

The Essence of Decision (Allison 1971)

How do we explain governmental choice?

Rational Actor Paradigm

- I. *Basic Unit of Analysis*: Government Action as Choice. The Rational Actor selects the action that will maximize strategic goals and objectives.

- II. *Concepts*:
 - a. *Actor*: The actor (government) is a rational, unitary decisionmaker. The actor has one set of specified goals, one set of perceived options, and a single estimate of the consequences that follow from each alternative.
 - b. *Problem*: action is in response to a specific problem.
 - c. *Static selection*: The action is a steady state choice among alternatives rather than a large number of partial choices in a dynamic stream of events.
 - d. *Action as Rational Choice*. The components include
 1. Goals and Objectives
 2. Options
 3. Consequences
 4. Choice - value maximizing - the rational agent selects the alternative whose consequences rank highest in terms of goals and consequences

“if a nation performed a particular action, that nation must have had ends toward which the action constituted an optimal means.”

Organizational Process Paradigm

“governmental behavior can be understood less as deliberate choices and more as outputs of large organizations functioning according to standard patterns of behavior”

I. *Basic Unit of Analysis*: Government Action as Organizational Output. The Rational Actor selects the action that will maximize strategic goals and objectives.

II. *Concepts*:

- a. *Organizational Actor*: The actor (government) is not a monolithic “government” but rather a constellation of loosely allied organizations
- b. *Factored Problems and Fractionated Power*: Problems are broken down and parceled out to various organizations.
- c. *Parochial Priorities and Perceptions*: Problem factoring encourages organizational parochialism and is enhanced by (1) selective information available (2) recruitment of personnel (3) tenure of individuals (4) small group pressures inside organization (5) distribution of rewards. “Thus, organizations develop stable propensities concerning operational priorities, perceptions and issues.”
- d. *Action as Organizational Output*. Organizational activity has a programmed character: behavior is an enactment of preestablished routines:

Organizational Process Paradigm (continued)

Organizational Activity Characterized by:

1. Goals that are defined by constraints (e.g., budget) that define acceptable performance.
2. Sequential Attention to Goals
3. Standard Operating Procedures—organizations perform “higher” functions by doing “lower” tasks
4. Programs and Repertoires—sets of rehearsed SOPs for producing specific actions
5. Uncertainty avoidance—organizations attempt to “negotiate” their environment to reduce uncertainty
6. Problem-directed search—when situations cannot be construed as standard, organizations conducted limited search according to prevailing training or experience
7. Organizational Learning and Change—organizational behavior mostly persists but can be changed in response in to budgetary feast or famine or dramatic performance failures.

General Propositions of (Organizational Process) Paradigm

1. *Implementation*: Organizational activity according to SOPs and programs does not constitute far-sighted, flexible adaptation to “the issue.” Actions are determined by organizational routines, not governmental leaders’ directions.
2. *Options*: The menu of alternatives defined by organizations to be real options is severely limited in both number and character.
3. *Limited Flexibility and Incremental Change*: Behavior at one time is marginally different from behavior at a different time. Simple minded predictions work best.
4. *Long-range planning*: A long range planning function would suggest Model I but long range planning tends to become institutionalized and then disregarded.
5. *Goals and Tradeoffs*: Organizational goals are formulated as constraints. Tradeoffs are neglected—hard choices among goals are seldom made. Incompatible constraints are attended to sequentially.
6. *Imperialism*: Most organizations define “health” in terms of growth in budget, manpower, and territory.
7. *Administrative feasibility*: A considerable gap separates what leaders choose and what organizations implement.
8. *Directed Change*: Existing organizational orientations and routines are not impervious to directed change. Need to target personnel, rewards, information, and budgets over time. But most political leadership is short—directed change is uncommon.

Governmental (Bureaucratic) Politics Paradigm

I. *Basic Unit of Analysis*: Government Action as Political Resultant. The decisions and actions of governments are not chosen but are the result of compromise, conflict, and confusion of officials with diverse interests and unequal influence.

II. *Concepts*:

Who Plays?

Players in Positions: The actor (government) is not a unitary agent nor a conglomeration of organizations, but rather a number of individual players (men in jobs).

What determines each players stand?

Players' Goals and Priorities: The factors that encourage organizational parochialism also exert pressure upon players on top (within) these organizations. Organizational goals and interests are intermingled with personal interests. Deadlines and events raise issues and force busy players to take stands.

What determines each player's impact on results?

Player's Impact: Power (effective influence on government decisions and actions) is an elusive blend of bargaining advantages and skill/will in using bargaining advantages. Bargaining advantages include formal authority and responsibility, actual control over resources, expertise, control of information, the ability to affect other players' objectives, and access to players who have bargaining advantages.

What is the game? How are players' stands, influence, and moves combined to yield governmental decisions/actions?

Action channels and Rules of the Game: An action channel is regularized means of taking governmental action (e.g., federal budget process). These structure the game by preselecting the players. The rules of the game come from various statutes, court interpretations, executive orders, conventions, and even culture. Rules establish the positions and constrict the range of government decisions and actions.

“Each player pulls and hauls with the power at his discretion for outcomes that will advance his conception of national, organizational, group, and personal interests.”

The decision environment can force responsible men to become active players.