



*Public Policy Theories,
Models, and Concepts
An Anthology*

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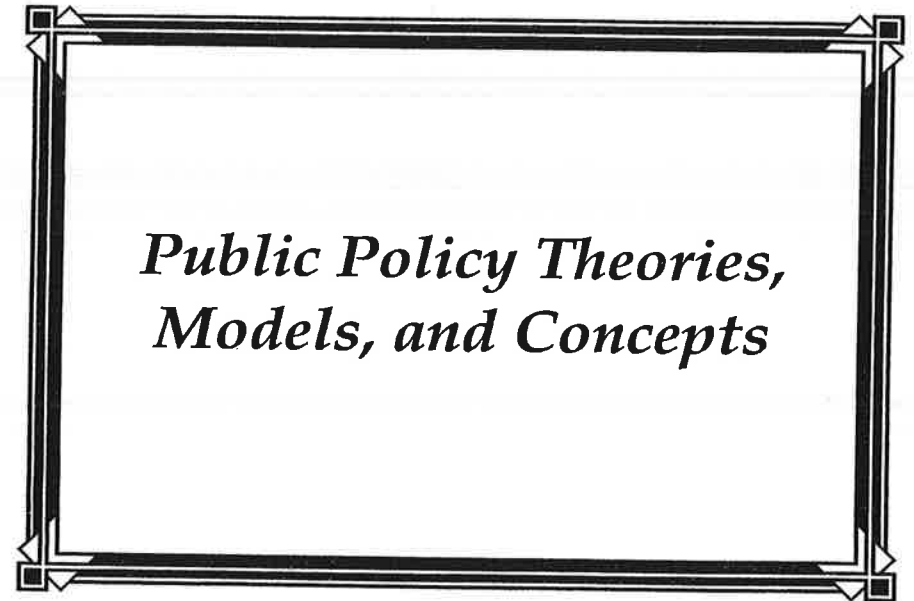
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policy analysts.⁹ And because it will be superior to any other decision-making method available for complex problems in many circumstances, certainly superior to a futile attempt at superhuman comprehensiveness. The reaction of the public administrator to the exposition of method doubtless will be less a discovery of a new method than a better acquaintance with an old. But by becoming more conscious of their practice of this method, administrators might practice it with more skill and know when to extend or constrict its use. (That they sometimes practice it effectively and sometimes not may explain the extremes of opinion on "muddling through," which is both praised as a highly sophisticated form of problem-solving and denounced as no method at all. For I suspect that in so far as there is a system in what is known as "muddling through," this method is it.)

One of the noteworthy incidental consequences of clarification of the method is the light it throws on the suspicion an administrator sometimes entertains that a consultant or adviser is not speaking relevantly and responsibly when in fact by all ordinary objective evidence he is. The trouble lies in the fact that most of us approach policy problems within a framework given by our view of a chain of successive policy choices made up to the present. One's thinking about appropriate policies with respect, say, to urban traffic control is greatly influenced by one's knowledge of the incremental steps taken up to the present. An administrator enjoys an intimate knowledge of his past sequences that "outsiders" do not share, and his thinking and that of the "outsider" will consequently be different in ways that may puzzle both. Both may appear to be talking intelligently, yet each may find the other unsatisfactory. The relevance of the policy chain of succession is even more clear when an American tries to discuss, say, antitrust policy with a Swiss, for the chains of policy in the two countries are strikingly different and the two individuals consequently have organized their knowledge in quite different ways.

If this phenomenon is a barrier to communication, an understanding of it promises an enrichment of intellectual interaction in policy formulation. Once the source of difference is understood, it will sometimes be stim-

⁹Elsewhere I have explored this same method of policy formulation as practiced by academic analysts of policy ("Policy Analysis," 48 *American Economic Review* 298 [June, 1958]). Although it has been here presented as a method for public administrators, it is no less necessary to analysts more removed from immediate policy questions, despite their tendencies to describe their own analytical efforts as though they were the rational-comprehensive method with an especially heavy use of theory. Similarly, this same method is inevitably resorted to in personal problem-solving, where means and ends are sometimes impossible to separate, where aspirations or objectives undergo constant development, and where drastic simplification of the complexity of the real world is urgent if problems are to be solved in the time that can be given to them. To an economist accustomed to dealing with the marginal or incremental concept in market processes, the central idea in the method is that both evaluation and empirical analysis are incremental. Accordingly I have referred to the method elsewhere as "the incremental method."

ulating for an administrator to seek out a policy analyst whose recent experience is with a policy chain different from his own.

This raises again a question only briefly discussed above on the merits of likemindedness among government administrators. While much of organization theory argues the virtues of common values and agreed organizational objectives, for complex problems in which the root method is inapplicable, agencies will want among their own personnel two types of diversification: administrators whose thinking is organized by reference to policy chains other than those familiar to most members of the organization and, even more commonly, administrators whose professional or personal values or interests create diversity of view (perhaps coming from different specialties, social classes, geographical areas) so that, even within a single agency, decision-making can be fragmented and parts of the agency can serve as watchdogs for other parts.

STAGES OF THE POLICY PROCESS

*Randall B. Ripley**

Numerous treatments of the policy process lay out stages of that process, with various nominal labels attached, in order to help organize discussion and analysis. Such stage-oriented discussions do not form the direct basis for hypothesizing causal relationships, although such hypotheses may emerge. Rather, they are rough chronological and logical guides for observers who want to see important activities in some ordered pattern or sequence. Such organizational helpers are useful and, in fact, essential for anyone trying to plow through the complexities of policy making and policy analysis. At best, such maps—even with their rough spots and simplifications—lend some clarity to the observer/reader/student as he or she grapples with a complicated and sometimes murky set of interactions and processes.

I see no point to repeating a lot of different authors' versions of policy stages. There are many versions. Most of them have some similarities. Many analysts agree pretty well on the central activities requiring attention. Instead, I will offer my guide to the stages of the policy process.

Major Stages

Figure 3-4 lays out the basic flow of policy stages, major functional activities that occur in those stages, and the products that can be expected at each stage if a product is forthcoming. Naturally, a policy process may be aborted at any stage. Beginning a process does not guarantee that products

*Randall Ripley, *Policy Analysis in Political Science*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1985 (pp. 48-55). Used by permission.

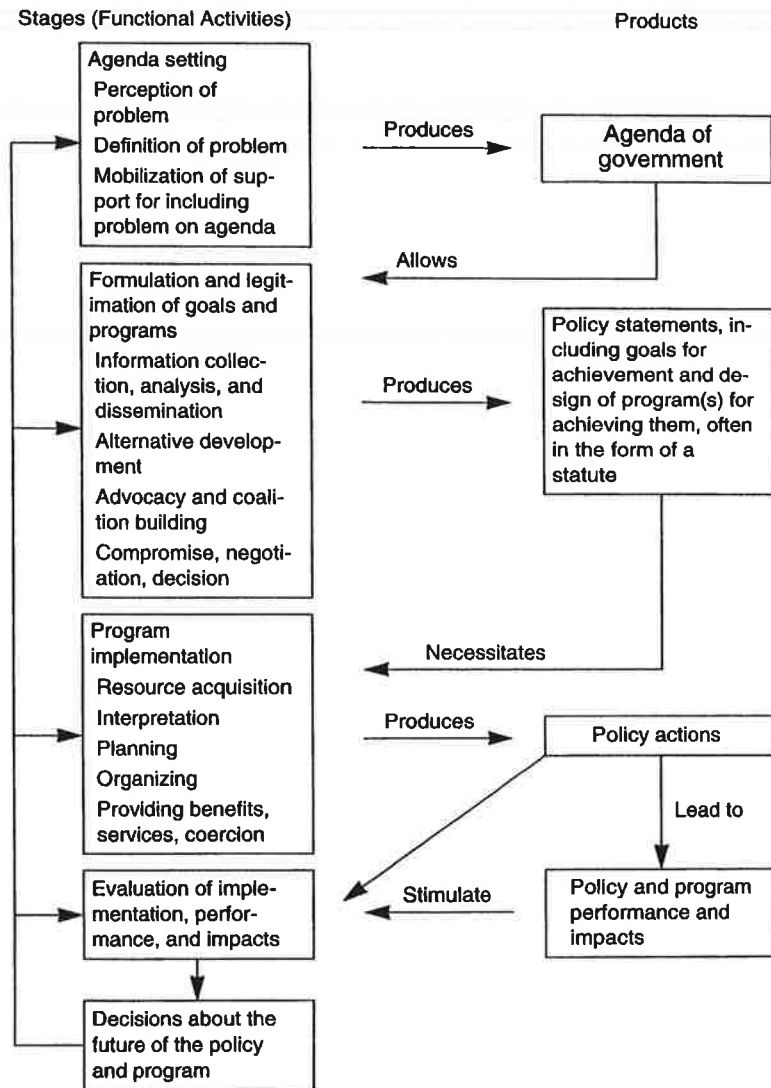


Figure 3-4 The Flow of Policy Stages, Functional Activities, and Products

will emerge or that a stage will be “completed” and so lead to the next stage. Figure 3-4 presents the general flow of stages, activities, and products that can be expected in a policy that is generated and transformed into a viable and ongoing program. “Stages” are the names attached to major clusters of activities that result in identifiable products if they reach conclu-

sion. “Functional activities” are the major subroutines of actions and interactions engaged in by policy actors. “Products” are the output, or end result, of any general stage.

Agenda setting Somehow the organs of government must decide what they will pay attention to. The stage at which this decision is made in any given policy area is here called agenda setting. Thousands of issues are constantly vying for inclusion on the governmental agenda. Only some of them make it at any given time. The form in which they come on the agenda can vary over time and influence subsequent concrete decisions. The functional activities in the agenda-setting stage include the necessity for some individuals and/or groups to perceive a problem to exist, to decide the government should be involved in the problem, to define the problem, and to mobilize support for including the problem on the governmental agenda.

Competition enters these activities in several ways. First, different people compete to attract the attention of governmental actors for inclusion of any specific problem on the agenda. There is not a fixed number of agenda item “slots” available at any one time. On the other hand, the capacity for the government to include items on its action agenda at any point in time is not unlimited. Second, even within the groups and among individuals concerned with a general issue area there will be competition over the specific definition of the problem and, subsequently, competition over which groups and views to mobilize and how to do it.

Formulation and Legitimation of Goals and Programs Not all agenda items receive specific treatment in the form of decisions about policies and programs. Not all of them even get translated into a form that allows specific formulation and legitimation activities to take place. But if an item on the agenda is treated in any concrete way, the next step is for it to become the subject of formulation and legitimation.

Formulation and legitimation are complex activities that involve four major sets of functional activities, each complex in its own right. Part of formulating alternatives and then choosing one alternative for possible ratification is collecting, analyzing, and disseminating information for purposes of assessing alternatives and projecting likely outcomes and for purposes of persuasion.

Alternative development is one of the successor subroutines to the one dealing with information. Another is advocacy, in which different persons and groups advocate different points of views and alternatives and seek to build supporting coalitions in support of their views and their preferred alternative. Finally, usually as a result of compromise and negotiation, a decision is reached. If the compromise and negotiation process breaks down, no decision is reached.

The generic products of the formulation and legitimation stage are policy statements (declarations of intent, including some form of goal statement) and the design of programs for making the intent concrete and pursuing achievement of the goals. Both the goals and the program designs may be vague and sketchy. Grandiose goal statements that lack clarity are usually the result of the compromise process. Too much specificity and clarity might prevent compromise of forces that don't really agree on fundamental concrete goals and aspirations. If the goals are raised to a more general and murky level, they can attract the support of persons and groups that might otherwise disagree.

Reasons for lack of specificity and clarity in program design are more numerous. Partly it is a matter of not proliferating details that might also proliferate disagreements, and partly it is a matter of time on the part of Congress, since program designs usually appear first in a statute. Congress must address hundreds, even thousands, of agenda items in any given two-year period. The members cannot fool with any one too long. Throughout the course of history, Congress has gotten into the habit of delegating administrative power to the president and/or to the agencies and secretaries concerned to flesh out rudimentary program designs. From the early 1930s to 1983, Congress could hedge its bets by inserting some form of legislative veto in a statute, which in effect made the president or agency check with Congress before proceeding with some specific actions. The Supreme Court ruled this invention unconstitutional in mid-1983. This ruling may force Congress to fill in a few more details some of the time, but it is doubtful if it will have more effect than that. The pressures producing extensive delegation by Congress will not change.

Program Implementation The next stage (assuming that a policy has been stated and a program created) is program implementation. In order to implement a program, resources need to be acquired. The law needs to be interpreted, usually in written regulations and then in elaborations of those regulations. A variety of planning activities typically take place. Various organizing routines are part of implementation. Finally, the payoff—routines of providing benefits, services, and/or coercion (whatever the tangible manifestation of the program) are developed. All of these activities, although they sound more dull than advocacy and negotiation, are political. Conflict and disagreement can erupt. Various techniques of conflict resolution are necessarily brought into play. Policy actions are the products of the various routines and activities that comprise the program implementation stage.

Evaluation of Implementation, Performance, and Impacts After policy actions lead to various kinds of results (what I call performance and impact), evaluation of both the actions (implementation) and the results (performance and impacts) takes place. The word *evaluation* often conjures up an

image of "objective" social scientists applying rigorous analytic techniques and letting the chips fall where they may. Some of that may transpire. But, as used in this book, evaluation is a much broader concept and refers to the assessment of what has happened or, in many cases, what is thought to have happened. The "what" can refer to implementation, to short-run results (performance), or to long-run results (impacts). That assessment takes place constantly and is done by all kinds of people—officials of all descriptions, interest groups, legislators, researchers inside the government, and researchers outside the government. Some evaluation is completely based on political instincts and judgments. A good deal is based on a mix of a little information (often anecdotal) and political judgments. Some (a small portion) is based on systematic analysis of fairly extensive information (data).

Policy analysts coming from political science or any other discipline have a role to play in evaluation of implementation, performance, and impacts. But they should realize that their form of evaluation is only one form and that probably it is less politically relevant than almost any other form of evaluation that takes place. Not too much should be expected in terms of attention to or subsequent actions based on evaluation. On the other hand, evaluation should not be written off entirely. It has a place.

Decisions about the Future of the Policy and Program The evaluative processes and conclusions, in all of their diversity, lead to one or more of many decisions about the future (or nonfuture) of the policy and program being evaluated. The necessity for such decisions means that the cycle can be entered again at any of its major stages. Conceivably, a problem will be taken off the agenda either because it has been "solved" or because it is viewed as no longer relevant. Or the nature of its most salient features as an agenda item may be changed. Thus, decisions about the future might reset the cycle to the agenda setting stage.

Those decisions may lead back to policy formulation and legitimation. The necessity or legitimacy of keeping an item on the agenda may not be questioned, but legislative (statutory) revisions may be viewed as necessary or desirable, at least by some actors. Thus, the cycle is reentered somewhere in the activity cluster comprising formulation and legitimation. In some cases, decisions about the future may not require new legislation or amendments to existing legislation, but they may require some adjustments in program implementation.

Principal Limits on and Utility of a Stage Conception of the Policy Process

Remember when looking at the policy process as a succession of stages that any such conception is artificial. It may also not be true to what happens. It has a logical appeal, and it is presented chronologically, but chronological

reality as it emerges in any case may vary significantly from what the stage-based model says "should" happen in a specific order. The process can be stopped at any point, and, in most cases, the policy process is truncated at some fairly early stage. Only some fairly modest subsets of all possible policies go through the entire process. And the process can be reentered or reactivated at any point and at any time.

In short, reality is messy. Models, particularly a nice listing of stages with an implied tidy chronology, are not messy. In a collision between tidiness and untidiness the analyst must not be so struck by the values of order as to force reality into a model in which it might not fit.

These are only caveats, however. The utility of organizing data and thoughts about complicated reality in this way is great. It allows the analyst to look for patterns and, more important, to explain the causes of different patterns.

DISCUSSION

Daniel McCool

All of the concepts introduced in this section, while disparate, attempt to explain how the process of governing works (or does not work). The macrolevel model of the entire political system presented by Easton is the most ambitious. As Easton points out, he is trying to "bring some over-all order" (1965, 105) to a process that is by its very nature extremely chaotic.

There are some advantages to such an all-encompassing view of reality: "The main merit of systems theory is that it provides a way of conceptualizing what are often complex political phenomena. In emphasizing processes as opposed to institutions or structures, Easton's approach represents an advance over more traditional analyses" (Ham and Hill 1984, 13–15). Stewart also sees merit in the systems approach: "The great advantage of systems theory for the understanding of policy is that it invites us to consider how crucial information is in the business of politics" (1992, 245). By moving beyond formal institutional processes, systems theory can account for the informal processes that connect the political system to external influences. Sylvia, Meier, and Gunn attribute the popularity of systems theory to its ability to examine this interaction between a political program and its environment (1985, 1).

But the strength of systems theory is also its weakness; it has achieved generality by sacrificing specificity. Note the following comments:

Easton's systems analysis gives a verbal accounting system, which is of little help in specific policy analysis. (Hecl 1972, 105)

[systems analysis] has fallen from favor in part because nobody can really describe it." (Bobrow and Dryzek 1987, 10)

Perhaps the greatest omission in the model is the conspicuous blank space labeled "the political system." Easton tells us this is where the "con-

version of demands into outputs" occurs. This conversion process is really the heart of what goes on in politics, but the systems model tells us little about causal relationships that shape this conversion. Easton admits that the conversion process is the central element of the system: "a system is a means whereby the inputs of demands and support are converted into outputs. This is the allocative aspect of the system behavior. It creates the basic political problem. . . ." (1979, 478). But he has spent very little time explaining this aspect of the model. His original formulation of the model, which appeared in *World Politics* in 1957, made no mention of the black box of the "political system" except to say this is where the "withinputs" originate. His subsequent book *A Systems Analysis of Political Life* devotes all of two pages to the conversion of demands into outputs (1979, 478–79). Instead he simply views policy makers as mere "gatekeepers" (1979, 86–96) who regulate the flow of demands through the system. Obviously politics is more than this housekeeping role suggests. Despite these limitations Easton's systems model has provoked a great deal of discussion and prompted numerous attempts to apply—and improve—the theory.¹

In contrast to systems theory public choice attempts to explain the conversion of demands into outputs with exacting specificity. Analyses focus on the individual decision maker as a person who acts only in self-interest. Public choice is an elaborate, formalized theory of governing that relies upon economic models to give it "a more elegant technical apparatus" (Riker 1988, 256). To its adherents public choice is "a most impressive intellectual achievement" (McLean 1987, 183). Even its detractors recognize its importance: "In just three decades rational [i.e., public] choice theory has emerged as one of the most active, influential, and ambitious subfields in the discipline of political science" (Petraffa 1991, 289).

Public choice theory has been most helpful in pointing out the inadequacies of government: the wastefulness of logrolling; the tendency of legislators and bureaucrats to engage in porkbarrel spending; the exploitive use of public resources for private gain; the urge to spend more and more money. Applications of public choice theory to particular policy issues have produced insightful new ways of examining old issues and have led to innovative policy prescriptions (see, e.g., Anderson 1983; Butler 1985; Baden and Leal 1990). But much of the literature on public choice—both pro and con—is infused with ideological bias, and this has made it more difficult to evaluate its utility as a theory of the policy-making process.

The critics of public choice are legion (see, e.g., Ball 1976; Lyons and Lowery 1989; Petraffa 1991; Dunleavy 1992). In a comment that accompa-

¹For an interesting application of a modified systems model to administrative law, see Warren 1982, 22–27. For a more general application of systems theory to public administration, see Sharkansky 1978. A recent application of systems theory is found in Stewart (1992).

nied the article by William Mitchell excerpted here, Margaret Levi succinctly listed many of the common criticisms:

Who is unaware of the fact that the behavioral assumption of public choice is flawed, that the model tends to oversimplify reality, that many of the questions public choice can authoritatively answer are trivial, and that many, too many, of the most intelligent proponents of public choice suffer from a libertarian, conservative, or an out-and-out right-wing bias? (1983, 114)²

Of course, many of the critics of public choice have a left-wing bias.

The ideologically charged debate over public choice is voluminous and complex. However, with some simplification we can discern three common criticisms of public choice theory. First, critics attack the assumption that individuals make all decisions based only on a consideration of what it will gain for them. This permits no consideration of altruism, concern for the public interest, or a value system predicated on duty to others. While we presumably choose more rather than less in a marketplace, individuals often make political choices based on a much broader array of values. By insisting that all behavior is simply a matter of calculated self-interest, public choice theory trivializes the human spirit. Indeed, there is empirical evidence that citizens make decisions that go beyond simple calculations of self-interest. Muller and Opp (1986) demonstrated that individuals participate in rebellious political activity—which can be fraught with personal risk—even though they could have let others do the dangerous work for them (be “free riders”); their commitment to cause was greater than their desire to benefit themselves exclusively. Brodsky and Thompson studied referendum voting and concluded that voters justified their votes “in terms which suggest altruistic (selfless) rather than self-interested motivations” (1993, 297).

The debate over self-interest versus public interest has been especially vociferous regarding the behavior of public bureaucrats. Following Niskanen (1971), public choice theorists argue that bureaucrats are only interested in maximizing their budgets and personal remuneration. Others, primarily in the field of public administration, claim that most bureaucrats have a well-developed sense of public service (Goodsell 1982, Kelman 1987) and a commitment to constitutional and professional norms that override selfish desires (Rohr 1989). Furthermore, there is empirical evidence that bureaucrats are not primarily motivated by direct economic benefits to themselves (see Heffron 1989, 266–87).

In recent years many public choice theorists have begun to recognize that the self-interest axiom is inadequate (see Cook and Levi 1990). For example, William Mitchell recently noted that, in regard to altruism, “stan-

²Martin Paldam admits that “several of the founding fathers of public choice are surely very right wing” but argues this is good because “some extremism gives a movement zest” (1993, 182).

dard public choice admits but does little with such motives” (1993, 141). Others remain convinced that all behavior is based solely on self-interest (Mueller 1986). Mansbridge argues that this single-minded devotion to the self-interest axiom has forced public choice into a corner: “Within the group that insists on self-interest, some, who recognize that a great deal of observed behavior cannot be accounted for by self-interest, are nevertheless so wedded to the concept that they are prepared to salvage it by sacrificing the [public choice] modeler’s other stock-in-trade—rationality” (1990, 254). The debate over self-interest raises some interesting questions regarding the validity of public choice theory.

A second assumption of public choice theory is that markets are inherently more rational than governments in determining value (Mitchell 1983, 346, 367). This may be true for items that have a clearly discernable economic value—for example, consumer goods—but is problematic when decisions involve values that are very difficult to quantify in economic terms. For example, the most honorable way to solve a problem, and the most economically efficient way to solve that problem, may be different; which approach is more “rational”? Markets have no sense of fair play, no commitment to justice, culture, or history. As a result, markets evaluate goods and services, not according to their contribution to society, but according to their economic value. To take one simple example, consider the following comparison:

A basketball player makes \$5 million a year.

A highly paid CEO of a large corporation is paid an annual bonus of \$1 million even though his company lost millions of dollars.

A teacher in a private school is paid \$18,000 a year.

We must ask, In what sense are these incomes a “rational” allocation of resources?

Furthermore, there is a well-known set of market failures that prevent markets from achieving optimum rationality. There are plenty of examples of government foolishness, but there are also innumerable examples of market decisions that produced outcomes clearly contrary to the public interest. The real question is whether the inherent disadvantages of government decision making are more onerous than the inherent disadvantages of the market, and which alternative—governments or markets—is more susceptible to reforms that can reduce these disadvantages? The question is further complicated if we want to maintain democratic input; do we want to emphasize popular input, or efficiency?

The third criticism of public choice is the assumption that government is unresponsive and beyond democratic control. In Mitchell’s article he clearly states his belief that the citizen is virtually powerless to affect public policy—a notion that is congruent with elite theory. Public choice theorists

are particularly adamant about the bureaucracy being beyond the control of the people and their elected officials. In another article Mitchell writes that politicians have "little influence on the bureaucrats and the programs they administer" (1983, 356). Yet many scholars claim just the opposite; bureaucrats are constantly bombarded with demands from elected officials, interest groups, and individuals (Lowi, 1979). This argument is especially relevant to the discussion of iron triangles and policy subsystems in Section 5. The real question is whether it is easier to become a player in the marketplace, or the government. Public choice theorists have developed devastating critiques of how some private interest groups have exploited government for their own private gain at public expense—the so-called rent-seeking discussed by Mitchell. These are certainly valid claims, but participation in the marketplace can also be quite exclusive. Market proponents claim that anyone with a *willingness* to buy and sell can participate in an open market, but such participation also requires the *ability* to pay. In short it takes money to convince government to distribute largess to private interests, but it also takes money to buy what you want in the open market. Thus the elements of society that are disadvantaged in political competition are also disadvantaged in market competition.³

This brief review of some main points—and criticisms—of public choice theory demonstrates how difficult it can be to assess the contribution of theory to our understanding of political reality. This challenge becomes even more difficult when it is affected by powerful normative and ideological forces.

Many conceptualizations of policy making assume that individuals are capable of making informed choices by ranking alternatives and then selecting the best one. Public choice assumes this type of "rational" decision is, or at least should be, the norm. But Lindblom, in "Muddling Through," offers what he views as a much more realistic interpretation of how the policy-making process really works. Lindblom later refined his concept in his book *A Strategy of Decision*, which was written with David Braybrooke (1963). In that book they argue that, not only is incrementalism an accurate depiction of the way decisions are really made, but that it is preferable in many ways to alternative forms of decision making: "Disjointedness has its advantages—the virtues of its defects—chief among them the advantage of preserving a rich variety of impressions and insights that are liable to be 'coordinated' out of sight by hasty and inappropriate demands for a common plan of attack" (1963, 106). In the ensuing years there has been a lengthy debate over both the theoretical and normative dimensions of incrementalism.

³Public choice theorists counter that government could provide vouchers for the disadvantaged, but such vouchers would be subject to all the same political pressures as existing subsidies; who would decide the eligibility requirements and amounts of these vouchers?

In terms of its theoretical utility, there is widespread agreement that incrementalism offers an accurate description of how the policy process actually works much of the time (Ham and Hill 1984, 83). A critic of the incrementalist approach admitted it was an "undeniable success, in purely descriptive terms" (Goodin 1982, 19). Another author gives Lindblom's work even more credit: "[it] constitutes a uniquely valuable source of such knowledge and theory. It is applicable to virtually all public administrators, it is enduring, it is concise and disciplined, it is insightful, and it is realistic" (Balzer 1979, 539). Thus it would appear that incrementalism possesses great theoretical validity. But a closer look reveals problems; a good theory must be much more than mere description; it must permit us to determine causal relationships and thus explain otherwise inexplicable phenomena. And while incrementalism is descriptively accurate, many have questioned whether it is good theory:

... the problem here is less the lack of any scale by which to measure size than it is the demands on theory. ... to help us distinguish incremental from non-incremental adjustments. ... Aside from being unable to tell us much about the actual size of an increment, weak theory [i.e., incrementalism] cannot tell us how to construct an experiment for testing itself, especially with respect to the influences that need to be controlled (Dryzek and Ripley 1988, 708).

Other critics argue that incrementalism omits critically important elements of the policy-making process:

Incremental approaches focus on just one kind of decision-making process. . . ignoring the problem orientation of decision makers and the contexts in which they operate. . . . Context does not matter to the incrementalist. Goals are dismissed by assuming that decisions taken are right because, lacking sufficient support, they would not have been made in the first place. The assumption is grievously faulty. (Brewer and DeLeon 1983, 24)

Indeed, incrementalism may not be theory at all; Goodin describes it as an atheoretical decision-making routine (1982, 20). And Braybrooke and Lindblom claim that incrementalism is utilized in the absence of a "large formal theoretical system" (1963, 118). The title of their book, *A Strategy of Decision*, suggests that perhaps incrementalism is a description of a certain way to make decisions, not a theory.

A second critique of incrementalism concerns its normative implications. Many proponents of incrementalism have argued that it "is not only inevitable in practice but also desirable on principle" (Goodin 1982, 19). There have been two responses to this claim. First, critics argue that incrementalism is undesirable because it favors the status quo, makes real reform nearly impossible, and has an ideological bias. These critics claim that incrementalism "is the planning model for ideological conservatism" (Frohock 1979, 52) and "an ideological reinforcement of the pro-inertia and anti-

innovation forces. . . .” (Dror 1964, 155. Also see Weiss and Woodhouse 1992). Lindblom has responded to these critics:

Incrementalism in politics is not, in principle, slow moving. It is not necessarily, therefore, a tactic of conservatism. A fast-moving sequence of small changes can more speedily accomplish a drastic alteration of the status quo than can an only infrequent major policy change. (Lindblom 1979, 520)

To a great extent the conflict over whether incrementalism is inherently conservative is a symptom of the theoretical problems described earlier; if the “theory” does not provide sufficient specification, that is, what constitutes an increment, then it is impossible to assess the validity—and the bias—of the theory. I ask the reader to review the incrementalist strategy as described in the “muddling through” article, and then compare it with the previous quote by Lindblom; does the strategy sound like it is capable of “fast-moving sequences” and “drastic alterations” in policy? Apparently an increment is like pornography; it cannot be defined but you know it when you see it.

A second normative response to incrementalism is that it fails as a guide to moral decision making and thus fails as a preferred strategy regardless of its empirical validity. Paris and Reynolds argue that “incrementalism cannot distinguish positive, fair meliorative change from mere change, i. e. the result of the incremental process; it is blind to its actual normative impact” (1983, 131). They conclude that proponents of incrementalism “provide no reason to believe that incremental systems will consistently or even typically yield morally acceptable results” (1983, 134. Also see Hayes 1992, 24, 197). Etzioni characterizes incrementalist decision making as “drifting—action without direction” (1967, 388. For an opposing opinion see Weiss and Woodhouse 1992).

Incrementalism’s greatest contribution may be its utility as a critique of the rational-comprehensive approach; to a great extent the characteristics of the strategy read like a list of reasons why the rational approach does not work. But even here, incrementalism has been criticized. Starling notes that Lindblom’s description of the rational approach was overdrawn in order to contrast it with incrementalism; Lindblom’s characterization “has something of a straw man in it. None of the model’s advocates would press maximization to this absurd length” (1988, 297). This is the same “caricature” issue we discussed in the precious section.

The debate over incrementalism has generated a number of attempts to offer alternative models. Yehezkel Dror (1968) developed a “normative-optimum” model that combines elements of both rational and incremental decision making. Similarly Amatai Etzioni created a combination model called *mixed-scanning* (1967). And Paul Schulman has introduced a theory of how large-scale, nonincremental decisions are made (1980).

It is clear that Lindblom’s original “muddling through” piece, pub-

lished in 1959, has had a heuristic effect. Despite its limitations this seminal idea has had a widespread impact on theories of public policy making.

The stages model of policy making is nearly as pervasive as incrementalism, although it has generated less debate. It is most effective when it is used to explain the *differences* between the stages; if this is not accomplished, research utilizing the stages model becomes merely a chronology of events.

Many textbooks are arranged according to some variation of this model. (See, for example, Brewer and DeLeon 1983; Hogwood and Gunn 1984; Jones 1984; Anderson 1990). There is a clear set of advantages—and disadvantages—to using the stages approach for analyzing the policy-making process.

James Anderson succinctly identifies the advantages of the stages approach:

It is a fairly accurate description of how the process works.

It can be easily modified; stages can be added, deleted, or altered.

It emphasizes the relationships between actors as they proceed through the stages.

It can be utilized across many different cultures (1990, 35–37).

The stages approach permits a simple, straightforward, linear view of the policy-making process. But as Ripley points out in the piece excerpted here, reality is rarely so tidy. Hogwood and Gunn offer a similar caveat regarding the stages model: “. . . it is a framework for organizing our understanding of what happens—and does not happen. The policy process applied to any given issue in practice may be truncated (e.g. the option selected may be to do nothing). The dividing lines between the various activities are artificial and policy-makers are unlikely to perform them consciously or in the implied ‘logical’ order” (1984, 4). In short the model sacrifices validity for economy.

Another problem is that the stages model tells us little or nothing about causal relationships; does one stage “cause” a successive stage? Sabatier points out that this approach “contains no coherent assumptions about what forces are driving the process from stage to stage and very few falsifiable hypotheses. . . . there is little theoretical coherence across stages” (1989, 5–6). Jenkins notes that “the utility of such an approach, particularly as a vehicle for hypothesis generation, becomes problematic” (1978, 18).

By now it should be clear to the reader that no perfect theories are going to emerge from this set of readings. Each has its own unique set of insights and liabilities. I have pointed out numerous shortcomings, but this does not mean that these theories are without value; quite the contrary, they are included because policy scholars have found them useful. I suggest that we follow the advice of James Anderson: “. . . it is wise not to be bound too dogmatically or rigidly to a single model or approach” (1990, 34).

At this point you should be developing a sense of how the various theories and concepts relate to each other. Is incrementalism an artifact of pluralist democracy? Is it possible that some of these theories work well in some of the stages of the policy-making process, but not others? What do systems theory have in common with advocacy coalitions (Section 5)? How does group theory fit into Lowi's typology (Section 4): And what can public choice theory tell us about distributive policy (Section 4), and iron triangles? (Section 5)?

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