

Wandling, R. (2011). Rationality and rational choice. In J. Ishiyama, & M. Breuning (Eds.), 21st century political science: A reference handbook. (pp. 34-43). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc. doi: 10.4135/9781412979351.n5

# 21st Century Political Science: A Reference Handbook

## Rationality and Rational Choice

Contributors: John T. Ishiyama & Marijke Breuning

Print Pub. Date: 2011

Online Pub. Date: November 23, 2010

Print ISBN: 9781412969017

Online ISBN: 9781412979351

DOI: 10.4135/9781412979351

Print pages: 34-43

This PDF has been generated from SAGE knowledge. Please note that the pagination of the online version will vary from the pagination of the print book.

10.4135/9781412979351.n5

*University of North Texas*  
[p. 34 ↓ ]

## Chapter 5: Rationality and Rational Choice

The rationality concept has figured prominently in some of the most fascinating, heartfelt, and at times acrimonious scholarly exchanges among political scientists. This chapter focuses on five important intellectual developments in the study of rationality from a political science perspective: (1) the 1960s as an important era in scholarly exploration of the relationship between public policy making, decision making, and rationality; (2) Herbert Simon's seminal and hugely influential theorizing on decision making and the limits of individual rationality; (3) the legacy of bounded rationality, particularly in Graham Allison's models of decision making; (4) the seminal work of a group of economists and political scientists during the 1950s and 1960s who figured prominently in the emergence of modern rational choice theory; and (5) the modern scholarly debate over rational choice. A central theme of this survey is the tension between economic and political definitions of rationality and how these conceptions of rationality have shaped contemporary political science theory and research.

### Policy Making, Decision Making, and Rationality

Charles Lindblom's "The Science of 'Muddling Through'" (1959) was an important milestone for a whole generation of theory and research on public policy making. Although an economist by training, Lindblom became a major figure in political science, particularly among scholars of public administration and public policy. While exploring the intersection of public policy making and administrative decision making, Lindblom compares two "methods" of policy analysis and choice, identified as "rational-comprehensive" and "successive limited comparisons" (p. 81). The first method is summarized as the "root" method and the latter, the "branch" method. Lindblom

presents the rational-comprehensive method (or model) in a negative light, as not only empirically flawed social science but as normatively questionable as a guide for sound decision making and public policy making in a democracy.

The rational-comprehensive model assumes that policies are crafted through a process that involves advance specification of key values and goals, tightly configured means-ends analysis, extensive analysis that is at once comprehensive and characterized by high levels of information, and a prominent role for theory-driven analysis. Out of this analytically intensive and information-rich process emerges a policy choice that is the “best” relative to decisional elements such as values and goals, actual analysis, and means evaluation. The successive limited comparisons model, however, is the one embraced by Lindblom. With this model, also known as incrementalism, values and goals often are not distinct, analysis of relations between ends and means is limited and perhaps even inappropriate, the options considered are few in number and [p. 35 ↓ ] differ only marginally (or incrementally) from each other, and policy choices emerge out of a “succession of comparisons” (p. 81) among a limited set of options. If theory is important in the rational-comprehensive method, decision making in incrementalism is process oriented, with goodness of a decision defined as achieving agreement among analysts—that is, agreement rather than some objective evidence that the information, data, and analysis clearly point to the best option.

Lindblom's framework represents a broadside against application of the rational model to policy making and administrative decision making. This comprehensively and tightly specified version of rationality does not work as either description or explanation of public policy making. However, to Lindblom this does not mean that policy making lacks rationality or is characterized by irrationality. It comes down to how rationality is conceptualized. Lindblom does not portray a chaotic or random universe with irrationality run rampant; there is a science or logic to “muddling through.” Decisions are made through a politicized process rather than based on compelling, objective logic of the facts, evidence, and information collected. In fact, to Lindblom the rationality of incrementalist-style policy making is preferable. Incrementalist-style rationality is very compatible with a pluralistic political system, particularly in producing options that rank high on political relevance and are grounded firmly in existing knowledge and information held by government officials.

Lindblom set the stage for further examination of rationality during the pivotal 1960s period of political science scholarship. Paul Diesing (1962) argued that rationality has multiple meanings and lamented the tendency to view rationality primarily as either technical or economic rationality concerned with organizational productivity and economic efficiency. Diesing develops a philosophy-oriented framework that argues for the study of three other forms of rationality—social, legal, and political. Aaron Wildavsky (1966), one of the 20th century's most influential political scientists, takes the cue and warns strongly against framing rationality in terms of decision-making strategies or techniques such as cost-benefit analysis, systems analysis, and program budgeting. For political science, the latter were flawed because they indicated an economics-oriented view of rationality. To Wildavsky, political rationality is important in its own right because government leaders must calculate political costs such as the resources needed to generate support for a policy, the implications of a policy decision for reelection, and the possibility of provoking hostility for decisions not well received.

## Simon, March, and the Limits of Rationality

Herbert Simon greatly influenced theory and research in fields as disparate as organization theory, decision sciences, and bureaucratic policy making. His ideas also played a role in the development of rational choice theory—whether through his criticism or through efforts by some rational choice practitioners to incorporate Simon's rationality assumptions into their research.

Simon provides a synthesizing approach to rationality that incorporates both economic and psychological dimensions while exploring the limits or boundaries of individual and organizational rationality. A starting point is Simon's (1957) distinction between “objective” and “subjective” rationality. Objective rationality is evident if a decision or choice is the “correct behavior for maximizing given values in a given situation” (p. 76). With this version of rationality, a clear test is available to ascertain the correctness of a decision or choice. Subjective rationality incorporates psychological elements by considering the decision maker's actual knowledge—or knowledge limitations. In short, based on the information possessed by the decision maker, what might be concluded about the rationality of a decision? Simon's concern is that standards for achievement of objective rationality go well beyond the actual decision-making abilities of individuals,

specifically individuals in complex organizations. The realities of psychology and human cognition mean that full knowledge of decision-related information is not possessed, and the full range of options also is not identified and evaluated in a comprehensive way.

Simon (1955) criticizes the rationality of classic economic theory and its model of “economic man” (p. 99), who is assumed to have extensive and intensive knowledge relative to the decision-making environment while possessing a well-organized and stable system of preferences, as well as a skill in computation that enables him to calculate the best alternative that reflects the highest point on his preference scale. The economic model of rationality is problematic for the development of a theory of the business firm or any type of organization, and this is the case whether the goal is empirically or normatively based theory. To Simon, real, empirical human rationality does not achieve the demanding standards of the classic economic model. Perhaps with a hint of things yet to come in the social sciences (including political science), Simon uses the term *rational choice* while inventorying key limits or constraints in “rational adaptation” behavior, particularly with respect to the range of alternatives considered, preferences, and decision maker knowledge of potential decision “payoffs” (p. 100). Simon also criticizes the “global rationality” assumptions that he sees embedded in game theory and castigates the economic rationality model as a “simplified model” that fails to capture the complex reality of a “choosing organization of limited knowledge and ability” (pp. 101, 114).

With this foundation, Simon fully develops his theory of *bounded rationality*—with important contributions from coauthor James March (March & Simon, 1958). The rationality of “administrative man” (p. 137) is compared and contrasted with the rationality requirements of classical economics—and statistical decision theory. In the [p. 36 ↓ ] latter versions of rationality, decision optimality is the standard in an environment with a full and clear specification of alternatives, knowledge of consequences of the alternatives, and a “utility ordering” (p. 138) in which key values at stake guide fully conscious assessment of the alternatives. March and Simon, however, argue that individuals in organizational settings are not guided by the quest for optimality (i.e., the best possible decision) but rather make decisions at the point that an alternative is deemed satisfactory. They assert that “most human decision-making, whether individual or organizational, is concerned with the discovery and selection of satisfactory alternatives; only in exceptional cases is it concerned with the discovery

and selection of optimal alternatives” (pp. 140–141). This point sets the stage for the much-referenced *satisficing* concept, which is a decision-making process in which the satisfactory standard is reached and the option selected is deemed as sufficient by the individual decision maker. In sum, the option is satisfactory—and it suffices. Satisficing is a major departure from the quest for the best possible choice as determined by extensively analyzing a wide range of alternatives and factoring in a full range of decision-related values or preferences. This model of decision making also parts company with the classic economic model in another way, through March and Simon's assertion that alternatives are evaluated sequentially rather than simultaneously. At some point, an alternative is considered to be acceptable, given organizational goals, values, and decision-maker knowledge; the decision process concludes at that point.

Satisficing, however, does not take place in a vacuum; it is embedded in an organizational context in which rationality is bounded by “repertoires of action programs” (March & Simon, 1958, p. 169) that circumscribe and also channel the decision-making process. March and Simon give particular emphasis to the role of organization structure as the setting for individual decision making. Organization structure comes to play an important role in establishing the “boundaries of rationality” (p. 171). In essence, when we speak of the rationality of individual decision makers, we also are considering the role that organizations play in funneling or channeling decision making and even compensating for the limits of human rationality.

Later, Simon (1985) shed additional light on this path-breaking approach to rationality by noting that bounded rationality really is interchangeable with the term *procedural rationality*. Rationality is rooted in an organizational process of identifying alternatives, collecting information, and considering important values. This is another way of saying that there is no such thing as a substantively or objectively optimal decision. Simon sees this distinction as parallel to the concepts of procedural and substantive due process, observing that “in the same way, we can judge a person to be rational who uses a reasonable process for choosing; or, alternatively, we can judge a person to be rational who arrives at a reasonable choice” (1985, p. 294). Bounded rationality is a way of focusing on the use of a reasonable process that helps to compensate for the limits of human rationality. And to avoid any misconceptions, Simon also contends that bounded rationality is not equivalent to irrationality. Objecting to the quality of choices or even the information that informed a decision is not the same as saying irrationality

has prevailed. Individual decision makers do have goals and strive to make the best choices possible under the circumstances, which is another way of saying that they are “intendedly rational” (e.g., March & Simon, 1958, p. 170). Finally, Simon reminds us that bounded rationality has intellectual roots in psychological theory, specifically cognitive psychology. To Simon, cognitive psychology has a good appreciation of how individual choice making is limited in its computational abilities and involves a realistic understanding of individual problem-solving processes.

## The Legacy of Bounded Rationality

The bounded rationality concept has figured prominently in political science, including influencing Lindblom's incrementalist theory of rationality. Bounded rationality is a robust concept that lends itself readily to multiple meanings and applications, and it continues to play a role in how political scientists frame rationality. To illustrate, Jones (2003) evaluates the contributions of bounded rationality in public administration and public policy scholarship and argues that the bounded rationality approach has yielded an enhanced understanding of how government organizations may produce unexpected or even unpredicted policy or program results. With public organizations not operating under full rationality conditions, administrators aspiring toward rationality may nonetheless find their goals undermined by a variety of forces, such as informational uncertainties and nonrational elements of organizational decision making.

Bounded rationality also plays an important role in Allison's (1971) three decision-making models for studying the Cuban missile crisis: rational policy, organizational process, and bureaucratic politics. The first and second models are most relevant to this chapter. Model 1 (rational policy) is Allison's version of the economic rationality model, with assumptions of advance specification of goals and objectives; identification and evaluation of a range of options; clear-headed knowledge of consequences of decision alternatives, particularly with respect to costs and benefits; and finally selection of the best option from the standpoint of value maximization. This model conceptualizes decision making by the U.S. government as a unified national actor coolly mapping out a set of different alternatives for careful, deliberate evaluation—major options such as doing nothing, diplomatic pressures, a surgical air strike, or a blockade. Model 2 (organizational process) focuses on organizational processes and



outputs, seeing U.S. decision making as the result of complex bureaucratic [p. 37 ↓ ] properties. Simon's satisficing concept is evident in Allison's argument that decision making in Model 2 involves "sequential attention to goals" (p. 82). Bounded rationality also is evident in Allison's emphasis on "standard operating procedures" and "programs and repertoires" (p. 83) that coordinate the activities of individuals in government departments and agencies. These latter principles serve as the basis for Allison's much quoted examples of how organizational procedures and constraints may come to shape decision making at the highest levels of a presidential administration. Perhaps the most widely cited rationality example from Allison is Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's argument for a political and internationally sensitive approach to blockade implementation, as opposed to admiral George Anderson's reluctance to deviate from the Navy's standard operating procedures for blockade placement.

Some scholars, however, have suggested that there may be problems with Allison's application of his decisionmaking models. To illustrate, Bendor and Hammond (1992) criticize Model 1 as unduly simplistic in its version of rational choice, and they contend that Allison has misinterpreted and misapplied bounded rationality theory. They argue that Allison's version of bounded rationality misinterprets Simon by viewing organizational structure, processes, and routines as a hindrance to quality decision making. Organizational properties such as standard operating procedures really are positive features in Simon's bounded rationality, by facilitating and assisting the decision-making process: In essence, complex challenges and difficult choices require that rationality be boosted through organizational processes, including processes as seemingly mundane as standard operating procedures. Organizations do not limit rationality; they facilitate rationality.

## The Foundations of Rational Choice

The roots of modern rational choice theory generally are traced to the seminal contributions of a group of economists—primarily Arrow, Downs, Buchanan and Tullock, and Olson—and one path-breaking political scientist—Riker—through the 1950s to mid-1960s (e.g., see Almond, 1991; Ordeshook, 1990). Some scholars note the early formative role of social or economic philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes and Adam Smith (Monroe, 2001). Kenneth Arrow's (1963) social-choice approach to rationality is



a good place to start. First developed in the early 1950s, it has contributed to decades of theory and research on the question of whether individual and collective rationality are inherently in conflict in democratic society. Individual rationality as indicated in expressed preferences might generate problematic collective social choices that lead to serious questioning of the possibility of coupling rationality with democracy—that is, without dictatorship to force choices on people. This puzzle is covered in rational choice investigations of what generally is identified as the *possibility theorem*, or alternatively the *impossibility theorem*.

Anthony Downs's (1957) *Economic Theory of Democracy* is arguably the most important contribution from someone who is not a political scientist to rational choice in political science. While exploring the meanings of economic and political rationality, Downs presents a theory of rationality in which individuals in political and governmental arenas are guided by self-interest as they pursue choices with the highest levels of utility. The concept of utility figures prominently in economics and is a general way of summarizing the benefits choices bring to decision makers, and the utility concept makes regular appearances in the rational choice literature of political science. To Downs, benefits are not limited to a narrow monetary or financial nature; utility also may be derived from government services such as policing, water purification, and road repairs.

Downs is particularly well-known for his propositions on how self-interested voters assess the appeals of rationally oriented political parties in democratic political systems. These voters may also experience degrees of uncertainty and even information gaps, somewhat similar to what occurs in bounded rationality conditions. Kenneth Shepsle and Mark Bonchek (1997), coauthors of the standard text on rational choice, note the importance of Downs in spatial modeling to show how rational voters evaluate the merits of politicians and electoral candidates in ideological space. Governments themselves figure in Downs's analysis because government officials and political parties seek to maximize support from voters—for example, through spending on government programs or offering programs that appeal to voter self-interest. According to Downs (1957), governments are run by self-interested individuals whose primary concern is not an abstract ideal of social welfare maximization or the public interest; they are oriented toward developing government programs in relation to strategies to please voters.

James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock's (1962) *Calculus of Consent* presents a rationality model in which individuals choose according to the “more rather than less” principle (p. 18). The average individual seeks to maximize utility and secure more of what he or she values—rather than less of it—in the political arena as well as elsewhere. Buchanan and Tullock are particularly interested in the relationship between individual and collective rationality. Although they acknowledge that rationality in market-based decision making does not hold up as well in the governmental setting, they nonetheless argue for applying the logic of economic-based decision making to democratic political systems. Rational members of democratic society will decide in favor of political organizations and institutions that serve their respective individual interests, with competition among individuals also evident in this process. This competition becomes manifest as rational [p. 38 ↓ ] individuals in constitutional democracies pursue more rather than less for themselves in the political arena. Although there may be some slippage from the full rationality standard regarding information levels of individuals and even the extent to which self-interest may dominate, Buchanan and Tullock confidently assert that “each participant in the political process tries, single-mindedly, to further his own interest, at the expense of others if this is necessary” (p. 305). Furthermore, individual choice plays out in an existing constitutional system—for example, the institutions, processes, and rules of representative democracy. In this sense, Buchanan and Tullock embrace a version of bounded rationality in that constitutional democracy also sets the boundaries for political choice.

Mancur Olson's (1965) *Logic of Collective Action* represents a major challenge to traditional thinking on individual participation in groups in democratic society. Rational individuals may not have an incentive to join or participate in large voluntary associations, particularly those characterized as “latent” groups, if they can benefit from the collective or public goods provided by these groups without having to pay dues or incur other costs of membership (pp. 58–59). A key element of Olson's approach to rationality concerns the “objectives” pursued by individuals. Olson pointedly makes the following observation:

The only requirement is that the behavior of individuals in large groups or organizations of the kind considered should generally be rational, in the sense that their objectives, whether selfish or unselfish, should be

pursued by means that are efficient and effective for achieving these objectives. (p. 65)

## Rational Choice Arrives in Political Science

William Riker's (1962) *Theory of Political Coalitions* is probably the most important scholarly work in the emergence of rational choice in political science. Riker takes the theories of economics and mathematics-based game theory and expressly applies them to political decision making, presenting an alternative to political science's long-standing focus on concepts such as power and authority. Riker sees rationality in terms of individuals who seek to win, rather than lose, in the context of various types of two-person games: "Politically rational man is the man who would rather win than lose, regardless of the particular stakes" (p. 22).

Whether considering topics such as voting choices or federal system design, Riker (1990) conceives of political rationality as involving actors who are "able to order their alternative goals, values, tastes, and strategies" and who "choose from available alternatives so as to maximize their satisfaction" (p. 172). In Riker we see the fusion of the rational actors of game theory and economics, transposed to the world of politics and government. Riker, however, sees his approach to rationality as transcending traditional arguments over pure economic and bounded rationality. The focus of rational choice theory should be on how individuals decide with information available to them, from knowledge of their own preferences or through the consequences of alternatives themselves. His definition of rationality "requires only that, within the limits of available information about circumstances and consequences, actors choose so as to maximize their satisfaction" (p. 173). Riker became one of the most controversial figures in modern political science, arguing for political science to openly embrace rational choice as its future, particularly because "in contrast to economists, political scientists frequently have been methodically unsophisticated" (p. 178).

Riker's approach to studying politics illustrates prominent features of modern rational choice. First, there is the common use of what may be called the "as if" assumption of rationality to guide empirical analysis and research (e.g., Moe, 1979). Individuals are assumed to act "as if" they decided according to principles such as utility maximization

and the pursuit of self-interest (see Riker & Ordeshook, 1968), and then researchers go about the process of testing their propositions and hypotheses against empirical reality. The “as if” approach in rational choice theory has prompted great debate over rational choice's approach to knowledge in the social sciences, with one writer exploring tensions between “instrumentalist empiricism” and “scientific realism” in rational choice scholarship while asking whether the “as if” assumption approach represents a “useful fiction” (MacDonald, 2003).

A second feature is the tendency of rational choice practitioners to work out anomalies or counterevidence from within the rational choice tradition itself—that is, to focus on what some refer to as the maintenance of core elements of the rational choice theory as a way of explaining political reality—even in the face of potentially confounding data or developments (e.g., Shapiro, 2005). To illustrate, Riker and Ordeshook (1968) addressed the puzzle that voting itself might be an irrational act when considering individual costs and benefits; they find that there really is an underlying rational calculus to the decision to vote—or for that matter not to vote.

A third feature of rational choice is its ongoing evolution, as we would expect of any healthy scholarly approach. The rational choice of recent decades is not the same as that of the 1960s and 1970s. In Riker, this is seen in his devotion in the latter part of his career to a scholarly approach labeled *heresthetics*, which focuses on the strategic use of communications, such as sentences and languages, by political leaders and elites in important arenas such as agenda control and coalition formation (Shepsle, 2003).

## Understanding Contemporary Rational Choice Theory

Rational choice theory draws from the general approach called *rational actor theory*, which Monroe (1991) identifies as emphasizing individuals who pursue goals and decide among competing alternatives while possessing extensive information, a coherent preference ordering, and a commitment to the principles of self-interest and utility [p. 39 ↓ ] maximization. Rational choice theorists, however, at times differ on how they incorporate these properties into their assumptions and empirical research.

A major example is the distinction between *thin* and *thick* rationality. The thin version is the elemental approach to rationality that operates at a fairly broad level, not going much beyond general-purpose assumptions such as characterizing individuals as goal oriented, self-interested, and seeking utility maximization. A thickened version of rationality builds additional specifications into the rationality model—for example, actual belief systems, psychological needs, aspiration levels, cultural values, and even specific goals that may be important in the sociopolitical arena (e.g., see Ferejohn, 1991; Friedman, 1996). Rationality thus becomes richer or more substantive as it is thickened. The importance of understanding this distinction is underlined by Ostrom (2006), who criticizes the tendency in political science to “lump all scholars together who use a thin model of rationality together with those who are developing second- and third-generation behavioral theories” (p. 8).

A few examples from within rational choice scholarship illustrate efforts to broaden its framework and scholarly focus, particularly through the study of institutions. Shepsle and Barry Weingast (1994) assess the transition from the first generation of rational choice congressional research, which fused a behavioral orientation with a strong focus on majority cycles coupled with a relatively abstract notion of the legislature. The second and third generations of rational choice research on Congress, however, shifted toward incorporating institutional structure variables—such as committees, subcommittees, and their rules—along with parties and leadership in the postreform era. Terry Moe (2005) provides a critique from within rational choice that although supportive of the promise of rational choice for political science nonetheless calls for a much more substantial role for political power in rational choice and its study of institutions—in settings that range from the U.S. bureaucracy on through nation-to-nation interactions in international politics.

Richard Feiock (2007) develops a set of hypotheses on regional governance institutions based on what he identifies as a “second-generation model” that incorporates contextual factors that shape and underpin individuals as rational actors. A thin version of rationality is set aside, and contextual factors show how rationality may be bounded—and thus provide an example of integrating bounded rationality into modern rational choice. An excellent example of this synthesis is found in George Tsebilis (1990), who argues that rational choice has unique qualities in its ability to explain behavior of rational actors in the context of political and social institutions that establish the rules

of the game in which individuals assess their options and seek utility maximization. Tsebilis's embrace of a rational choice that is bounded by institutional setting is particularly interesting in view of his application of it to comparative political analysis.

To this point, rational choice has been presented in a summative way to introduce the reader to its roots and key influences while providing some sense of its present concerns. It must be noted, however, that any survey of rational choice runs the risk of oversimplification, and the student may be wise to consider the statement by one well-known rational choice practitioner:

I suspect the only thing all RC [rational choice] people would agree upon is that their explanations presume that individuals behave purposively. Beyond that, every manner of disagreement—theoretical, substantive, methodological—can be found. RC is an approach, a general perspective, within which many different models can be located. (Fiorina, 1996, p. 87)

In addition, the undergraduate student with an interest in rationality will encounter multiple references to the public choice, social choice, and rational choice schools, and these terms often are used interchangeably—either accurately or inaccurately (e.g., Friedman, 1996; Monroe, 1991). Within political science, the term *public choice* certainly has definite connotations, primarily due to its association with a well-known political science couple, Elinor and Vincent Ostrom, whose unique and influential versions of rational choice theory and research have been identified by some as the *Bloomington school* (Mitchell, 1988). Illustrative of the sometimes tricky terrain, the term *public choice* may also represent a general ideological orientation to some political scientists who view public choice as having limited application to the discipline. These political scientists contend that public choice is too closely associated with a market-based model that ultimately sees politics and government as hindrances to individual and collective welfare. In sum, rational choice is a multifaceted subject with different schools of thought and even the potential for stirring some emotions.

# Rational Choice Controversies

A full understanding of rational choice requires knowledge of controversies associated with this approach in the political science discipline. The decade of the 1990s represents a key turning point, with the emergence of open and occasionally heated debate over the value of rational choice to political science. This decade includes Donald Green and Ian Shapiro's *Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory* (1994) and subsequent scholarly exchanges such as those in *The Rational Choice Controversy: Economic Models of Politics Reconsidered* (Friedman, 1996). A survey of some representative criticisms from this era captures the intensity of this debate:

The rational choice debate carried over into the first decade of the 21st century, though the intensity level of the debate certainly has waned in recent years. The Perestroika movement, which borrowed its name from the reform era of the Soviet Union, probably was the most significant development in the rational choice debate of the past decade. The year 2001 witnessed a multipronged effort by a coalition of disenchanted political scientists to reform the American Political Science Association and redirect political science scholarship in general.

The Perestroikan critics of the political science establishment grouped rational choice with formal modeling and quantitatively oriented research as they made their case against a style of political science perceived as actually diminishing genuine knowledge of government, politics, and policy. Perhaps the most colorful statement to represent the emergent criticism of rational choice is the following call to arms:

William Riker was fond of saying that political science was a sinking ship, and rational choice theory was the only tugboat that might bring it to port. It is truer to say that Riker's disciples have acted as pirates out to hijack political science to a rather barren island. Their piracy is doomed to fail. (Kasza, 2001, p. 599)

While the early fervor of the Perestroika heyday eventually dissipated, additional critiques of rational choice later emerged in an edited volume with the colorful title of *Perestroika! The Raucous Rebellion in Political Science* (Monroe, 2005). While rational



choice was not by any means the sole object of attention of this volume, rational choice took its lumps from some high-profile political scientists such as Theodore Lowi and Samuel Beer.

## Toward Reconciliation

It has not been all slings and arrows over the past decade. A case in point is the assessment provided by a scholar with a well-established record of questioning rational choice and who also has argued for an alternative framework rooted in political psychology—*perspective theory*, which focuses on identity at the individual, group, and societal levels. Kristen Monroe (2001) argues that the discipline “has wasted too much time debating the merits of rational choice theory” and that it is time to focus more fully on asking “what we have learned that may be utilized in the next stage of constructing more realistic theories of political life” (pp. 165–166). Ostrom's (2006) framing of the issue as “Rational Choice—An Evil Approach or a Theory Undergoing Change and Development?” (p. 8) also merits consideration. While embracing the value of rational choice as part of a diverse modern political science and certainly not seeing it as an evil approach, she nonetheless acknowledges, as a rational choice practitioner herself, that factionalism in today's political science may have multiple sources, including rigid adherence to a narrow definition of rationality: “Some of the factionalism does stem from the arrogance of those who consider the continued use of a narrow model of human rationality the essential qualification for doing good social science” (p. 8).

## Conclusion and Disciplinary Directions

The past 50-plus years have shown great interest by political scientists in the meaning and applications of rationality. Lindblom's incrementalism ushered in an era of theory and research on the limits of rationality in crafting and choosing public policies, and Wildavsky expanded on incrementalist theory as he made the case for political rationality over economic rationality. Simon's seminal theorizing contributed greatly to knowledge of the realities and parameters of rationality by arguing that there are limits on decision-makers' abilities to acquire and process information and assess

options. Rationality is circumscribed or limited, with bounded rationality the condition of individuals as they make important political, policy, and administrative choices. Starting with Riker, rational choice theory elevated the question of whether political actors—from voters on through institutional actors such as political parties, elected officials, government bureaucrats, or even nation-states—are motivated primarily by an economic-based sense of self-interest and utility maximization. Rational choice political scientists answered in the affirmative to this question as they drew from scholars such as Downs, Olson, and Buchanan and Tullock—all of whom cut their academic teeth in the economics discipline. With political scientists such as Riker and the Ostroms laying the foundations, rational choice would become an important force in the discipline.

Alternative conceptions of rationality have spurred debate among political scientists, including expressions of resistance to the notion that politics and government may be understood through the prism of an economics-oriented model of individual and organizational decision making [p. 41 ↓ ] and behavior. Scholars such as Lindblom, Wildavsky, and even Allison questioned the value of seeing policy making and government decision making as tightly structured processes of high-end rationality. Critics of rational choice argued against a political science that reduced the political arena to self-interested, utility maximizing political actors who could be studied through heavily assumption-laden theories and methodologies that make extensive use of formal modeling. Rational choice practitioners, however, have defended their scholarly approach while asserting that rational choice is not a monolithic enterprise, with scholars marching in lockstep. In response to criticisms of early versions of a stripped-down rationality, known alternatively as thin rationality, second- and third-generation versions of rational choice have emerged to incorporate more nuanced and developed understandings of rationality in politics and government—such as adopting bounded rationality assumptions and paying attention to the impact of institutional or cultural variables such as legislative rules and traditions.

Although the dialogue over rational choice has been animated and sometimes heated, it ultimately has been beneficial to modern political science. From the multi-pronged criticisms of rational choice theory, methodology and research voiced by Green and Shapiro in the 1990s on through the sometimes heated debates of the Perestroika movement at the dawn of the new century, political science certainly has indicated a willingness to address fundamental issues and questions. For example, what drives

or motivates individuals or government officials to action? Are they fundamentally self-interested? Or are they capable of placing the public interest over personal, economic-oriented calculations of benefit or utility? What of the impact of social-psychological factors such as emotions, values, and identity? Is the political arena best understood as a venue explained by the basic concepts and tools of economics? Just how much information can political actors handle when making a decision—such as whether to vote for a candidate, align with a political party or ideology, express support for a public policy, or evaluate the performance of government officials? All these intriguing questions figure in the study of rationality in political science, and they no doubt will continue to shape future generations of theory development and empirical research.

*Note:* For building a foundation in rationality studies, the following sources will be particularly helpful to students: Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957); Monroe, *The Economic Approach to Politics: A Critical Reassessment of the Theory of Rational Action* (1991); Friedman, *The Rational Choice Controversy: Economic Models of Politics Reconsidered* (1996); and Shepsle and Bonchek, *Analyzing Politics: Rationality, Behavior and Institutions* (1997). Advanced students of rationality in political science should consider Ostrom's *Understanding Institutional Diversity* (2005), in which the 2009 Nobel Prize winner and public choice proponent grounds nuanced rational choice premises in social, economic, and political settings that include bounded rationality, the impacts of institutional rules and procedures, collective decision-making processes, game theoretic strategies, and community characteristics. A shorter and more focused version of this approach can be found in her 2007 survey article "Institutional Rational Choice," dealing with its use in public policy research. Ostrom's scholarly effort is part of what she calls the institutional analysis and development framework that already has been applied by a variety of scholars to real and challenging policy problems such as land use conflicts and common pool resource exhaustion problems (e.g., deforestation and soil erosion).

Richard A. Wandling *Eastern Illinois University*

## References and Further Readings

Allison G. T. 1971. *Essence of decision: Explaining the Cuban missile crisis* . Boston: Little, Brown.

Almond G. A. 1991 *Rational choice theory and the social sciences* . In Monroe K. R. (Ed.), *The economic approach to politics: A critical reassessment of the theory of rational action* . New York: HarperCollins.

Arrow K. J. 1963. *Social choice and individual values* (2nd ed.). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Bendor J. Hammond T. H. *Rethinking Allison's models American Political Science Review* vol. 86 pp. 301–322 1992

Buchanan J. M. Tullock G. 1962. *The calculus of consent: Logical foundations of constitutional democracy* . Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Diesing P. 1962. *Reason in society: Five types of decisions and their social conditions* . Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Downs A. 1957. *An economic theory of democracy* . Boston: Addison-Wesley.

Feiock R. C. *Rational choice and regional governance Journal of Urban Affairs* vol. 29 pp. 47–63 2007 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9906.2007.00322.x>

Ferejohn J. 1991 *Rationality and interpretation: Parliamentary elections in early Stuart England* . In Monroe K. R. (Ed.), *The economic approach to politics: A critical reassessment of the theory of rational action* (pp. pp. 279–305). New York: HarperCollins.

Fiorina M. J. 1996 *Rational choice, empirical contributions* . In Friedman J. (Ed.), *The rational choice controversy: Economic models of politics reconsidered* (pp. pp. 85–94). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Friedman J. 1996 Introduction: Economic approaches to politics . In Friedman J. (Ed.), *The rational choice controversy: Economic models of politics reconsidered* (pp. pp. 1–4). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Green D. P. Shapiro I. 1994. *Pathologies of rational choice theory: A critique of applications in political science* . New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Jones B. D. Bounded rationality and political science: Lessons from public administration and public policy *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* vol. 13 pp. 395–412 2003 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/jopart/mug028>

Kasza G. Perestroika: For an ecumenical science of politics *PS: Political Science and Politics* vol. 34 pp. 597–600 2001

Lindblom C. E. The science of “muddling through .” *Public Administration Review* vol. 19 pp. 79–88 1959 <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/973677>

MacDonald P. K. Useful fiction or miracle maker: The competing epistemological foundations of rational choice theory *American Political Science Review* vol. 97 pp. 551–565 2003

March J. G. Simon H. A. 1958. *Organizations* . New York: Wiley.

Mitchell W. C. Virginia, Rochester and Bloomington: Twenty-five years of public choice and political science *Public Choice* vol. 56 pp. 101–119 1988 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF00115751>

Moe T. M. On the scientific status of rational models *American Political Science Review* vol. 23 pp. 215–243 1979

Moe T. M. Power and political institutions *Perspectives on Politics* vol. 3 pp. 215–233 2005

Monroe K. R. 1991 The theory of rational action: Its origins and usefulness for political science . In Monroe K. R. (Ed.), *The economic approach to politics: A critical reassessment of the theory of rational action* (pp. pp. 1–23). New York: HarperCollins.

Monroe K. R. Paradigm shift: From rational choice to perspective International Political Science Review vol. 22 pp. 151–172 2001 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0192512101222002>

Monroe K. R. 2005. Perestroika! The raucous rebellion in political science . New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Olson M. 1965. The logic of collective action . Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Ordeshook P. C. 1990 The emerging discipline of political economy . In Alt J. E., ed. Shepsle K. A. (Eds.), Perspectives on positive political economy (pp. pp. 9–30). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511571657.003>

Ostrom E. 2005. Understanding institutional diversity . Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Ostrom E. Converting threats into opportunities PS: Political Science & Politics vol. 40 pp. 3–12 2006

Ostrom E. 2007 Institutional rational choice: An assessment of the institutional analysis and development framework . In Sabatier P. A. (Ed.), Theories of the policy process (2nd ed., pp. pp. 21–64). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Riker W. H. 1962. The theory of political coalitions . New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Riker W. H. 1990 Political science and rational choice . In Alt J. E., ed. Shepsle K. A. (Eds.), Perspectives on positive political economy (pp. pp. 163–191). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511571657.008>

Riker W. H. Ordeshook P. C. A theory of the calculus of voting American Political Science Review vol. 62 pp. 25–42 1968

Shapiro I. 2005 Problems, methods, and theories in the study of politics . In Monroe K. R. (Ed.), *Perestroika! The raucous rebellion in political science* (pp. pp. 61–76). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Shepsle K. A. Losers in politics (and how they sometimes become winners): Riker's heresthetic *Perspectives on Politics* vol. 1 pp. 307–315 2003

Shepsle K. A. Bonchek M. S. 1997. *Analyzing politics: Rationality, behavior and institutions* . New York: W. W. Norton.

Shepsle K. A. Weingast B. R. Positive theories of congressional institutions *Legislative Studies Quarterly* vol. 19 pp. 149–179 1994 <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/440423>

Simon H. A. A behavioral model of rational choice *Quarterly Journal of Economics* vol. 69 pp. 99–118 1955 <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1884852>

Simon H. A. 1957. *Administrative behavior: A study of decisionmaking processes in administrative organizations* . New York: Free Press.

Simon H. A. Human nature in politics: The dialogue with political science *American Political Science Review* vol. 79 pp. 293–304 1985

Tsebilis G. 1990. *Nested games: Rational choice in comparative politics* . Berkeley: University of California Press.

Walt S. M. Rigor or rigor mortis? Rational choice and security studies *International Security Studies* vol. 23 pp. 5–48 1999

Wildavsky A. The political economy of efficiency: Cost-benefit analysis, systems analysis, and program budgeting *Public Administration Review* vol. 26 pp. 292–310 1966 <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/973301>

10.4135/9781412979351.n5