative for market goods such as food or housing. This problem is not very serious as a logical stumbling block, however. The fact remains that the vast majority of individual public service consumers are “policytakers,” not “policymakers.” Hence, for analytical purposes, individual