Bendor, J. and T. H. Hammond (1992). "Rethinking Allison's Models." American Political Science Review 86(2): 301-322.

Introduction

Graham Allison formulated three models of governmental decisionmaking: a rational actor model(I), an organizational process model(II), and a governmental politics model(III). These models have been very influential in political science. Bendor and Hammond develop a typology to classify these three models and critique them. They make five arguments:

1) it is difficult to determine what Allison's assumptions are,
2) his hypotheses are not derived directly from the assumptions,
3) several key propositions in model 2 are incorrect,
4) his first model is to simple, and his third model is too complex, and,
5) Allison misinterpreted parts of the three literatures underlying his models (rational choice theory, organization theory, and bureaucratic politics)

A typology of models

Four different kinds of assumptions play a part in Bendor and Hammond's typology: the number of actors, whether they have the same or different goals, whether they are perfectly or imperfectly rational (a.k.a. bounded rationally), and whether or not they have complete information. (See figure 1 on page 303).

Allison's first model involves 1) a single decision maker, 2) with the same goals, 3) who is perfectly rational, 4) and has complete information. They suggest that this is too simple, and that Allison should have considered the possibility of incomplete information or imperfect rationality.

His second model has many decisionmakers with the same goals, but who are imperfectly rational and who have incomplete information; however, sometimes, he seems to imply that some of the decisionmakers have different goals. They suggest that he should have considered perfect rationality in this model also.

Finally, his third model has multiple decisionmakers with conflicting goals, but it is unclear whether they have perfect or imperfect rationality.

Analysis of model 1

B. and H. claim that rational actor models should specify two things: attributes of the decisionmakers (the decision-theoretic component), and attributes of the strategic interactions (the game-theoretic component). They critique his model for assuming excessively simple decisionmakers, and ignoring the attributes of the strategic interactions. His model is too simple because it only assumes a single goal, whereas this is not an intrinsic property of rational models. Moreover, he assumes a single time period, instead of multiple time periods. Furthermore, he ignores the problem of uncertainty. Finally, he has no equilibria or games in his model.

Analysis of model 2

B. and H. also take issue with Allison's interpretation of March and Simon's bounded rationality. Allison assumes that the simple decision rules used by imperfectly rational agents lead to standard operating procedures that sharply limits behavior, and thus leads to simple behavior; they argue that simple rules can lead to complex behavior. Allison also assumes that because individual decisionmakers are boundedly rational, organizations must also be. They argue that organizations can overcome bounded rationality to some extent.

Analysis of model 3

B. and H. have four criticisms of model 3:first, it misconstrues nature of executive branch policymaking; second, it says little about the fact that policymaking takes place within a hierarchy; third, his model is not very precisely formulated; fourth, it is simply too complex to determine the role and impact of each variable, relationship, and assumption.

Their first criticism is most developed, and involves several arguments: they argue that policymaking in the executive branch does not proceed via bargaining, since policymakers do not necessarily have different goals, a president does not need to bargain, his subordinates do not necessarily have informational advantages, nor do they have political support outside the executive branch.

Conclusions

In summary, B. and H. claim that Allison's models are not rigorously formulated, conclusions are incorrectly derived or do not follow from the models, and that the empirical tests are ambiguous. Allison's book is a good starting place for thinking about alternative explanations, but should not be used as a complete guide. Models should be well-developed, well grounded in the literature, state assumptions clearly, and used to rigorous derive implications which can be tested through empirics.