

## **When Is a State with Bureaucratic Politics Representable as a Unitary Actor?**

*Christopher H. Achen, University of Michigan: mimeograph, 1989, 34 pp.*

When is a state with bureaucratic politics representable as a unitary actor? When the decision-making process corresponds to the “focal actor” model. [advisers advise... leader decides]

Why and how do we get there?

The “unitary rational actor” issue derives from the realist paradigm, which holds that the state can be viewed as a unitary rational actor, a single intelligent agent pursuing its interests. Indeed, according to the realists, the pressures of the external environment so dominate foreign policy decision-making that policy differences among policymakers are swamped by common perceptions and goals. Domestic considerations are set aside in favor of focus on the international system. And irrational actors are overcome by the impact of reality.

The problem with this approach is that it assumes away the complexities of the state’s internal decision processes. Hence the criticisms of “bureaucratic politics” scholars, like Allison, influenced by behavioral organization theories of Simon, March & co. They claim that states make decisions under constant and contradictory competing bureaucratic and domestic interests, often unrelated to the international problem at hand, and that therefore the unitary actor is nowhere to be found.

The most important theoretical claim of these critics is that the concept of a collective utility function cannot be defined. This argument is based on Arrow’s theorem (1963) according to which if one wanted a social choice mechanism which would (1) use conventional ordinal preferences information, (2) aggregate an arbitrarily diverse set of preferences, and (3) respect a unanimous consensus, then the only mechanism which would be rationally coherent across successive choices was... dictatorship.

In other words (Cyert and March): “Since the existence of unresolved conflict is a conspicuous feature of organizations, it is exceedingly difficult to construct a useful positive theory of organizational decision making if we insist on internal goal consistency. As a result, recent theories of organization objectives describe goals as the result of a continuous bargaining-learning process. Such a process will not necessarily produce consistent goals”.<sup>1</sup>

As Achen puts it: “thus the unitary rationality assumptions that support so much powerful theorizing [sic] seemed to be contradicted both by the logic of pure theory and by the facts of everyday bureaucratic life”<sup>2</sup>. Something had to be done...

Stunned by this perfidious attack, the realist defense, alas, proved wholly ineffective. They argue that consensus and presidential dominance typify American foreign policymaking. But consensus of values has nothing to do with consensus on policy options. Furthermore, dominant decisionmakers provide no guarantee of logically coherent outcomes.

“In summary, then, realist thinking is presently without serious intellectual micro-foundations. Standard descriptions of the governmental process seem to contradict it, and conventional collective choice theory appears to make a defense impossible”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cyert and March. 1963. *A Behavioral Theory of the Firm*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, p. 28

<sup>2</sup> p. 5

<sup>3</sup> p. 8

Who will save the Queen???

Well, Achen notices a weakness in the critics' argument: the claim that inter- or intra-bureaucratic decisionmaking does not generally produce consistent goals is "often asserted but never demonstrated". "The argument of this paper is that, far from being in contradiction to unitary rational decisionmaking, bureaucratic politics will ordinarily produce it".

The argumentation of Achen is twofold.

First, he shows that, around the world, the dominant foreign policy decisionmaking apparatus is "the focal actor process". This process involves advisors, who... advise, and the "focal actor" who... decides. "The influencers move first. They offer a schedule of rewards to the decisionmaker for moving the outcome toward them in the space of alternatives (equivalently, they threaten to punish if the decisionmaker moves it away). In doing so, they take account of the "anticipated reaction" of the decisionmaker. After the prospective reward schedules are announced, the decisionmaker chooses and collect the rewards".<sup>4</sup>

Second, he sets up a most-simple-[sic]-actually-ten-page-long math model which [magically] shows that "under certain assumptions, the result [of such a process] is a unique equilibrium with a "rationalizability" [sic] property: collective decisions are representable by a cardinal utility function that is a weighted average of the preferences of the actors involved, with the weights proportional to actors' power to influence the focal actor. A state that makes decisions in this fashion [supposedly most of them] is representable as a unitary rational actor."<sup>5</sup>

Well.... In my view, behind the mathematical veil lies a very basic tautology: assuming that you have a chief and rational actors, it is not difficult to conclude that then the decisions taken are consistent and rational. I see three further difficulties with this approach.

If the decision derives from the "weighted average of the preferences of the actors involved, with the weights proportional to actors' power and influence the focal actor", this focal actor has, by and large, no leeway: he is a **broker**, not a leader (and even more, a *fair* broker!).

Moreover, there is *a priori* no reason why each actor (advisor) would not be a 'broker' himself of the positions of his own fellow advisors (or whatever name we give to people down to him on the hierarchical ladder), and so on down the 'pyramid'. If the leader is a mere -but fair- broker of interests, any bureaucracy would approach a perfect democracy. This is the precise reason why the Soviets claimed (and maybe believed initially) their bureaucratic system was democratic, because it was *theoretically* designed this way. In this perspective, Achen's argument is quite disconcerting.

If, on the contrary, the 'focal actor' has some leeway, then the role of other actors is secondary (whether they are rational or not might even not matter) and the whole idea of rationality and unity is based on his shoulders, which does not obviously fit with my intuition. Finally, why is it that the "weighted average of the preferences of the actors" has anything to do with the best rational option regarding international problems?? There seems to me to be an abuse of language here, "rationality" being used to both describe the ability of the "actors" to define and manage their interests and to describe what would be a smart political decision. I fail to see how this so-called theory proves they harmoniously converge.

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<sup>4</sup> p. 24

<sup>5</sup> p. 32