Theories of Decision Making

The Rational Comprehensive Model

The rational comprehensive model is based on the reasoning of economists, mathematicians, and psychologists. It assumes that the decisionmaker can identify the problem, that the decisionmaker’s goals, values, and objectives are clear and ranked in accord with their importance, that alternative ways of addressing the problem are considered, that the cost and benefits or advantages and disadvantages of each alternative are investigated, that alternatives and their consequences can be compared with other alternatives, and that the decisionmaker will choose the alternative that maximizes the attainment of his or her goals, values, and objectives.

However, problems are not always clearly defined; problems have to be formulated in a way which enables people to make decisions about them. Decisionmakers must have vast amounts of information in order to make use of the rational comprehensive decision-making technique. There needs to be an ability to predict the future consequences of decisions made. Also, problems confronting decisionmakers often embody conflicting values. In addition, it is tough to ignore the sunk costs of former decisions, these may foreclose many alternatives. Moreover, this model of decisionmaking assumes that there is one (unitary) decisionmaker, when in fact a great many people, interests and institutions are usually involved.

The Incremental Theory

Attempts to correct deficiencies of the rational comprehensive model and to better describe how policy decisionmakers actually behave have resulted in incremental theory.

Incremental theory holds that the selection of goals and objectives is intertwined with, not distinct from, the scientific analysis of the problem. Decision makers only consider alternatives for dealing with a problem that differs marginally (incrementally) from existing policies (suggesting that they do not completely remake policy every time they make a policy decision, but instead refashion existing policy). For each alternative, only important consequences are considered. Problems confronting the decisionmaker are continually redefined. Constant ends-means and, means-ends adjustments are made to better manage policy. Seldom are there ever single decisions or totally correct solutions available to resolve a problem. A good decision is one that policy makers can agree on, not one that may be most appropriate for an agreed objective. Incremental decisionmaking is remedial, not holistically-devised or future-oriented. Rarely are decisions faced in all or nothing terms.
Mixed Scanning

Okay, this one is pretty simple. Sociologist Amitai Etzioni (you need only remember his last name) found fault with both the rational-comprehensive model of decisionmaking and the incremental model of decisionmaking. His mixed scanning approach considers both fundamental and incremental decisions. Mixed scanning incorporates a broad-based analysis sometimes and an in-depth analysis at other times. It considers the differing capacities of decisionmakers. Etzioni’s approach is not very specific about how mixed scanning could be used in practice.

Decision Criteria

Decisions can be studied as an individual or collective process. First, consider the role of values in decisionmaking. Values are a big deal in Presidential campaigns: witness Dan Quayle and “Murphy Brown” squabbling over values projected by a fictional TV character who elects to have a child out of wedlock. Much of the Clinton vs. Dole 1996 Presidential campaign involved disputes about values big government vs. small government, pro-life vs. pro-choice, and pro-gun control vs. anti-gun control, et cetera.

Values

Below are five categories of values which sometimes guide decisionmakers.

Organizational Values

Decision makers, especially bureaucrats, are influenced by organizational values. Sometimes agencies use rewards and sanctions in subtle ways to induce their members to act in accordance with organizational values. Wearing a common uniform—as do the police, firefighters, the military, the Park Service and the Forest Service, et cetera—is one way those organizations attempt to build common values among their workers. Organizational values involve the promotion of organizational interests in the decisionmaking of those in the collectivity.

Professional Values

The norms of one’s profession instill values that are often critical in decisionmaking. Lawyers (believe it or not), doctors, professors, and other occupational specialization’s requiring years of training, education, and
work experience embody professional norms or values that shape decisionmaking behavior.

**Personal Values**

This can involve personal ambitions, reputation, and self-interest. Note that rational choice theorists put far too much weight on explaining the behavior of individuals in terms of self-interest. This is understandable because so much of self-interest is tied to economic gain, which can be modeled in elegant, mathematical, and abstract terms.

**Policy Values**

This means acting on the basis of perceived public interest or acting in accordance with beliefs about what is proper, ethical, necessary, or morally correct. The Small Business Administration is filled with people who are likely to believe that small businesses are worthwhile, need help to survive, and promote beneficial public interests.

**Ideological Values**

Rationalizing and legitimizing actions on the basis of a political ideology (or belief system). Nationalism was a paramount ideology in explaining the behavior of many leaders (and average people) during Desert Shield and Desert Storm operations against Iraq. Conservatism and liberalism, although over-used and often misunderstood as American political ideologies, manifest ideological values.

**Political Party Affiliation**

Party membership is interwoven with leadership influence, policy values, and ideological values. However, the Republican and Democratic parties are mass membership parties that seek to appeal to an extremely broad range of political interests and ideologies. Also, party members are not nearly as cohesive in voting as they once were (more people vote split tickets than vote along straight party lines). Party is still a pretty good predictor of how most legislators will vote on a bill. Parties are sometimes associated with specific policy positions.

**Constituency Interests**

When party interests conflict with constituency interests, legislators usually vote in favor of their constituency interests. A legislator’s constituency is made up of the voters and key interests that elected him or
her to office. Legislators are delegates sometimes, and trustees other times. As delegates they decide matters in accordance with the views of the majority of their constituents or in accordance with a vital block of back-home interests. As delegates they attempt to anticipate the feelings and sentiments of their constituents. When legislators behave as trustees, they consider interests beyond their constituencies. They may think about National interests, the greater public good, international issues, broad-based economic concerns, charity, future generations, interests with little or no political representation, and protecting the National and global environment, et cetera.

Public Opinion

Public opinion usually has an impact on policy decisionmaking when decisions involve broad direction or thrust. Most members of the general public have a very limited knowledge of what policy makers are considering. Public opinion does impact foreign policy in a broad sense.

Defence

Deferring to the judgment of others occurs when administrators obey the wishes of their politically appointed superiors, or when legislators vote in accordance with the wishes of the top representatives or senators who head key committees or subcommittees. Judges defer when they interpret laws in accordance with the wishes of the legislative originators of the statute.

Decision Rules

Stare decisis is sometimes a decision rule. It means new decisions are often based on precedents in decisionmaking that came before. It also applies to committee decisionmaking dynamics.

THE PUBLIC INTEREST

This is tough to define. It is sometimes thought of as the outcome of competing interest group forces. The public interest may involve decisionmaking aimed at helping the Nation as a whole, rather than seeking to benefit selfish special interests. Some may argue that reducing the Federal deficit or balancing the Federal budget advances the public interest. Some may reason that maintaining the Nation’s capacity to mobilize and respond to disaster threats is in the public interest.