

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

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

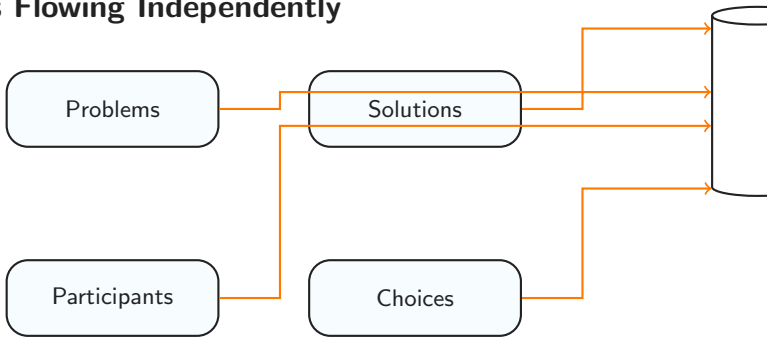
Four Streams in the Garbage Can Model

- **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

Streams Flowing Independently



When streams
converge in the
garbage can,
a decision emerges

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
- **Satisficing** – When time is short
- **Incrementalism** – When risk is high
- **Groupthink Prevention** – Build in dissent
- **Opportunity Recognition** – Be ready when streams align

Final Thought

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