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Chapter 7

Public Policy Decision-Making—Beyond Rationalism, Incrementalism, and Irrationalism

The decision-making stage of the policy cycle received the most attention in the early development of the policy sciences, when analysts borrowed heavily from the models of decision-making in complex organizations developed by students of public administration and business organization.[1] By the mid-1960s, discussions about public policy decision-making had ossified in the debate surrounding the 'incremental' and 'rational' models.[2] The mainstream position was that while the 'rational' model was more preferable as a model of how decisions ought to be taken, the 'incremental' model best described the actual practice of decision-making in governments.[3] This led to efforts in the 1970s to develop alternative models of decision-making in complex organizations. Some attempted to synthesize the rational and incremental models. Others–including the so-called 'garbage can' model of decision-making–focused on the irrational elements of organizational behaviour in order to arrive at a third path beyond rationalism and incrementalism.[4]

Only recently have efforts been made to go beyond the three general models and develop a nuanced understanding of the complex processes associated with public policy decision-making.[5] The objective of this chapter is to discuss the contending models of public policy decision-making and examine recent developments in the field. It concludes by proposing an alternative model of decision-making in governments which takes into account the questions about constraints on power and the significance of policy subsystems raised in our discussions of earlier stages of the policy cycle.

Conceptual Issues

Gary Brewer and Peter DeLeon describe the decision-making stage of the public policy process as:

> the choice among policy alternatives that have been generated and their likely effects on the problem estimated. . . . It is the most overtly political stage in so far as the many potential solutions to a given problem must somehow be winnowed down and but one or a select few picked and readied for use. Obviously most possible choices will not be realized and deciding not to take particular courses of action is as much a part of selection as finally settling on the best course.[6]

This definition makes several key points about the decision-making stage of public policy-making. First, decision-making is not a self-contained stage, nor a synonym for the entire public policy-making process, but a specific stage rooted firmly in the previous stages of the policy cycle. It involves choosing from among a relatively small number of alternative policy options, as identified in the process of policy formulation, to resolve a public problem. Secondly, this definition underlines the point that public policy decision-making is not a technical exercise, but an inherently political process. It recognizes that public policy decisions create 'winners' and 'losers', even if the decision is to do nothing or to retain the *status quo*.

Brewer and DeLeon's definition says nothing about the desirability, likely direction, or scope of public decision-making. To deal with these issues, different theories have been developed to describe how decisions are made in government as well as to prescribe how decisions ought to be made. Although they have significant differences these models also exhibit several similarities. It is to discussion of these that we now turn.

First, each of the models acknowledges that the number of relevant policy actors decreases with the progress of the public policy process. Thus agenda-setting involves a wide variety of state and societal actors. At the stage of policy formulation, the number of actors remains large, but includes only those state and societal actors forming the policy subsystem. The public policy decision-making stage involves even fewer actors, as it normally excludes virtually all non-state actors, including those from other levels of government. Only those politicians, judges, and government officials empowered to make authoritative decisions in the area in question participate in this stage of the policy cycle.[7]

Second, the models also recognize that in modern governments the degree of freedom enjoyed by each decision-maker is circumscribed by a host of rules governing political and administrative offices and constraining the actions of each office-holder. These rules range from the country's constitution to the specific mandate conferred on individual decision-makers by various laws and regulations.[8] The rules usually set out not only which decisions can be made by which government agency or official, but also the procedure that must be followed. As Allison and Halperin have noted, such rules and operating procedures provide decision-makers with 'action channels'–a regularized set of procedures for producing certain types of decisions.[9] These rules and standard operating procedures explain why so much of the decision-making in government is of a routine and repetitive nature.[10] While they circumscribe the freedom available to decision-makers, considerable discretion remains with individual decision-makers to arrive at their own judgement of the 'best' course of action to follow in specific circumstances. Exactly what process is followed and which decision is considered 'best' varies among decision-makers and the contexts in which they operate.

At the macro-level, different countries have different constitutional arrangements and different sets of rules governing the structure of governmental agencies and the conduct of officials. Some political systems concentrate decision-making authority in the elected executive and the bureaucracy, while others permit the legislature and judiciary to play a greater role. Parliamentary systems tend to fall in the former category and presidential systems in the latter. Thus in Australia, Britain, and Canada and other parliamentary democracies, the cabinet and bureaucracy are solely responsible for making policy decisions. They may at times have decisions imposed upon them by the legislature in situations when the government does not enjoy a majority in the parliament or by the judiciary, in its role as the interpreter of the constitution, but these are not routine occurrences. In the United States and other Republican systems, although the authority to make decisions rests with the President (and the cabinet and bureaucracy acting on the president's behalf), those requiring legislative approval often involve negotiation with members of the Congress, while some are modified or overturned on a regular basis by the judiciary on constitutional or other grounds. At the micro-level, decision-makers themselves vary greatly in terms of background, knowledge, and predilections that affect how they interpret a problem and the solutions to it.[11] Different decision-makers operating in similar institutional set-ups respond differently when dealing with the same or similar problems.

Beyond these areas of similarity the numerous models developed to describe the decision-making process differ substantially. Three of the most commonly used in this respect are the Rational, Incremental, and Garbage Can models. We will discuss these in turn.

Models of Decision-Making

The two best known models of public policy decision-making are usually referred to as the *rational* model and the *incremental* model. The former is essentially a model of business decision-making applied to the public arena, while the latter is a political model applied to public policy. Other models seek to combine rationality and incrementalism in varying measures. In contrast to all these models admitting varying degrees of rationality, the *garbage can* model portrays decision-making as an essentially non-rational (but not completely irrational) process based on convenience and ritualized decision-making behaviour.

The Rational Model

An idealized model of rational policy-making process consists of a 'rational individual' undertaking the following sequential activities:

1. A goal for solving a problem is established.
2. All alternative strategies of achieving the goal are explored and listed.
3. All significant consequences of each alternative strategy are predicted and the probability of those consequences occurring is estimated.
4. Finally, the strategy that most nearly solves the problem or solves it at least cost is selected.[12]

The rational model is 'rational' in the sense that it prescribes procedures for decision-making that will lead to the choice of the most efficient means of achieving policy goals. Rationalist theories are rooted in enlightenment rationalism and positivism, schools of thought which seek to develop detached, scientific knowledge to improve human conditions.[13] They are based on the belief that society's problems ought to be solved in a 'scientific' or 'rational' manner, by gathering all relevant information on the problems and the alternative solutions to them, and then selecting the best alternative.[14] The task of the policy analyst is viewed as developing the relevant knowledge and then offering it to the government for application.[15] Policy-makers are assumed to operate as technicians or business managers, who identify a problem and then adopt the most effective or efficient way of solving it. It is for its problem-solving orientation that this approach is also known as 'scientific', 'engineering', or 'managerialist'.

In decision-making studies, the rational model is rooted in early attempts to establish a science of organizational behaviour and public administration. Elements of the model can be found in the work of early students of public administration such as Henri Fayol in France and Luther Gulick and Lyndal Urwick in Britain and the United States. Drawing on the insights gleaned by Fayol from his studies of the turn-of-the-century French coal industry,[16] Gulick and Urwick codified a model by which they argued the best decisions could be taken. The PODSCORB model they developed suggests that organizations can maximize their performance by systematically Planning, Organizing, Deciding, Selecting, Co-ordinating, Recruiting, and Budgeting.[17] 'Deciding' on a particular course of action, for Gulick and Urwick, amounted to weighing the benefits of any decision against its expected costs.

Later, many analysts subscribing to this perspective began to argue that this form of decision-making would generate maximal results only if all possible alternatives and the costs of each alternative were assessed before a decision was made–the 'rational-comprehensive' model of decision-making.[18] The new emphasis on comprehensiveness proved problematic, as critics were quick to point out. There are limits to the ability of human decision-makers to be comprehensive in establishing alternatives and calculating benefits and costs. There are also political and institutional constraints that condition the selection of options and decision choices. The rational-comprehensive model was criticized as misguided at best and mischievous at worst.

Perhaps the most noted critic of the rational model is the American behavioural scientist Herbert Simon, the only student of public administration ever to win a Nobel prize. Beginning in the early 1950s, he argued in a series of books and articles that several hurdles prevented decision-makers from attaining 'pure' comprehensive rationality in their decisions.[19] First, there are cognitive limits to the decision-makers' ability to consider all possible options, forcing them to selectively consider alternatives. If this is so, then it is likely they choose from among options selected on ideological or political grounds, if not randomly, without reference to their implications for efficiency. Second, the model assumes that it is possible for decision-makers to know the consequences of each decision in advance, which is rarely the case in reality. Third, each policy option entails a bundle of favourable and adverse consequences which makes comparisons among them difficult indeed. Since the same option can be efficient or inefficient depending on circumstances, it is not possible for decision-makers to arrive at unambiguous conclusions about which alternative is superior.

Simon's assessment of the rational model concluded that public decisions in practice did not maximize benefits over costs, but merely tended to satisfy whatever criteria decision-makers set for themselves in the instance in question. This 'satisfycing' criterion, as he put it, was a realistic one given the bounded rationality with which human beings are endowed.

The Incremental Model

Doubts about the practicality or even usefulness of the rational model led to efforts to develop a theory of decision-making more closely approximating the actual behaviour of decision-makers in practical situations. This fostered the emergence of the *incremental* model which portrayed public policy decision-making as a political process characterized by bargaining and compromise among self-interested decision-makers. The decisions that are eventually made represent what is politically feasible rather than desirable.

The credit for developing the incremental model of public decision-making is attributed to Yale University political scientist Charles Lindblom.[20] He summarized the model as consisting of the following 'mutually supporting set of simplifying and focusing stratagems':

> a. Limitation of analysis to a few somewhat familiar policy alternatives . . . differing only marginally from the status quo;
> b. An intertwining of analysis of policy goals and other values with the empirical aspects of the problem (that is, no requirement that values be specified first with means subsequently found to promote them);
> c. A greater analytical preoccupation with ills to be remedied than positive goals to be sought;

d. A sequence of trials, errors, and revised trials;
e. Analysis that explores only some, not all, of the important possible consequences of a considered alternative;
f. Fragmentation of analytical work to many (partisan) participants in policy making (each attending to their piece of the overall problem domain).[21]

In Lindblom's view, decision-makers develop policies through a process of making 'successive limited comparisons' with earlier decisions, those they are familiar with. As he put it in his oft-cited article on 'The Science of "Muddling Through",' decision-makers work through a process of 'continually building out from the current situation, step-by-step and by small degrees'.[22] Decisions thus arrived at are usually only marginally different from those that exist; in other words, the changes from the *status quo* are incremental.

There are two reasons why decisions do not usually vary substantially from the *status quo*.[23] First, since bargaining requires distribution of limited resources among various participants, it is easier to continue the existing pattern of distribution rather than try to impute values to radically new proposals. The benefits and costs of the present arrangements are known to the policy actors, unlike the uncertainties surrounding new arrangements, which make agreement on changes difficult to reach. The result is either continuation of the *status quo*, or small changes from it. Second, the standard operating procedures that are the hallmark of bureaucracy tend to promote the continuation of existing practices. The methods by which bureaucrats identify options and the methods and criteria for choice are often laid out in advance, inhibiting innovation and perpetuating the existing arrangements.

Lindblom also argued that the rational model's requirement of separation between ends and means was unworkable in practice not only for the time and information constraints identified by Simon, but also because it assumed policy-makers could clearly separate means and ends in assessing policies, and could then agree upon both. Lindblom argued that in most policy areas, ends are inseparable from means, and which goals are pursued often depends on whether or not there are viable means available to accomplish them. Since agreement on a policy choice is difficult to achieve, decision-makers avoid re-opening old issues or considering choices that are so different from existing practices as to make agreement difficult. The result is, again, policy decisions that differ only incrementally from the old policies.

The incremental model views decision-making as a practical exercise concerned with solving problems at hand rather than achieving lofty goals. In this model the means chosen for solving problems are discovered through trial-and-error rather than through the comprehensive evaluation of all possible means. Decision-makers consider only a few familiar alternatives for appropriateness and stop the search when they believe an acceptable alternative has been found.

In earlier writings, Lindblom and his co-authors held out the possibility that incremental decision-making could co-exist with efforts to achieve more 'rational' decisions. Thus Braybrooke and Lindblom, for example, argued that four different types of decision-making could be discerned depending upon the amount of knowledge at the disposal of decision-makers, and the amount of change the decision involved from earlier decisions.[24] This generated the two-by-two matrix shown in Figure 9.

Figure 9.
Four Types of Decision-Making

		Level of Available Knowledge	
		High	Low
Amount of Change Involved	High	*Revolutionary*	*Analytic*
	Low	*Rational*	*Disjointed Incremental*

SOURCE: Adapted from David Braybrooke and Charles Lindblom, *A Strategy of Decision: Policy Evaluation as a Social Process*, New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963.

In this view, the overwhelming majority of decisions were likely to be taken in an incremental fashion, involving minimal change in situations of low available knowledge. However three other possibilities existed, the rational model emerging as one possibility and two other poorly defined styles–'revolutionary' and 'analytic'–also existing as infrequently utilized alternatives.

Later in his career, however, Lindblom was to argue that a spectrum of decision-making styles existed. These ranged from 'synoptic' or rational-comprehensive decision-making to 'blundering', that is, simply following hunches or guesses without any real effort at systematic analysis of alternative strategies. The spectrum is illustrated in Figure 10.

Figure 10.
A Spectrum of Decision-Making Styles

Synoptic —— Strategic —— Disjointed Incremental —— Simple Incremental —— Blundering

SOURCE: Adapted from Charles E. Lindblom and D.K. Cohen, *Usable Knowledge: Social Science and Social Problem Solving*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979.

Although admitting the theoretical possibility of different styles of decision-making, Lindblom in his later works rejected all other alternatives to the incremental on practical grounds. He argued that any kind of synoptic analysis which attempted to arrive at decisions on the basis of maximizing criteria of any kind would end in failure, and that all decision-making was based on what he termed 'grossly incomplete' analysis. The essence of incrementalism, he argued, was to try to systematize decisions reached in this fashion by stressing

the need for political agreement and learning by trial-and-error, rather than simply bumbling into random decisions.[25]

While the incremental model may be an accurate description–and that too is debatable–of how public policy decisions are often made, critics have found several faults with the implications of the line of inquiry it suggests.[26] First, it is criticized severely for its lack of any kind of goal orientation. As Forester puts it, incrementalism 'would have us cross and recross intersections without knowing where we are going'.[27] Second, the model is criticized for being inherently conservative, given its suspicion of large-scale change and innovation. Third, it is criticized for being undemocratic, to the extent it confines decision-making to bargaining within a select group of senior policy-makers.[28] Fourth, by discouraging systematic analysis and planning and undermining the need to search for promising new alternatives, it is said to promote short-sighted decisions which can have adverse consequences for society in the long run. In addition to criticisms of the desirability of decisions made incrementally, the model is criticized for its narrow analytic usefulness. Yehezkel Dror, for example, notes that incrementalism can only work when there is a great deal of continuity in the nature of problems policies are intended to address and in the means available to address them, a continuity that does not always exist.[29] Incrementalism is also more characteristic of decision-making in a relatively stable environment, rather than in situations that are unusual, such as a crisis.[30]

The Garbage Can Model

The limitations of rational and incremental models led students of public policy-making to look for alternatives. Amitai Etzioni developed his *mixed scanning* model to bridge the shortcomings of both rational and incremental models by combining elements from both.[31] His model suggests that optimal decision-making would consist of a cursory search ('scanning') for alternatives, followed by a detailed probe of the most promising alternative. This would allow for more innovation than permitted by the incremental model, without imposing the unrealistic demands prescribed by the rational model. Etzioni goes further and suggests that indeed this is how decisions are made in reality. It is not uncommon to find a series of incremental decisions followed by a substantially different decision when faced with a problem significantly different from those dealt with before. Thus, mixed scanning is presented as both a prescriptive and descriptive model of decision-making.

This and other approaches, however, remained largely within the framework established by the rational model and its incremental critics. In the 1970s, a very different model asserted the inherent lack of rationality in the decision-making process. March and Olsen proposed a so-called *garbage can model* of decision-making which denied even the limited rationality permitted by incrementalism.[32] They began with the assumption that the other models presumed a level of intentionality, comprehension of problems, and predictability of relations among actors that simply does not obtain in reality. In their view, decision-making was a highly ambiguous and unpredictable process only distantly related to searching for means to achieving goals. Rejecting the instrumentalism that characterized most other models, March and Olsen argued that decision opportunities were:

> a garbage can into which various problems and solutions are dumped by participants. The mix of garbage in a single can depends partly on the labels attached to the alternative cans; but it also depends on what garbage is being produced at the moment, on the mix of cans available, and on the speed with which garbage is collected and removed from the scene.[33]

March and Olsen deliberately used the garbage-can metaphor to strip away the aura of science and rationality attributed to decision-making by earlier theorists. They sought to drive home the point that goals are often unknown to policy-makers, as are causal relationships. In their view, actors simply define goals and choose means as they go along in a process which is necessarily contingent and unpredictable.

Several case studies[34] have substantiated the proposition that public decisions are often made in too *ad-hoc* and haphazard a fashion to be called incremental, much less rational. Anderson, for example, has argued that even decisions with respect to the Cuban Missile Crisis, admittedly one of the most critical issues of the post-World War Two period, were made in terms of simplistic yes/no binary choices on proposals that would emerge in the course of discussion.[35]

Be that as it may, the garbage can model is perhaps an exaggeration of what actually occurs. While its key tenets may well be a fairly accurate description of how at times organizations make decisions, in other instances it would be reasonable to expect more order. Its main strength was in breaking the logjam which surrounded the rather sterile rational-incremental debate, allowing for more nuanced studies of decision-making within institutional contexts to be undertaken.

A Subsystem Model of Public Decision-Making

By the early 1980s, it had become apparent to many observers that the continuing debate between the advocates of rationalism and those of incrementalism was interfering with empirical work and the theoretical development of the subject. As Smith and May argued, 'A debate about the relative merits of rationalistic as opposed to incrementalist models of decision-making has featured for some years now and although the terms of this debate are relatively well known it has had comparatively little impact upon empirical research in the areas of either policy or administrative studies.'[36] Rather than continue with this debate, the authors argued that:

> we require more than one account to describe the several facets of organizational life. The problem is not to reconcile the differences between contrasting rational and incremental models, nor to construct some third alternative which combines the strongest features of each. The problem is to relate the two in the sense of spelling out the relationship between the social realities with which each is concerned.[37]

At present, some progress has been made in the direction suggested by Smith and May. Although few advocate a return to a comprehensive rational model, or completely reject incrementalism at least as a description of much actual public policy decision-making, most argue that Braybrooke and Lindblom's notion of multiple decision-making styles is correct and that it is important to spell out exactly under which conditions different styles will tend to be adopted.[38]

One of the most interesting developments in this direction can be found in the works of John Forester. He argues that there are at least five distinct decision-making styles associated with six key sets of conditions.[39] According to him, 'what is rational for administrators to do depends on the situations in which they work.'[40] That is, the decision-making style and the type of decision made by decision-makers vary according to issue and institutional contexts. As he put it in his 1984 article:

> Depending upon the conditions at hand, a strategy may be practical or ridiculous. With time, expertise, data, and a well-defined problem, technical calculations may be in order; without time, data, definition, and expertise, attempting those calculations could well be a waste of time. In a complex organizational environment, intelligence networks will be as, or more, important than documents when information is needed. In an environment of inter-organizational conflict, bargaining and compromise may be called for. Administrative strategies are sensible only in a political and organizational context.[41]

Forester suggests that for decision-making along the lines suggested by the rational model to take place, the following conditions must be met.[42] First, the number of *agents* (decision-makers) will need to be limited, possibly to as few as one person. Second, the organizational *setting* for the decision will have to be simple, and will be closed off from the influences of other policy actors. Third, the *problem* must be well defined; in other words, its scope, time horizon, value dimensions, and chains of consequences must be well understood. Fourth, *information* must be as close to perfect as possible; in other words it must be complete, accessible, and comprehensible. Finally, there must be no urgency for the decision; that is, *time* must be infinitely available to the decision-makers to consider all possible contingencies and their present and anticipated consequences. When these conditions are met completely, rational decision-making can be expected to prevail.

To the extent these five conditions are not met, as is almost always the case, Forester argues that we will find other styles of decision-making. Thus the number of agents (decision-makers) can expand and multiply almost to infinity; the setting can include many different organizations and can be more or less open to external influences; the problem can be ambiguous or susceptible to multiple competing interpretations; information can be incomplete, misleading or purposefully withheld or manipulated; and time can be limited or artificially constrained and manipulated. These are set out in Figure 11.

Figure 11.
Parameters of Decision-Making

Variables	Dimensions
1. *Agent*	*Single—Multiple*
2. *Setting*	*Single, Closed—Multiple, Open*
3. *Problem*	*Well-Defined—Multiple, Vague*
4. *Information*	*Perfect—Contested*
5. *Time*	*Infinite—Manipulated*

SOURCE: Adapted from John Forester, 'Bounded Rationality and the Politics of Muddling Through', *Public Administration Review* 44, 1 (1984): 26.

From this perspective, Forester suggests that there are five possible styles of decision-making: Optimization, Satisfycing, Search, Bargain, and Organizational. *Optimization* is the strategy that obtains when the conditions (mentioned above) of the rational-comprehensive model are met. The prevalence of other styles depends on the degree to which the conditions are not met. When the limitations are cognitive, for reasons mentioned earlier, we are likely to find the *Satisfycing* style of decision-making. The other styles mentioned by Forester are overlapping and therefore difficult to distinguish clearly. A *Search* strategy is one which is likely to occur when the problem is vague. A *Bargaining* strategy is one which is likely to be found when multiple actors deal with a problem in the absence of information and time. The *Organizational* strategy involves multiple settings and actors with both time and informational resources but also multiple problems. Suffice it to say that these types involve greater number of actors, more complex settings, more intractable problems, incomplete or distorted information, and limited availability of time for making a decision.

While a major improvement over earlier classifications and taxonomies, and certainly an improvement over the rational and incremental models and their 'garbage can' opponents, Forester's was only a first step in establishing an improved model of decision-making. A major problem with his taxonomy of decision-making is that it does not follow from his arguments. That is, a close examination of his discussion of the factors shaping decision-making[43] reveals that one would expect to find many more possible styles than five flowing from the possible combinations and permutations of the variables he cites. Although many of these categories are indistinguishable in practice and, in any event,

seem to serve little analytical purpose, it remains unclear why one should expect only the five styles he cites to emerge.

An improvement on Forester's model can be made by re-casting his variables. Study of 'agent' and 'setting' can be accomplished by focusing on the policy subsystem, while the notions of the 'problem', 'information', and 'time' resources can all be seen as relating to the types of constraints which are placed upon decision-makers. Thus the two significant variables become (1) the complexity of the policy subsystem dealing with the problem and (2) the severity of the constraints it faces. The complexity of the policy subsystem affects the likelihood of attaining a high level of agreement or opposition to an option within the subsystem. Some options accord with the core values of the subsystem members while other do not, thereby structuring decisions into hard and soft choices.[44] Similarly, the making of decisions is constrained to varying degrees by information and time limitation, as well as the intractability of the problem.[45] Figure 12 outlines the four basic decision-making styles that emerge on the basis of the two dimensions emerging from this analysis: the complexity of the policy subsystem and the severity of constraints.

Figure 12.
Basic Decision-Making Styles

		Complexity of the Policy Subsystem	
		High	Low
Severity of Constraints	High	*Incremental Adjustment*	*Satisfycing Search*
	Low	*Optimizing Adjustment*	*Rational Search*

SOURCE: Modelled after Martin J. Smith, 'Policy Networks and State Autonomy' in *The Political Influence of Ideas: Policy Communities and the Social Sciences*, eds S. Brooks and A.-G. Gagnon. New York: Praeger, 1994.

In this model, complex policy subsystems are more likely to be involved in adjustment strategies than in searches. Situations of high constraint are likely to result in a bargaining approach to decision-making while low constraint situations are more likely to generate rational or optimizing activity.

Taken together, these two variables result in four basic decision-making styles. Lindblom-style *incremental adjustments* are likely to occur where policy subsystems are complex and constraints on decision-makers are high. In such situations one would expect large-scale, high-risk decisions to be rare. In the opposite scenario, where the policy subsystem is simple and constraints are low, more traditional *rational searches* for new and possibly major changes are possible. When a complex subsystem exists and constraints are low, an adjustment strategy is likely, but one which may tend towards *optimization*. Finally, where constraints are high but subsystems simple, then *satisfycing* decisions are quite likely.

Conclusion

The essential character of the public decision-making process is very much the same as that of the other stages. Like the earlier stages of the public policy process, the decision-making stage varies according to the nature of the policy subsystem involved and the constraints under which decision-makers operate. As John Forester sums up the argument, what is rational for administrators and politicians to do 'depends on the situations in which they work. Pressed for quick recommendations, they cannot begin long studies. Faced with organizational rivalries, competition and turf struggles, they may justifiably be less than candid about their plans. What is reasonable to do depends on the context one is in, in ordinary life no less than in public administration.'[46]

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Chapter 8

Policy Implementation—Policy Design and the Choice of Policy Instrument

Conceptual Issues

After a public problem has made its way to the policy agenda, various options have been proposed to resolve it, and a government has made some choice among those options, what remains is putting the decision into practice. This is the policy implementation stage of the policy cycle. It is defined as 'the process whereby programs or policies are carried out; it denotes the translation of plans into practice.'[1]

Until the early 1970s, implementation was regarded as unproblematic in a policy sense; it was assumed that once a policy was made, it would simply be carried out. This view began to change with the publication of Pressman and Wildavsky's work on program implementation. Their study of federal programs for unemployed inner-city residents of Oakland, California showed that job creation programs were not being carried out in the manner anticipated by policy-makers.[2] Other studies confirmed that the Great Society programs instituted by the Johnson Administration (1963-1968) in the US were not achieving their intended objectives and that the problem was rooted in the manner in which they were being implemented. Research in other countries arrived at similar conclusions. The upshot of all these studies was a more systematic effort to understand the factors that facilitated or constrained implementation of public policies.

Some of these efforts generated analyses and prescriptions that perceived policy implementation to be a 'top-down' process concerned with how the implementing officials could be made to do their job more effectively. This approach was opposed by those who subscribed to a 'bottom-up' approach, which starts from the perspective of those affected by and involved in the implementation of a policy. Later a third approach emerged which, rather than studying the purely administrative concerns of putting a program into practice, looked at the implementation process as one in which various tools of