

# 3 Policy Making through Disjointed Incrementalism

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## CONTENTS

3.1 Incrementalism as an Alternative to Rationality.....	40
3.1.1 The Breakdown of Rationality.....	40
3.1.2 How Incrementalism Works Where Rationality Is Paralyzed.....	40
3.2 Incrementalism as a Descriptive Model.....	43
3.2.1 Is the Policy Process Typically Incremental?.....	43
3.2.2 Rationality as a Prerequisite for Effective Nonincremental Change.....	45
3.2.3 Nonincremental Change and the Life Cycle of Issues .....	48
3.3 Incrementalism as a Prescriptive Model.....	49
3.3.1 Ideologues vs. Pragmatists.....	49
3.3.2 Who Likes Incrementalism?.....	53
3.3.3 Conditions for the Effective Operation of Incrementalism .....	57
Further Reading .....	58
References.....	58

The rational-comprehensive method of decision making evokes a vision of policy makers clearly defining objectives and making value-maximizing choices after a thorough examination of relevant alternatives. Unfortunately, this ideal is usually unattainable. Inherent obstacles to rational decision making prompted Charles E. Lindblom to advance his model of disjointed incrementalism as an alternative method of policy making (Dahl and Lindblom, 1953; Lindblom, 1959; 1965; 1979; Braybrooke and Lindblom, 1963).

According to Lindblom (1965), policy making is less a matter of rational decision making than a process of mutual adjustment among various actors driven by different self-interests and divergent conceptions of public interest. Participants typically disagree on objectives and may start off from very different ideas of the problem at hand. Incomplete knowledge and time constraints limit attention to a short list of politically feasible alternatives differing marginally from previous policies. This focus on incremental alternatives, combined with the necessity for compromise, makes incremental outcomes virtually inevitable. Major policy change will occur gradually, if at all, as experience with newly enacted policies gives rise to demands for modification or expansion in subsequent policy cycles.

To Lindblom, incrementalism offers both a descriptive and a prescriptive model of the policy process. As a descriptive model, incrementalism provides a plausible explanation for the functioning of the policy process in most cases. However, the model describes so well how the process works because it consistently produces better outcomes than the rational-comprehensive ideal, given the constraints under which that method must operate most of the time.

This chapter is divided into three major sections. The first section reviews rationality and its limitations and then lays out the elements of the incremental model, showing how it departs from the rational method on all points. The second section focuses on incrementalism as a descriptive model, exploring the extent to which Lindblom's model accounts for how policy is actually made. The third section focuses on incrementalism as a prescriptive model by asking whether incrementalism really is the best way to make public policies, as Lindblom asserts.

### 3.1 INCREMENTALISM AS AN ALTERNATIVE TORATIONALITY

In an ideal world, policies would result from a rational analysis culminating in a value-maximizing choice after a thorough examination of all relevant alternatives. Unfortunately, this approach breaks down on a variety of fronts.

#### 3.1.1 THE BREAKDOWN OF RATIONALITY

The model begins by assuming that policy makers perceive and accurately define public problems. It further assumes that they rank potential public problems in order of priority, with the most serious