In his article, "Computers and a Normative Model of the Policy Process," [Policy Sciences, 1 (Spring 1970)], Davis Bobrow outlined a simple model of the public policymaking process, indicated the current impediments affecting the efficiency of this process, and then presented the computer as a possible means of reducing some of these impediments to better policymaking.

This reader was present at the Symposium at which Dr. Bobrow gave his paper, and in both his oral presentation and his subsequent article in this journal, it seemed that the author was exuding the same initial "gee-whiz" reaction to the computer that pathfinders have expressed in other areas of endeavor. These same pathfinders subsequently found that there were other factors, not mentioned by Dr. Bobrow in his paper, that tended to reduce the effectiveness of a computer in the area under study. This review attempts to (a) bring some of these factors into perspective, and (b) to emphasize that the computer software advocated so strongly by Bobrow, is not the single factor that is or will be the most important variable in the long haul to improvement of existing public policymaking.

The Bobrow Normative Model and Reality

1. There are a number of assumptions in the Bobrow normative model of the policy process that require closer scrutiny prior to any evaluation of the role of the computer in such a process. Assumption 1 of the model, i.e., that the policymaking process "should be democratic with informed expression of public preferences and exercise of public control . . . ," needs some expansion if the rest of Bobrow's argument is to have some credibility.

By not elaborating on his concept of "public control," Bobrow left a rather large gap in his arguments that his critics might use for an attack on his whole thesis. If one judges by Bobrow's assessment of his elite and public groups, it seems that he envisages the public in a policymaking role that would seem to add yet another corner to the already overloaded federal government decisionmaking triangle of Congressional Committee–Interest Group–Executive Bureau.

It seems that Bobrow's concept of the role of the public (and certainly his ill-
defined concept of public control) is based on his assessment of the success of "some
groups in the public [in their attempts] to generate policy alternatives independently of
elite initiatives . . ." [p. 12 of manuscript]. Yet if he is assessing the success of con-
temporary confrontation politics or the so-called participatory democracy that is
supposed to be the focal point of at least two federal government programs, it is
difficult to see the source of his optimism.

Participatory democracy is no doubt highly desirable, even to the point of having
51% consumer representation on policy advisory bodies at state and local govern-
ment planning level, if responsiveness to public needs is to be improved. Equally
important, however, are the notions of accountability and responsibility in government,
as a huge body of literature testifies. Also desirable, particularly if one happens to be
President of a nation where there is a "silent majority," is some notion of public
preference expressed through mechanisms other than the ubiquitous opinion poll, the
TV interview, or elections. As the reader of the literature on "the public interest"
(however defined) is aware, any model of "the public interest" which does not con-
sider the large proportion of the population that (a) does not know how to express its
preferences; (b) does not want to express its preferences; (c) does not have access
to preference-indicating mechanisms, is a rather incomplete model. It might be added
that these are generally characteristics of any section of the population (a) which is
not educated; (b) which feels alienated from the government decisionmaking pro-
cesses, and which would rather directly confront the so-called elite group than dis-
close preferences to some unknown decisionmaker. One might anticipate also some
considerable problems in persuading the public group to indicate preferences through
a computer terminal apparently endowed with some of the worst qualities of Orwellian
fiction; (c) that is located in urban areas with inadequate transportation systems and
without means of access to Bobrow's computer terminal, even allowing for the fact
that it could be a portable computer terminal.

Thus Bobrow's notion of how to obtain an informed expression of public pre-
ferences seems to be inadequate in this respect, while his notion of the exercise of
"public control" appears to lack a realistic appreciation of existing public policy-
making processes, particularly at the national level. As the Model Cities, OEO, and
Comprehensive Health Planning experience to date reveals, 51% consumer repre-
sentation does not necessarily mean that the policymaking system will be more re-
sponsive, or that better decisions will be made, nor does it ensure that any decision
will be made.1 Would 100% consumer representation, facilitated through an informed
public expressing its policy preferences, à la Bobrow, necessarily change this situa-
tion? Are public policymakers ready and willing to surrender their present responsi-
bilities to public control? Are consumers (Bobrow's public group) capable of or
interested in changing any of the group characteristics that Bobrow itemizes?

2. Again in his discussion of some common properties of public groups in Section
II of his paper, Bobrow appears to overlook the considerable problems of long-range
planning, which is ostensibly one desirable end result of collecting data on public


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