Understanding Politics and Public Policy

Foundations and Core Concepts

POSC 315: Introduction to Public Policy

Lecture 8-3: Decision Making (Part 3 of 3)

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Decision-Making Models Overview

- **Rational Choice:** Idealized model based on full information and optimization.
- **Bounded Rationality:** Limited information and satisficing behavior.
- **Incrementalism:** Policy change through small, conservative steps.
- **Groupthink:** When group harmony overrides critical thinking.
- **Garbage Can Model:** Organized anarchy; decisions emerge from timing.

Groupthink: Key Symptoms

Definition

Prioritizing group cohesion and unanimity over critical analysis.

Common Symptoms:

- Illusion of invulnerability
- Collective rationalization
- Suppression of dissent
- Self-censorship

Groupthink: Prevention Strategies

Strategies to Avoid Groupthink

- Encourage open dialogue and dissent
- Assign a devil's advocate role
- Use anonymous feedback mechanisms
- Break into smaller groups for discussion
- Rotate leadership roles

Goal

To ensure diverse perspectives are considered and critical thinking is maintained.

Groupthink: Example

Example: Bay of Pigs Invasion

In 1961, President Kennedy's advisors:

- Overvalued consensus and ignored dissenting opinions.
- Failed to critically evaluate the risks of the invasion.
- Resulted in a poorly planned operation that ended in failure.

Garbage Can Model of Decision-Making

Core Idea

Problems, solutions, participants, and choice opportunities float independently and only occasionally align.

- Developed by Cohen, March, and Olsen (1972)
- Reflects high-uncertainty, loosely coupled organizations

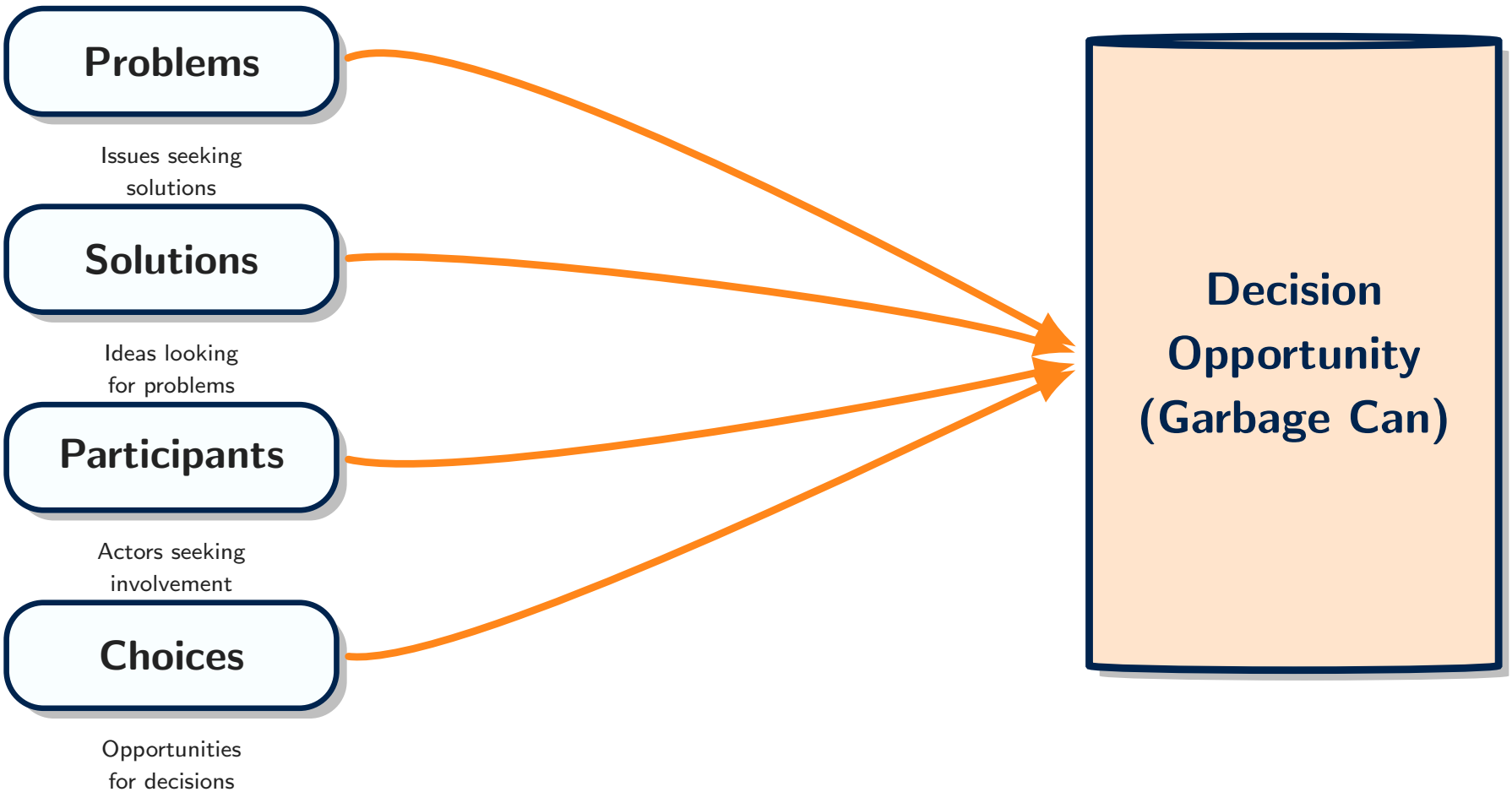
Four Streams in the Garbage Can Model

- **Choices** looking for problems
- **Issues** looking for decision venues
- **Solutions** looking for problems
- **Participants** looking for something to do

When these converge by chance: a decision is made.

Garbage Can Model: Streams Visualization

Independent Streams Flow into Decision Opportunities



When streams **randomly converge** at the same time,
a decision emerges—often **independent** of rational planning

Garbage Can Model: Example

Example: University Budgeting

Imagine a university where:

- **Problems:** Departments need more funding.
- **Solutions:** New fundraising strategies.
- **Participants:** Faculty, administrators, and students.
- **Choices:** Budget meetings scheduled at random times.
- **Outcome:** A decision is made when a fundraising idea aligns with a budget meeting, even if not all problems are addressed.

Comparison Table: Decision-Making Models

Model	Information	Process	Outcome
Rational Choice	Complete	Optimization	Best solution
Bounded Rationality	Limited	Satisficing	Good enough
Incrementalism	Limited	Small steps	Gradual change
Groupthink	Filtered	Conformity	Poor decisions
Garbage Can	Random	Stream convergence	Unpredictable

Decision-Making Toolkit

Rational Analysis – When info is good

Use when you have reliable data, time, and a clear problem.

Satisficing – When time is short

Use when decisions must be made quickly with limited info.

Incrementalism – When risk is high

Use when radical change is risky or politically infeasible.

Groupthink Prevention – Build in dissent

Use when teams are at risk of overvaluing harmony.

Opportunity Recognition – Be ready when streams align

Use when solutions, problems, and decision windows collide.

Final Thought

“The best decision-makers aren’t those who follow one model perfectly, but those who know which model to use when.”