



## Study on Obstacles to Policy Termination

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### Abstract

The problem of how to terminate outdated or ineffective policies, programs or organizations is increasingly important. But the termination of public organizations, policies and programs has usually been neglected by policy researchers. This paper is intended to explore why the ending of policy is so tough that few cases are reported in practice. The main reasons for the longevity of government organizations and policies are as follows: intellectual reluctance, institutional permanence, antitermination coalition, legal obstacle, high start-up costs, pressure from public opinion, influence of interest groups, incrementalism at work, dynamic conservatism and so on. In the second part, some general strategies for making the termination option more available are suggested.

**Keywords:** Policy termination, Obstacles, Countermeasures

### 1. Introduction

Just like person's life is destined to an end, so is public policy. However outdated or inefficient policy will not die automatically, it requires policy makers to abolish artificially. That is to say, policy termination must be enforced by man through certain procedure. There is no consensus of policy termination in theoretical circle. But we can understand it in the following way: policy termination is a kind of action that is taken to bring the outdated, redundant, unnecessary or inefficient policy to close by decision-makers after a careful policy evaluation. Before specific termination strategies devised, termination must be accepted as part of the policy process. (DeLeon, 1978) Policy termination is conducive to saving resources, improving policy performance, avoiding the rigid policy and optimizing effect, etc. Therefore it is ought to be a necessary and important process of government administration, but for various reasons, in practice there have much resistance in policy termination. As for theoretical research, much work should be done to convert negative cognition on it, enlarge case collection to generalize the measure and so on. Herbert Kaufman has written that one of the reasons for publishing his study of termination was to call attention to this gap.

Policy termination is a significant and unavoidable topic to the rulers in theory or in practice. Policy termination is an administrative process relating to a series of personnel, institutions, activities and systems and other complex factors. Thus, "it is hard to carry out policy termination. Government programs are rarely terminated, even when evaluative studies produce negative findings; even when policymakers themselves are fully aware of fraud, waste, and inefficiency; even when highly negative benefit-cost ratios are reported, government programs manage to survive. Once policy is institutionalized within a government, it is extraordinarily difficult to terminate." (Thomas, 2004, p.324) Why is it so difficult for governments to terminate failed programs and policies? The answer to this question varies from one policy to another, but a few generalizations are possible. DeLeon's termination resistance model provides a vehicle for answer that question. He holds that at least six obstacles inhibit---if not virtually prohibit---the political act of termination: psychological reluctance; institutional permanence; dynamic conservatism; antitermination coalition; legal obstacles; and high start-up costs. (DeLeon, 1978, p.379) These usually occur in combination, and bring about the particular difficulty of planning and executing policy termination. Now obstacles to policy termination are concluded in the following discussion.

### 2. Obstacles to policy termination

#### 2.1 Intellectual Reluctance

The first obstacle is that people do not readily confront issues pertaining to death. This is also applicable to policy termination. Termination is rarely attempted is that political leaders are reluctant to admit or seem to admit past mistakes. Generally speaking, persons resist the end of the policy can be mainly classified into three groups: policy makers, policy executors and policy beneficiaries. For policy makers, on the one hand, they believe the existing policy is well thought and carefully drawn up; on the other hand, they assume that admission of policy failure is equal to acknowledging mistakes in job, and even may harm their own fame and wealth, thus they are against termination. For policy executor, if they are wanting in a high degree of consciousness, responsibility, and scientific attitude, they are usually reluctant to admit the failure of the policy because they have invested considerable energy and labor in the

process of enforcing the policies, especially when the end of the policy may be detrimental to their interest or development prospects, they tend to show a strong psychological and behavioral reject. Meanwhile after a period of implementation, policy executor has got into a work habit and mental set, which further consolidates their habits to maintain present state. In case policy termination is initiated, they will be unaccommodated. For policy beneficiary, policy termination means redistribution of interests. Thus, some are afraid to lose their own vested interests consisting of salary, bonus, benefits and the like due to policy termination. For instance, about the policies on streamlining government organs, those who believe that their power, status and prestige are impaired would be against it. Cognitive reluctance to realize policy shortcoming is reinforced for the analyst because policies typically are designed to solve, or at least to reduce, a specified problem; the options proposed and the programs chosen for not selected with the thought that they will prove deficient. For this reason, little serious attention is paid to the question of failure or the later need for policy termination.

In Thomas R. Dye's (2004) view, among the beneficiaries of any government program that are those who administer and supervise it. Bureaucratic jobs depend on a program's continuation. If the continuation is cut, "government positions with all of their benefits, pay, prerequisites, and prestige, are at stake. Strong incentives exist for bureaucrats to resist or undermine negative evaluations of their programs to respond to public criticism by making only marginal changes in their programs or even by claiming that their programs are failing because not enough is being spent on them." (Thomas, 2004, p.325)

### *2.2 Institutional Permanence*

The second cause of public policy longevity concerns the tendency of all institutions to maintain themselves—to become immortal. (Frantz, 1992, p.181) A diverse body of literature testifies to this tendency (Kaufman, 1976) and to the fact that the longer an institution exists, the more resilient it becomes (Downs, 1967) Organizations are deliberately designed to perpetuate a service or a relationship whose demands are expected to outlive a single sponsor or bureaucrat. Biller (1976) holds that the adaptive nature of an organization further immunizes it from easy termination. Should discrepancies between the organization's objective and its environment arises, the organization is designed to recognize, act upon, and reduce the problem before it can attain a magnitude that would endanger the institution's very existence or, at least, its nominal jurisdiction in dealing with such problems. To a large degree, these tendencies are proper and justifiable institutional objectives: major policies and institutions should not be transitory, nor should they meekly collapse under the treat of a new problem or altered conditions. (Deleon, 1978, p.381)

This is not the place to debate the issues and values of organizational growth, adaptation, or permanence. The crucial point is not whether planned institutional longevity is good or bad but simply that it is a fact of political, bureaucratic life. (Deleon, 1978, p.381) Organizations, their policies, and many of their programs are intended devised for long life and possible permanence. If amendment or adjustment is wanted to be done to one of them, external forces must be turned to for help. As is the reason why that the inertia inherent in organizations makes it instinctively opposed to any change. In addition, organizations, like human beings, have a strong vitality, when the policy termination endangering the survival of the organization, and it will do everything possible to alleviate the pressure, or change strategies, or adjust the structure, and finally find ways to slow down the process of policy termination. All of these give policy termination a negative impact.

### *2.3 Antitermination coalition*

Public programs become the stimuli for the development of coalitions of staff, constituents, and other groups who have common and intense interests in maintaining those programs according to DeLeon. (1978, p.290) These coalitions "may be strongly committed and may intensely resist change and ignore contrary evidence". (Anderson, 1984, p.255) Different political groups have its own strengths and tactics, but such groups are particularly successful when they form coalitions to block threatened acts of termination.

When the self-interest is threatened because of the upcoming termination of the policy, the power of coalitions struggling against policy termination is often consciously or unconsciously, to unite to make policy termination intractable. Organizations or groups that are against policy termination, on the one hand, will usually require its members to work together within a common resistance, on the other hand, will try every possible means including roping in or being close to the personage and policy supporter in order to form a powerful averse forces posing a threat to the end of the policy. The executive authorities' coalition is particularly active and influential; it is because it is more convenient than any other social organizations to conduct political activities for the executive organs. The power of these groups seems to have increased as the institution aged.

### *2.4 Legal obstacles*

Legal obstacles, according to DeLeon (1978, p.291), relate to "constraints of 'due process' " and may prohibit the government from closing institutions. We know that any formulation, implementation of policy, and the establishment of organization must be carried out through certain legal procedures, so must policy termination and the withdrawal of

organizations. These must also be handled in accordance with statutory procedures. This process is not only time-consuming, but also complex. At times, it may even delay the timing of policy termination. In particular, it is arduous to terminate the policies that have risen to the level of law. Thus, legal troubles are, and continue to be, significant impediments to the closure of policy. Meanwhile, termination of dysfunctional policy for the legislature means that their legislative activity is devoid of the corresponding scientificity and effectiveness to some extent. Therefore, for the sake of their own interest, the legislature in considering the termination of a policy or law is often hesitated and scrupulous, so it will undoubtedly increase the difficulty of policy termination.

### *2.5 High start-up costs*

DeLeon's model concludes the idea that there are considerable costs associated with terminations. "Whoever initiates a termination procedure must pay these costs convincing government to admit it made a mistake, finding an alternative solution to the problem, enduring the protests of those damaged by the termination, and accepting responsibility for the externalities of the closure." (Frantz, 1992, p.185) Few politicians are willing to admit that they have been made mistakes, and to call for the termination of a policy or program is tacit admission of such failure. DeLeon's fourth 'start-up cost' involves externalities such as the image government develops if it gives up its responsibility. Bardach (1976) refers to the 'moral repugnance' that people feel they are abandoned. Individual, groups, and whole societies frequently judge public policy in terms of its good intentions rather than tangible accomplishments. (Thomas, 2004, p.314)

Cost concerned with policy termination, from the perspective of its property, not only include political cost, but also economic and social cost. From the view of its course, it comprises direct and indirect cost. Generally speaking, cost of policy termination can be divided to two major parts: the sunk cost of existing policies and the price for the conduct of ending policies itself. Firstly, any extant policy has been occupying certain resources, and which would make persons who approve closure between the devil and the deep sea: on the one hand, the current policy has been proven to be ineffective or a failure, if additional investment is continued to put, this will certainly result in greater losses, and more input will surely bring about more loss; on the other hand, if no investment is added, investment of billions of dollars due to termination of the policy would be thoroughly frustrated and become sunk cost, which will never be drawn back. Secondly, the operation of termination needs large costs. Before ending, many resources must be collected for formulating new policy or institution so as to guarantee administrative continuance. Except that, in order to diminish resistance, certain compensation is necessary to provide for those individuals or organs suffer loss.

In general, higher cost is invested, more painful termination is made. In face of high sunk cost and large amount of price paid for the action of termination itself, decision makers usually choose to persist in current policy and give up termination hesitatedly.

### *2.6 Pressure from public opinion*

Social and public opinion is also a factor that influences and impedes in policy termination. James • E • Anderson said: "Public opinion establishes the basic scope and direction of public policy." (Anderson, 1984, p.63) Thus, whether in capitalist society or socialist society, public opinion all have an extremely important effect in political life. Many policy practices have shown that, home and abroad, when public opinion takes on a positive attitude towards the end of the policy, the policy termination becomes easier; on the contrary, when it presents a negative attitude, which will impede the conduct of policy termination. In the West, public opinion is often regarded as "the fourth power" besides legislature, administration and jurisdiction, due to its special role played in political life. Therefore, in order to promote the smooth ending of the policy, it is essential to steel and create a favorable public opinion environment for policy termination. If the policy or program is upheld by public communication media and mass opinion, any attempt to terminate it will encounter dramatic resistance.

### *2.7 Influence of interest groups*

Public choice theory figures that interest groups play a powerful role in public policy. Interest groups, politicians and officials together make up of 'the iron triangle' through interaction, as exacerbates policy termination. In a plural-structure society, a variety of forces impact public policy process. Group theory model regards that public policy is the result of diverse political forces' interaction. Political life in reality is a course that all groups try to influence public policy. For the sake of their own interest, each group does their outmost to strengthen themselves so as to put more influence on public policy subject. To some extent, public policy is the outcome and manifestation of different groups' interest balance. Therefore, when ending policy threatens their current goodness, interest groups will try all means to reject it.

### *2.8 Incrementalism at Work*

Complete program termination are very rare. Governments seldom undertake to ponder any program as a whole in any given year. Active consideration of policies is made at the margin—that is, "attention is focused on proposed changes in existing programs rather than on the value of programs in their entirety". (Thomas, 2004, p.325) This attention often

comes in the budgetary process, in the bureaucracy and legislature when proposed increases or decreases in funding are under discussion. Passive evaluative research can play a role in the budgetary course—limiting increases for failed programs or perhaps even identifying programs ripe for budget cutting. However focus is almost always put on changes or reforms, increases or decreases, rather than on the complete termination of policy. Failed programs can also be “repackaged”, that is to say, giving new names and agency titles, while keeping the same goals, the same bureaucracy, and the same policy prescriptions. Termination often generates a great deal of conflict and involve very special context. Marginal policy changes are much easier than policy termination to accomplish.

### *2.9 Dynamic Conservatism*

Term of “Dynamic Conservatism” is put forward by Donald Schon, which means a facility that organization can move to alter its objectives or possibly its environment. Because they are dynamic entities with both the way and the incentives to recognize when targets are reached or when a great disparity exists between institutional policy and specific policy goals, organizations are extraordinarily resistant to termination.

According to Thomas R. Dye (2004), it is scarcely sufficient grounds for disbanding an organization regardless of the successful or the unable attainment of a policy objective. Obviously, if an organization or a policy is not running to expectations, it is a more likely candidate for termination than if it were achieving some worthwhile measure of its defined objectives. This is not to deny that ineffective performance may not lead to termination; surely ineffective performance increases the probability of termination, but the increase may not be significant. “The main point is that organizations and their policies are dynamic, not static. Both can be altered if need be, to increase the difficulty of terminating them.” (Thomas, 2004, p.383)

### **3. Countermeasures**

From the discussion above, it is easy to find that it is not easy to execute policy termination. Detailed study of the obstacles to policy termination bears the aim to seek better strategies for closure of policy. If termination strategies are not carefully formulated and implemented, they can undermine their purpose

It appears that successful termination efforts are more likely under certain political and social conditions. Any strategy for terminating a given policy or program should obviously attempt to create, or at least await, these conditions: (1) A change in administration. This introduces—or at least has the potential for introducing—actors who are either not shackled to existing policies and programs or who have a positive incentive to dissociate themselves from the past; (2) Delegitimation of the ideological matrix in which the policy is embedded; (3) A period of turbulence in which many people’s optimistic expectations about their own life chances are shaken. This condition weakens the moral aversion to disrupting the life patterns of persons who have come to presume upon, and rely upon, the continuance of particular government activities; (4) Cushioning the blow. Policy termination strategies can be designed to partially ameliorate those injuries which will be suffered by interests to be adversely affected; (5) Finally Bardach Eugene mention again Biller’s admonition that designing policies for eventual termination would facilitate their transformation or even their complete destruction when the time was ripe. (Bardach, 1976, p.130)

Peter DeLeon takes for that a set of termination strategies to serve the dual function of not interfering with the ability of an organization or a policy to threat problem areas while making the termination option more available includes: firstly, the most important step toward termination opportunities is the recognition that termination is not a personal or institutional end of the world. Secondly, the analyst who develops termination contingencies must pay special attention to the evaluation stage, for it provides the measures that determine, relative to the objective, whether the termination option need be exercised, or whether partial termination can provide the necessary adjustments. A third consideration necessary before designing specific termination strategies is what we might call the “political context” and the “natural points” for termination. (DeLeon, 1978, p.388)

Due to the complexity, difficulty and contradiction of termination process, it is inevitable for the decision makers to make advantage of high intelligence and technique and take flexible tactic. Otherwise policy termination not only can not attain its goals, even make things worse and intrigue political crisis and conflict. So termination executors must avail themselves of driving force and clear up prohibitive force in ending policy at full steam. The main strategies we provide are as follows:

#### *3.1 Put great emphasis on communication*

The most important step toward improving termination opportunities is the recognition that termination is not a personal or institutional end of the world. Rather, termination can be viewed as an opportunity for improving a deficient condition or as the sign of a venture’s successful completion. (DeLeon, 1978, p.388) As mentioned above, policy makers, policy beneficiaries and policy executors are the major persons resist termination. So communication must be given particular attention in termination process in order to decrease their psychological pressure and eliminate resistant feeling. Termination executors should make the relative persons and organs, especially policy makers and executors, know the necessity, aims and methods of termination through passing enough related information in time. After those

know the original policy is outdated and if it lasts, more resources would be wasted and public interest would be damaged, then they may realize the positive values of termination and agree with it. One goal of communication is letting interrelated persons understand termination not certainly leading to loss of interest, but to change the weakness and search for advance. Termination is ultimately helpful for the state and its people. As long as they are aware of the meaning of termination, less resistance and more support are expected to be gotten.

### 3.2 Open results of policy evaluation

To a great degree, the attitude and magnitude of proponents is crucial to policy termination. Pioneers of policy termination is ought to enlarge the supportive force by all means to render termination a smooth run. The best way is to open the results of policy appraisal properly so as to strive for potential supporters. By opening outcome of evaluation to disclose the information on dysfunctional or ineffective policies, persons can further recognize the harm and loss brought about by them and change to the supportive one to termination from their resistant viewpoint and attitude. In addition, termination executors can set forward the reasons why they are for putting an end to certain policy, point out the original policy will never accommodate to the changing environment and relevant conditions. All of these are good for winning over more proponents.

### 3.3 Promulgate new policy when terminating old policy

Policy termination, in effect, is intended to break current interest allocation structure, and usually leads certain groups or persons to losing their intrinsic interests to different degree. Forasmuch they are often reluctant to accept closure of policy, but not be against the forthcoming of a new and better policy. So as to decrease the stress put by policy termination, it is of great significance to promulgate new policy while terminating outmoded one, and thus new policy can in time substitute the old.

Although people will lose their hope for the old policy, they are also about to get a new expectation. Such mental balance is good for diminishing enormously the controversy and resistance to the end of policy. However, this means requires a higher standard for legislature to carry out. It is because that terminating old policy is undertaken when coming up with the new one. These two conducts frequently struggle for limited time, energy, personnel, materials, information and so on. Any neglect or malpractice would harm policy termination. When utilizing this scheme, hereby, all kinds of preparation should be made carefully and skillfully so that old policy can be ended smoothly when the new one is brought into effect.

The above three strategies are the major but not the whole. Besides, other measures can also be gradually adopted, such as passing tentative information of termination to examine mass opinion, balancing policy termination, policy maintenance and policy development,.

## 4. Conclusion

In the current period of social transition, China is facing a number of adjustments in the political, economic and social areas, including the system and policy adjustments. In order to create a good social reform and development institutions and policy environment, we must perfect and clean up promptly the old system and policies. The success of this perfection and clean-up also depends on making use of the favorable factors concerned policy termination.

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