political decision making  Fritz Gaenslen

The decisions of a country’s top-level political leaders are often profoundly consequential; they can have implications for social order and justice, economic prosperity and growth, and war and peace. What do the decision processes of these leaders look like? How are problems identified? How are choices made? To address these questions is to confront a problem: analysts have only limited access to those they seek to analyze. Elite decision makers rarely submit to in-depth interviewing by researchers. What information they do communicate may be distorted by the inaccuracies of memory, imperfect insight into their own thought processes and motives, and, not least, the desire to create a favorable impression. Memoirs and archival materials (memoranda, reports, and minutes of meetings) are not only subject to similar distortions, but also are never so complete as to fully identify who says what to whom with what intention and with what effect. Finally, even when the historical record is richly informative about particular episodes of elite decision making, one may wonder whether these episodes are representative of less well-documented ones.

rational-choice approaches

Some approaches to the study of elite decision making require less access to elite decision makers than others. Notably undemanding in this respect are those that rely on rational-choice theory. The theory asserts that elites possess stable and ordered goals, assess the likely costs and benefits of available policy options in light of these goals, and rank the options accordingly. At least in principle, application of the theory is straightforward. Who are the relevant elites? These can be taken to be defined by the decision problem itself. What are their basic goals? These can be discovered in the public statements of elites or inferred from the bureaucratic roles they occupy. What options are available to elites and what are the costs and benefits of each option? Again, an analysis of the decision problem itself can reveal the likely answers. In short, rational-choice theory promises accounts of elite decision making that rely relatively little on information about the psychological processes of the people involved and much on the analyst’s construction of the circumstances they face. In the rational-choice view, elite decision makers tend to respond to these circumstances in a highly rational fashion.

Can this view of elite rationality be defended? One supporting argument stresses the consequential nature of elite decisions: the high stakes involved in the issues are said to induce high levels of rationality in the decision makers. A second argument stresses the complexity of the political process: institutional checks and balances are said to prevent the translation of personal foibles into public policy. A third argument is perhaps most compelling: models consistent with the tenets of rational-choice theory have been used to predict elite policy choices successfully in a wide variety of contexts. Focusing on the Council of Ministers of the European Community, for example, political scientist Bruce Bueno de Mesquita has demonstrated the ability of an “expected-utility” model to predict council decisions regarding automobile regulations, air transport, bank policy, and regulation of radioactive emissions. Bueno de Mesquita’s model requires estimates of each member’s preferred policy position on an issue, the salience of the issue for each member,
and the potential influence that each member could bring to bear on the others. The model itself consists of an algorithm, a mathematical recipe, that translates this information into a prediction of the council's final decision.

However, none of these arguments in support of rational-choice theory has escaped criticism. First, although the importance of the stakes and the arrangement of institutions might plausibly channel elite attention in a seemingly desirable direction, these same factors might just as plausibly produce the contrary effect by arousing multiple constituencies, concerns, and definitions of the situation. Second, although some rational-choice-inspired models do, indeed, predict elite behavior quite well, prediction is not the same as explanation. To show that elites make decisions as if they conformed to the theory is not to demonstrate that they do so in fact. Finally, considerable evidence suggests that, for all but the simplest decision problems, the degree of rationality described in rational-choice theory may not even be humanly possible. According to Herbert Simon, a Nobel laureate in economics, human rationality is best conceived as “bounded rationality”; because decision makers have limited cognitive capacities, they must resort to simplifying strategies when confronted with complicated choices. Examples of simplifying strategies include relying on a reduced representation of the problem, selectively attending to information, truncating the search for alternatives, or estimating consequences in an unsystematic manner.

**psychological approaches**

Most psychological approaches to the study of elite decision making rest on two assumptions. First, elites tend to be rational, but bounded in their rationality. Second, the issues they face tend to be characterized by complexity, uncertainty, and ambiguity. Elites must grapple with the need to reconcile multiple and competing values and interests; they frequently lack the information needed to assess the outcomes associated with various alternatives; and they may even find it difficult to determine their preferences in a given situation in the first place. To understand elite choices, then, requires more than a knowledge of the external circumstances they face. It requires a knowledge of how elites perceive and interpret their circumstances.

The process of elite decision making can be divided into two phases: a representation phase, in which the problem is defined, and a solution phase, in which the solution is presented. The first phase can be said to begin with the perception of anomalous events. To make sense of these events, elites must develop a definition of the situation, a mental representation of the problem that will allow them to decide what to do. Arriving at this representation is likely to involve a (not necessarily thorough) consideration of past experience, present goals, and possible constraints in which their own knowledge and beliefs play a major role.

A principal method by which analysts have sought to identify elite beliefs is content analysis, the systematic examination of written or verbal records. Through content analysis, particular attention has been devoted to the “operational codes” of elites, their “cognitive maps,” and their “cognitive complexity.” The notion of an operational code was first introduced by the political scientist Nathan Leites in a 1951 study of the Soviet Politburo. Two other political scientists, Alexander George and Ole Holsti, refined the concept, and a third, Stephen Walker, developed systematic measurement procedures. Analyzing a leader’s operational code involves answering a series of questions about his or
her diagnostic propensities, choice propensities, and attitudes toward risk. For example: Does the leader regard politics as essentially cooperative or conflictual? Does the leader regard the political actions of others as generally predictable or unpredictable? Is the leader inclined to cooperative or competitive strategies? Is the leader generally risk averse or risk acceptant? Most operational code studies focus on heads of government or foreign ministers. Walker, for example, derived Henry Kissinger's operational code from writings and speeches and concluded that it affected Kissinger's behavior in the negotiations ending the Vietnam War.

A second approach to identifying elite beliefs is cognitive mapping. Developed in the early 1970s by political scientists Robert Axelrod, C. Matthew Bonham, and Michael Shapiro, cognitive mapping involves constructing a graph of nodes and arrows in which the nodes represent the concepts that elites employ in the discussion of an issue and the arrows represent the alleged causal relations among these concepts, either positive, negative, or neutral. The result is a picture of how concepts are perceived to relate to each other and the overall structure of these relationships. For example, Bonham and his associates constructed cognitive maps from early exchanges between President Kennedy and Premier Khrushchev on the topic of nuclear weapons testing and discovered apparent cultural differences between the two men in the basic knowledge structures they used to represent political reality. Examining later exchanges, however, the authors found that the cognitive maps of the men had grown more similar, a precondition, the authors hypothesized, for a test-ban agreement. Michael Young, a political scientist, has recently developed a much more elaborate, computer-based system for cognitive mapping, called "World-View." "WorldView" distinguishes among six different kinds of causal assertions; identifies non-causal assertions about truth, falsity, possibility, and impossibility; and provides a variety of measures for describing the structure of cognitive maps and for comparing one map with another. A map's "size," for example, can be expected to indicate a policy maker's relative expertise.

A third approach, developed in the late 1970s by social psychologists Peter Suedfeld and Philip Tetlock, seeks to identify not the content of elite beliefs, but the cognitive complexity of belief structures. In this approach, cognitive complexity is defined and measured in terms of degrees of differentiation and integration. Differentiation refers to the number of dimensions and perspectives that a leader considers in the discussion of an issue, and integration refers to the number and nature of connections among the differentiated dimensions and perspectives. Elites high in cognitive complexity appear more sensitive to new information and better able to see policy options and opportunities for compromise. At the same time, they appear more likely to give undue weight to irrelevant information and more able to dismiss troublesome, inconsistent information. The level of cognitive complexity among elites may also affect their susceptibility to the influence of public opinion and interest groups: cognitive complexity appears to be enhanced by feelings of responsibility and accountability to others.

A different source of insight into the influence of problem representation on elite choices is "prospect theory," introduced in 1979 by psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky. Based on experimental evidence, prospect theory asserts that people tend to assess alternatives in relation to a reference point defining an acceptable outcome. Further, they tend to treat prospective deviations from this reference point as either "gains" or "losses," regarding losses as more painful than gains are pleasurable. Finally, people tend to be risk-acceptant in attempting to avoid losses and risk-averse in attempting to pursue gains. These results are significant because they suggest that, in the representation
of a problem, the selection of a reference point and the labeling of alternatives (whether as “gains” or “losses”) can have a profound effect on the willingness of elites to take risks. Prospect theory suggests, for example, that leaders will accommodate more slowly to losses than to gains and take more risks to maintain their international positions, reputations, and domestic political support than they will to enhance them.

The line between the problem representation and solution phases of a decision process is often difficult to draw. In some instances, a problem’s representation will readily suggest its solution, with little need on the part of elites to generate alternatives. In other instances, the representation and solution phases will repeat themselves, with objections to a proposal for action leading to a new representation, a new proposal, a new objection, and so on, until an acceptable proposal is found. Studies of decision processes associated with foreign-policy crises in a variety of countries suggest that the first scenario is more likely where the policy group is small and homogeneous, or dominated by a leader who is insensitive to advice from others. The latter scenario appears more likely in large and heterogeneous groups. Each scenario can be seen to be associated with a particular decision-making malady, “groupthink” in the first case, and “bureaucratic politics” in the second.

Introduced by psychologist Irving Janis in a 1972 study centering on several U.S. foreign-policy fiascos, “groupthink” refers to a decision process in which participants let their desire for group unanimity override and cut short their critical appraisal of alternative courses of action. In Janis’s theory, the antecedent conditions of groupthink are to be sought in feelings of stress among group members, group cohesiveness, a group’s insulation from the judgments of qualified outsiders, an absence of systematic methods for gathering and appraising information, and in group leaders who assertively promote their own opinions. Subsequent research, both in the laboratory and in government archives, has tended to confirm the effects of only the last three of these conditions.

If “groupthink” describes a decision process with too much emphasis on achieving unity and not enough on generating debate, “bureaucratic politics” describes the opposite vice: a process with too much debate and not enough unity. Bureaucratic politics is said to occur when members of a decision-making group represent various government ministries, departments, agencies, or bureaus and seek to advance and protect the interests of their organization against challenges from competing organizations with little concern for government policy as a whole. One possible consequence of bureaucratic politics is policy stagnation, where the bargaining among decision makers results in deadlock, in the inability of decision makers to take collective action. A second possible consequence is policy incoherence, where the bargaining among decision makers results in compromises such that the policies pursued are either mutually contradictory or bear little relation to the problems they were meant to address.

Is either groupthink or bureaucratic politics a common feature of elite decision processes? What can be said about the quality of elite decision making in general? The available evidence is best suited to judgments that are limited, tentative, and comparative. Given the structural complexity of most governments today, bureaucratic politics would seem to be a more common problem than groupthink. Certainly, studies of cabinet decision making in European democracies lend support to this conclusion. But groupthink and bureaucratic politics are broad syndromes. Focusing on foreign-policy decision making in the American White House and working from a list originally developed by Janis, a
number of researchers have sought to identify the presence or absence of a more narrowly defined set of defects. Janis's list includes gross omissions in surveying both alternatives and objectives, failure to reexamine the costs and risks of the preferred choice, poor information search, biased processing of available information, failure to reconsider originally rejected alternatives, and failure to work out implementation, monitoring, and contingency plans. Three generalizations emerge. First, elites appear to consider policy options one at a time on a yes-or-no basis more often than they weigh alternative policies against one another. Second, the biased use of available information appears to be a more common problem than the inadequate search for new information. Finally, the overall quality of decision making appears to vary considerably, not only between presidential administrations but sometimes within them. In a study of 19 international crises from 1945 to 1975, Janis, along with psychologist Gregory Herek and political scientist Paul Huth, concluded that White House decision processes were of high quality in eight crises and of low quality in seven. Perhaps these are the results to be expected of elites who tend to be rational, but bounded in their rationality.

[See also Decision Making; Political Behavior; Political Leadership; and Thinking, article on Problem Solving.]

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