

Book analysis: the science of muddling through

[Science](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Introduction

This article discusses two different strategies for comparing policies. The first strategy, Lindblom entitles Root, or Rational-Comprehensive Lindblom refers to the second strategy as Branch, or Successive Limited Comparisons. After a brief explanation of the two systems, he goes on to argue the superiority of the Branch system over the more commonly discussed Root system

Root

The Root approach, or Rational-Comprehensive, is best utilized for more simple problems, according to Lindblom, due to the necessitation of massive intellectual capacities and sources of information. He states that this approach is generally not correct for policy analysis, as time and money are restrictions in these scenarios. He also states that public agencies are effectively instructed not to practice the root method, due to political or legal constraints. Ironically, the common literature tends to preach formalization of this method. This leads to many practitioners acting against the philosophy commonly published.

Lindblom lists the characteristics of the Root approach as the following:

- Clarification of values or objectives distinct from and usually prerequisite to empirical analysis of alternative policies.
- Policy-formulation is therefore approached through means-end analysis: First, the ends are isolated, then the means to achieve them are sought.
- The test of a “ good” policy is that it can be shown to be the most appropriate means to desired ends.

- Analysis is comprehensive; every important relevant factor is taken into account.
- Theory is often heavily relied upon.

As this theory is often discussed, Lindblom assumes it is familiar to the reader and shifts his focus to explaining and clarifying the alternative. Most of the article revolves around the Branch approach, or Successive Limited Comparisons.

Branch

The Branch Approach, or Successive Limited Comparisons is the approach Lindblom claims most administrators use for their approach to understanding complex problems. Lindblom assigns the following characteristics to the Branch approach:

- Selection of value goals and empirical analysis of the needed action are not distinct from one another but are closely intertwined. Since means and ends are not distinct, means-end analysis is often inappropriate or limited.
- The test of a “good” policy is typically that various analysts find themselves directly agreeing on a policy (without their agreeing that it is the most appropriate means to an agreed objective).
- Analysis is drastically limited:
- Important possible outcomes are neglected.
- Important alternative potential policies are neglected.
- Important affected values are neglected.
- A succession of comparisons greatly reduces or eliminates reliance on theory.

The Branch approach could be illustrated as continually building out from the current situation, slowly, by small degrees, one step at a time. Lindblom then elaborates on the Branch approach throughout the remainder of the article.

a. Intertwining Evaluation and Empirical Analysis In this section, Lindblom explains how the Root method breaks down its handling of objectives and values. He states that clarifying values prior to investigating alternative policies produces several problems. The first problem is that citizens, congressmen, and public administrators frequently disagree on many critical values.

Second, even when an administrator opts to choose his own value set for guidance, he often will not know how to rank conflicting criterion. A third problem arises concurrent to the previous two " Social objectives do not always have the same relative values. " These common problems often lead administrators to ask a question like the following: " Given the degree to which we are or are not already achieving the values of good public relations, is it worth sacrificing a little speed for a happier clientele, or is it better to risk offending the clientele so hat we can get on with our work? "

The answer, of course, varies according to the situation. The particular difficulty with values is the issue with attempting to state marginal objectives in forms other than particular policies. This leaves administrators attempting to choose between policies that offer different marginal combinations of values. Lindblom closes this argument with two summarizing points. First, for complex problems, the Root system is impossible and irrelevant, while the Branch method is possible and relevant.

The Branch method is possible because the administrator does not need to attempt to analyze any values except those where the alternative policies differ, and this differentiation is only notable marginally. This drastically reduces the need for collecting information on values or objectives, which keeps the capacity for comparing values within reason.

b. Relations Between Means and Ends Generally, and according to the Root method, decision-making is considered to be a means-ends relationship.

The means are to be evaluated and selected depending upon the ends which is selected independently and before choosing the means. But this is difficult unless the values have been agreed upon and are stable at the margin. This relationship between the means and the ends does not exist with the branch method, as both are chosen simultaneously.

c. The Test of " Good" Policy Under the Root method, a decision can be considered correct if it can be shown to attain some specified objective. This objective must be defined beyond just describing the actual decision.

If administrators cannot agree on the objectives, the Root method offers no test. For the Branch method, the test is agreement on the actual policy, which may be possible even when agreement on values has proven impossible. Different ideologies can agree on different policies, even if the agreement is based on different reasoning. Lindblom states that " agreement on policy thus becomes the only practicable test of the policy's correctness. " The Branch method relies upon agreement whenever possible.

d. Non-Comprehensive Analysis It is impossible to take every important aspect of a problem into consideration unless the problem is very narrowly

defined, therefore limiting analysis. Simplification of complex problems is imperative.

Lindblom illustrates that under the Root method, simplification is achieved systematically through limitation of policy comparisons to those policies that differ in relatively small degree from policies presently in effect. It is only necessary to study the aspects in which the alternatives and their consequences differ from the current norm. This limitation reduces the alternatives under consideration and simplifies the investigation of each of these alternatives.

It only becomes necessary to study the respects in which the proposed alternative and its consequences differ from that norm. i. Relevance as Well as Realism In the west, policy analysts tend to limit their analysis to marginal differences in policies that are chosen to differ incrementally. Democracies tend to change policies incrementally. By simplifying the policy by limiting the focus to slight deviations, the most value is made of available information. " Non-incremental policy proposals are therefore typically not only politically irrelevant, but also unpredictable. "

Another way to simplify analysis is by ignoring important potential consequences of the possible policies, and also ignoring the values associated with those neglected consequences. Even if the exclusions are made at random, the policies may be formulated more intelligently than by attempting to achieve a comprehensiveness which is too extensive. ii. Achieving a Degree of Comprehensiveness The potential for losing important values is present in any organization. The benefit of a hypothetical division of

labor is that every important value has its own watchdog; these watchdogs can guard their respective interests in two ways.

First, they may redress damages done by other agencies. Second, they may anticipate and avoid injury before it happens. In the United States, no part of government attempts comprehensive policy overviews on things such as income distribution, yet a policy evolves. This incremental policy-making pattern fits with the multiple pressure pattern. When this particular type of policy-making model is followed, it is easier for one group to anticipate the moves of another group. It is also easier for these groups to make adjustments for injuries already accomplished.

Administrative coordination occurs as each of these agencies adjusts its policies according to the concerns of the other agencies in a fragmented form of decision-making. Branch method exclusions are deliberate and systematic, yet it does not necessarily disregard long-run considerations. Sometimes the only way long-run objectives can be given enough attention is through neglecting the short-term considerations. e. Succession of Comparisons The last element concerns the comparisons. These comparisons proceed in a chronological order. When the policy maker uses a succession of incremental changes, serious lasting mistakes can be avoided.

First, he learns from past sequences of policy steps, and gains knowledge of the probable consequences of similar steps. Second, he can avoid big jumps that may require predictions he does not possess the knowledge to adequately make. This is because he never expects his policy to be the final resolution. Third, he is able to test his previous predictions as he slowly moves on to the proceeding steps. Fourth, past errors can be fixed relatively

quickly. For policy-making purposes, the analyst need only know the consequences of each of the policy aspects as they differ from the others. iii.

Theorists and Practitioners

The Branch system explains why administrators often feel that outside experts are not helpful and would rather work off of gut instinct than following the advice proposed by theorists. Lindblom gives two reasons why theory can have limited applicability in policy-making. First, it is greedy for facts and can be construed only through a great collection of observations. Second, it is generally insufficiently precise for application to a policy process that moves through small changes. Only in restricted areas is economic theory precise enough to become particularly helpful when resolving policy questions. v. Successive Comparison as a System Lindblom concludes that the Branch system is indeed a legitimate system, despite its imperfections.

He reminds the reader that the Branch method lacks a built-in safeguard for all relevant values, and it may lead the decision-maker to overlook potential policies simply because they are not suggested. One of the benefits of clarifying this method is “ the light it throws on the suspicion an administrator sometimes entertains that a consultant or adviser is not speaking relevantly and responsibly when in fact by all ordinary objective evidence he is. While much of organization theory argues the virtues of common values and agreed organizational objectives, for complex problems in which the root method is inapplicable, agencies will want among their own personnel two types of diversification: administrators whose thinking is organized by reference to policy chains other than those familiar to most members of the organization and, even more commonly, administrators

whose professional or personal values or interests create diversity of view... so that, even without a single agency, decision-making can be fragmented and parts of the agency can serve as watchdogs for other parts.

Conclusion

Lindblom's argument basically attempts to legitimize the decision-making processes that are already frequently in use. He points out a gap between the theory advocated by policy academics and the real-world problems faced by decision-makers. He explains how and why the current work-around is legitimate and worthy of acceptance. The Branch method, as he calls it, simply needs to be recognized as having merit. By pointing this out and attempting to define the Branch method and its attributes, he is opening the door for academics to begin theorizing on this method, as well.