Chapter 1
Understanding Policy Decisions

Abstract The point of departure of the analysis is the recognition that major policy change is extremely difficult. However from time to time this actually happens and therefore it seems necessary to understand when and how this is possible. After a short excursus on the special characteristics of contemporary public policies, four different theoretical models of how decisions are taken are presented and discussed. The conclusion is the definition of a conceptual framework specifying which are the variables that influence policy outcomes and in particular the possibility to adopt non-marginal policy change.

Keywords Decision · Public policy · Incrementalism

1.1 The Decisional Problem

We live in difficult times. "Making the necessary reforms", as any government in the world knows all too well, is easier said than done. Taking decisions able to significantly alter the way collective problems are tackled, is particularly difficult in all democratic regimes.

The arguments used to explain this difficulty in governing and innovating usually mention the lack of agreement among the societal actors about the goals, the increasing level of institutional fragmentation, the difficult relationship between politics and administration, the fact that the coordination between the different public bodies does not work well or that the implementing procedures can put at risk what was established in the decisional phase, both as regards timing and costs. This list could of course continue.

What current explanations often have in common is the fact they resort to arguments at the level of the system. If it is so difficult to make decisions—especially important ones—there must be something wrong at a general level, making it necessary to change some institutional or political features that hinder what is needed. This is the so-called *macro-negative* approach that searches for and finds

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the general causes of the malfunctions of the political-administrative system (Dunn 1981, pp. 53–54). As Robert Putnam taught us when explaining the efficiency differentials of institutions between Northern and Southern Italy (Putnam 1993), such features can be generated by a very long history.

This general, systemic nature of the reasons for failure has various effects. In the first place, because it refers to features that everyone knows, it seems plausible and persuasive: we all tend to prefer short explanations of phenomena rather than find the specific cause for every single one. Secondly, it generates a feeling of dismay: if changing what should be changed is so difficult, maybe it's worth giving up. Political apathy is also due to this feeling of impotence. Finally, if the reasons that make it so hard are at a systemic level, it follows that the innovators, or presumed as such, are free from any responsibility for failure: we do in fact tend to forgive the leaders we like for not keeping their electoral promises, blaming the general features of the system for the negative outcomes.

However, there are two objections that cannot be easily overlooked.

The first is that many of the features under suspicion are actually constituent, even fundamental, characteristics of modern democracies, of the political systems that try to lead highly differentiated societies.

Just to give an example, institutional fragmentation is the other face of decentralization and federalism. It would be totally pointless to expect that the rise in resources and legal powers of the sub-national governments has no consequences at the level of the decisional system. But this does not mean that federal states cannot make reforms, as some superficial observers are tempted to say, or even that to do so is more difficult than in unitary centralised states: who would claim that decisional efficiency is lower in Switzerland—one of the most decentralised countries of the planet—than in Italy? And in any case the trend towards greater decentralisation is widespread in all western democracies, and not only there (Marks and Hooghe 2003).

So, the decentralization of responsibilities, the separation of powers, citizens' guarantees, the opportunity to use direct democracy and the resort to the judicial system against a decision of the public authorities, represent some of the basic elements of modern democracies. Of course these features do have a price, at least at the decisional level, but they also definitely have benefits that are even more important, like the impetuous socio-economic development of western democracies in the past century proves. This is especially true if compared to the much more modest performance of authoritarian and centralized regimes, even when they resorted to planning and coordination tools that on paper should have been a lot more efficient.

As Charles Lindblom teaches us, societies and political systems based on preferences and interactions tend to work better than societies based on the reason: they recognizes the dangers of human failure, do not expect to know what people's real needs are simply going by some theory, but are based on the need to supply suitable answers to citizens' preferences even when they are contradictory or irrational (Lindblom 1977, Chap. 19, pp. 247–260).

Or, to quote Luigi Bobbio, "democracy doesn't live in Gordium" in the sense that if deciding also means "to cut", to discard some of the alternatives, "this doesn't mean that the most effective tool for this operation is a sword, or its modern equivalents, whether they be the will of the majority or the rationality of a leader-manager". Actually, says the author, to follow the example of Alexander the Great who cuts the knot rather than undo it, is not necessarily a good thing: those who behave like this "are not in a better position to conquer Asia, like the young prince of Macedonia, but simply risk to go nowhere" (Bobbio 1996, p. 8).

The second problem we have to face is that, in spite of their plausibility, "macro-negative" explanations don't always work. Important reforms do take place also in systems with similar features to the ones considered the cause of immobilism. Sometimes important decisions are made in a short amount of time and with acceptable costs. The macro explanations of decisional blockages resemble the well-known myth according to which a bumblebee should never rise from the floor. To recall Dunn, we need a *micro-positive* approach to discover the specific circumstances under which important decisions are taken, also in order to check their transferability to other contexts.

The fact is that if the systemic features considered the cause of decisional inefficiency are often the other side of democracy, and if they still do not fully explain what actually happens (since important decisions are made and implemented), it follows that even the therapies identified to cure decisional block syndromes, delays and costs of non-decisions are not suitable at all. These therapies are based on a mix between the attempt to increase coordination in the decisional process, an element that belongs to the rational decision making model that we will present in Sect. 1.4.1, and the advocacy of inclusive strategies open to the participation of all those interested that we will discuss on Chap. 6. Consistently with their structure, current explanations of failures search for general therapies, only sometimes distinguishing the different types of policy decisions. This could be a pointless struggle since it is legitimate to suspect that it is probably impossible to find a single institutional solution for a whole set of decisions.

On the contrary, it is necessary to go further in-depth in the analysis of the decisional processes to identify the basic elements that could explain why certain results are achieved.

This is the path we will follow in this book.

To do this, we will unwaveringly take one point of view that will guide us throughout the whole book. We will put ourselves in the innovator's shoes, namely the person who intends to change the content of a public policy in a non-marginal way. Chapter 6 will in fact introduce the different strategies available to the innovator to achieve his/her goals. In other words, even if it is obvious that the features of the system within which each single decisional process takes place influence the outcomes of the process itself, they do not completely determine the decisional field. In most cases, general conditions being equal, it is the combination of the different elements of the process that explain the success or failure of the attempt to reform.

This book aims to propose a conceptual framework that allows understanding decisions in the public sphere. In this sense, the book has an explanatory function, meaning it defines the variables that can influence the processes and therefore (contribute to) determine the outcomes. Such a framework can be used to explain events of the past but can also be used in a prescriptive way in order to define the courses of action an innovator must adopt to accomplish his/her project. This means to try and answer the question whether the project itself is feasible from a decisional point of view and check if there are elements that can hinder the adoption of the decision. From a prescriptive point of view, it means to understand what it is necessary to do in order to make the decision possible.

We must point out two further aspects.

First of all, the conceptual framework cannot provide any information about the quality of the proposal. It cannot tell us if it is a good idea to tackle that specific policy problem with that specific solution. The solution itself may not be suitable to achieve the goal, or it may not be worthwhile (or may even be self-defeating) trying to solve that problem at all. Understanding the dynamics of the decisional process does not mean that one is immune from making mistakes.

However, and it is the second point, a good deal of innovative projects in public policies fail, in the sense that they do not reach the implementation phase, because the process has been badly managed. In other words, the correct application of the analytical framework suggested in the following pages tries to avoid decisional failure but does not guarantee a substantial success.

This does not mean that we want to introduce a "science" of decisions, meaning that we have identified laws able to foresee what will happen. As we will mention again, quoting Aaron Wildavsky, one of the founders of public policy analysis, the discipline is more "art and craft" than science, strictly speaking (Wildavsky 1979). The ability to lead a public policy decision through the many difficulties it will come across requires a lot of *bricolage* and can be based on very few certainties. However, identifying the main elements that contribute to the outcomes, doing a bit of conceptual cleaning up and mostly, warning against the sweeping generalisations that abound in this field, can help in avoiding major mistakes and identifying possible alternative courses of action.

1.2 What is a Policy Decision

The focus of the book is the concept of "policy decision", so it is from here that we need to start. The problem would be quite simple if we were to only consider the etymology of the word decision. To decide—from Latin *de-coedere*—means to cut, to eliminate the available options till only one remains. To decide, therefore, would be synonym of to choose, and decision a synonym of choice. Every day, we all make a lot of decisions, sometimes consciously and more often unconsciously (or, better said, automatically). This implies that there are some **alternatives** for many of the actions we carry out. As soon as we wake up in the morning we can choose whether

to drink coffee, tea or a glass of whisky but this means that we have all three drinks available at home, or that there is a café nearby. However, it is absolutely clear that we cannot decide to wake up: waking up is the result of a natural process that happens independently from our will. Just like we can decide to commit suicide by jumping out of a window or, less tragically, to take a dive from a springboard, but we cannot change our mind half way through: gravity does not allow us to.

These examples highlight some essential elements: decision implies an **act of will** and the existence of alternatives. When one or the other lacks, there is no decision.

The most obvious example of the importance of the act of deciding is probably the wedding ceremony, where the questions "do you Carlo take Lucia to be your lawful wedded wife" and "do you Lucia take Carlo to be your lawful wedded husband" are explicitly asked. The idea is that in front of an action full of consequences like choosing the person you will probably spend the rest of your life with, it is necessary to clearly express the will to take such a big step, offering the chance to respond negatively.

This example demonstrates what Bobbio wrote (1996, p. 11): "The act of deciding, taken in itself … has little analytical interest and is often obscure at an empirical level". Answering to why Carlo married Lucia, thus explaining his decision, by stating that he did so because he positively answered the question the celebrant asked him, would be tautological and stupid. Actually, the decision was certainly made a long time before and its reasons sometimes are not clear to the two participants either.

This is more true for decisions made in fields other than private life. To make an example taken from 2010 Italian political news, the moment politicians decided to approve a law reforming the way Italian Universities are managed, does not coincide with the final vote of the Senate of the Republic on the text approved by the Chamber of Deputies. The decision was surely made long time before and the reform's content progressively changed also due to the intervention of a great number of actors.

So, together with the fact that a decision implies an act of will and the existence of alternatives, a further fundamental element is represented by the **process** through which the final choice came to light, the sequence of elementary actions and decisions that determined its content.

Studying a decision means to study the decisional processes, the mechanisms through which we "decide to decide" and analyse or exclude possible alternatives before reaching the final result that can also be to "decide not to decide", leaving things exactly as they are.

This last consideration highlights a fourth element. A decision must imply a potential **transformation of the world**: if we decide to drink coffee at home, this means that our coffee supplies will decrease. In other words a decision implies a **content**.

At a first level, the decision can regard the selection of the means available to reach a goal. We can choose to drive our car to work, or to use public transport or, if we have enough time, to walk. We can choose whether to spend our holidays at the seaside or in the mountains, whether to send our children to one school or

another, and so on. In these three examples, the objectives are clear: we have to go to work, we want to have a nice holiday and we wish to give our children the best possible education.

Nevertheless, things aren't always so simple: to really understand the reasons of a decision, sometimes we have to go further back, given the fact that the real decision regards what goals we want to pursue and not the means to choose in order to do so. An example can be a career decision: the problem to solve is not about the available alternatives, but about personal goals. The decision to become a doctor can be driven by the will to be useful to others, by the desire to follow family traditions, by the attractiveness of employment in an intellectually stimulating sector, or just by the idea that this is a profession where it is possible to earn good money. It is quite certain that individual choices to enter the medical school involve a mix of all these different elements but then the real choice, the essential decision, it to define what are the values to pursue that will probably lead to consider completely different alternatives, such as the missionary, shopkeeper, physicist or private banker.

The problem whether the "real" choice regards the means or the goals (that at another level can certainly also be considered means: I want to be rich or I want to help others because that is what my happiness depends on) is clearly crucial in political decisions strictly speaking (MacKenzie 1982, pp. 16–17).

Before moving on to public decisions, it is good to add at least a further aspect that refers to decisions made in private life. Up to now, in fact, we imagined that choices have consequences only for the individual who makes them. But often enough this is not true. Even though individual behaviour is always fundamental in the concept of decision, there are many cases in which the results of the process depend on the actions of different people. Going back to the example regarding marriage, Carlo's wish to marry Lucia would remain such (and probably be a reason of unhappiness) if Lucia didn't agree. This is where the complex problem of how to combine individual preferences comes into consideration.

This problem is crucial for decisions made in the public sphere, that have consequences—direct or indirect, real or potential—on a whole community, may it be the population of a village, of a region, of a country or of the whole planet. At least since the end of absolute kingdoms (but actually even before) and in any case in democratic governments, these are collective decisions, meaning that the interaction of a plurality of individuals is necessary. As we will see in the following paragraph, this has important consequences.

Among the decisions made in the public sphere, the ones that regard public policies are particularly relevant (policy decisions). It is important to underline that they are not the only ones to be made in the public sphere: for example, appointments (through elections or other kinds of designation) to positions with legal authority are equally important.

Policy decisions, however, are certainly the most visible and interesting part of the governing activity for citizens, so it is worth trying to explain what a public policy is in the most accurate way possible.

One widespread definition is the one proposed by Dye (1987, p. 1) who states that a public policy is "whatever governments choose to do or not to do". With the same spirit, (Mény and Thoenig 1989, p. 129) propose the following definition: "a public policy is the product of the activity of an authority invested with public power [*puissance*, in the original version, author's note] and governmental legitimacy".

More detailed is the definition contained in a textbook translated into various languages according to which a public policy is the "connection of intentionally consistent decisions and activities taken from different public actors, and sometimes private ones,….in order to solve in a targeted way a problem which, politically, is defined as collective" (Knoepfel et al. 2001, p. 29).

It is clear that, while Dye, Mény and Thoenig state that public policies are just the activities carried out by public institutions, Knoepfel and his co-authors, even taking their participation for granted, admit that actors can also be private, introducing two further qualifications: the first is that the actions must be consistent, at least in the intentions, and the second that they need to refer to the existence of a collective problem. At a higher level of abstraction, we can define a public policy as a set of decisions and activities that are linked to the solution of a collective problem, meaning "an unrealized need, value or opportunity which…may be attained through public action" (Dunn 1981, p. 60).

Within this definition there are no limitations regarding the consistency of the actions (those who oppose to the problem's solution must also be considered actors of the process), nor the necessary presence of public institutions (even if they probably will be present). Instead, what is crucial is the existence of a collective problem, the outlines of which are inevitably subject to an interpretative activity by the analyst, even if he/she is obviously obliged to take into consideration what the actors think and how they define the problem. Nor are there limitations as to the nature of the problems: in history and in different places, it is totally obvious that there have been important variations of what was considered a collective problem, or better said, a problem requiring public intervention.

The reason why we prefer to choose a wider definition is mainly connected to the ambition of this book, anticipated in the previous pages and that will be further detailed in Chap. 6. As we said, we will unwaveringly assume a point of view putting ourselves in the innovator's shoes. Innovators are those who want to substantially modify the content of a public policy and are not necessarily public actors, even though they almost always try to influence the behaviour of institutions. Assuming a necessary link between government activity and the existence of public policies can hide the fact that behind many policy reforms there are social actors, experts, interest groups, private individuals.

We could actually even go further, asserting that a policy, for being public, only needs the presence of a collective problem: is the fact that many cultural policies are promoted and financially supported by private foundations or companies, so decisive to think that they are not public policies? And also, the invention of microcredit as a tool for development policies in the poorest countries has generally been attributed to the Grameen Bank and to its founder Mohammed Yunus. It is an activity that is mostly carried out by private subjects, but surely the

problem that it is trying to solve is collective, and in fact it receives funding in free grants or soft loans by public institutions and non-profit organizations. This is not the right place to analyse this matter in depth, and in any case, as we will see, the fact that an activity is carried out in the political sphere has important consequences on how decisions are made.

However, the definition we gave allows us to look at the decisions we are interested in, without assuming that we only have to look at the governments' activities.

As a consequence, and remembering that a decision involves an act of will that can regard both the goals and the means and will probably involve many actors, we can define a policy decision as the process of choice between alternative ways to solve a collective problem.

1.3 Typical Features of Contemporary Public Policies

As we just mentioned, the emergence of collective problems, or better said, the recognition that a problem is collective, has been object of modifications in time and in space. What is considered as clearly public in one country, is not in another. For example, the need to save up money to "send children to college" is something natural in the USA, but not in the United Kingdom, and therefore the rise of university fees decided by Tony Blair's Labour government, and later by David Cameron's coalition government, generated harsh discussions in the political and social spheres. On the other hand, in Europe the introduction of a strict legislation aiming at preventing the creation of monopolies and oligopolies, similar to the American one, was considered an inappropriate interference of the State in the functioning of private economy for a very long time.

These differences among countries are real and consistent, but over the last 250 years it has still been possible to witness a development of public policies that allows us to highlight the typical features of the current age. This is clearly an essential step: only by understanding the nature of collective problems and how we can solve them nowadays, we can imagine how an innovator might intervene to introduce a small or big change in public policies.

The starting point is represented by the American and French revolutions and by the gradual but widespread success of the liberal state model. It is in this phase that some of the basic features of the modern public administration are born, some of which are still with us. Max Weber skilfully summarized them in the definition of *legal-rational bureaucracy*. At the basis of this model are the tasks and the tools of the state. The basic challenge the liberal State has to deal with is to ensure public order, at the same time leaving citizens as free as possible to pursue their own interests. For this reason, the tools used are essentially regulatory, aimed at determining individual and collective behaviours, defining general rules that must be respected, or making certain activities possible only after the authorization of the public administrations (permits, licenses, concessions, etc.). The administrative

activity was to be totally dominated by the law so that the liberal State becomes a synonym of ***rule of law***, definition that can basically be summarized as follows: **public authorities can only do what is prescribed, should do everything that is prescribed and they must act only in the way prescribed by the laws approved by the bodies that have legislative power**.

It is important to underline that the XIX century liberal State also carried out activities that were not regulatory in nature: it maintained permanent armies, it built roads, channels and bridges, it organized and sometimes managed public education, and so on. However, it carried out these activities *as if* they were regulatory activities. Tendering procedures for public works, for instance, are, in theory, aimed at selecting the best offer, but in fact the main preoccupation is to strictly follow the rules in order to avoid any suspicion of lack of impartiality in assessing the different offers. From this point of view it is apparent how the delay in the building of the infrastructure is considered a lesser evil than a minor infringement of the formal rules in the selection of the contractor.

Things change, sometimes very deeply, with the *welfare state*, i.e. with the enlargement of the tasks of public powers. This "great transformation" consisted of assigning the State the responsibility to solve the so-called market failures in the production of public goods but, especially, to guarantee economic and social development, full employment, the reduction of citizens' uncertainties through health and social security systems. It is in this phase that administrations grow strongly, as do the resources they absorb (to give an idea, between 1950 and 1985, the public expenditure as a ratio of GDP goes from 35.3 to 47.3 % in Great Britain and from 23.6 to 68.5 % in Sweden). Obviously this transformation entailed a parallel change in the tools of government.

Not only public interests are to be protected by the increasing use of financial transfers (just think about retirement benefits), by the use of positive and negative incentives (in policies aimed at favouring economic development, as well as environmental protection) and through the direct production of goods and services (from education to health), but what is more important, the legislative tools at the basis of the public action change their meaning. From being "conditional programmes"—formulated in the form "if…then" (for example: if specific circumstances occur, the requesting citizen has the right to have the building permit)—they become "goal programmes", in which the objectives to be reached, and not only the legal procedures, are established. This is when *planning* becomes the fundamental form of action of public powers, by basically defining the available resources, their distribution among the different policy fields and the short and medium-term objectives that must be achieved by carrying out all the activities required.

The immediate consequence is the need to enlarge the autonomy and the discretion of bureaucracies, but also to abandon uniformity, that was a distinguishing feature up to that moment. The expansion of the direct production of goods and services by public administrations gives a great impulse to the *decentralization* of responsibilities to sub-national levels, through the creation of new levels of government (for example, regions in Italy, France and Spain), through the

strengthening of the State field offices, and the increase of local administration tasks. This gradual organizational differentiation has two main objectives: the first is to adapt the organizational structure to its functions as much as possible and the second is to multiply the areas in which political control is exerted over the bureaucracy.

All these changes actually happen over a rather long period and, in many cases, without the need to face the problem of defining a new general model. This is partly due to the fact that the State's new tasks did not completely replace the previous ones and that the principles of the rule of law continue to be valid also after the creation of the *welfare state*. If it is possible to clearly identify the exact moment of the process of transition from the absolute state to the liberal state (the American and French revolutions), the same is not true for the transition from the liberal state to the welfare state. It was certainly favoured by important external events (the 1929 economic crisis, the *New Deal* under Roosevelt, and, most of all, World War II), but it happened subtly through a progressive enlargement of public expenditure and taxation.

Therefore, the administrative model of the *welfare state* has less defined features compared to the liberal state. Not only was there no Max Weber able to systematize its essential features, but also the overlapping of new and traditional principles, along with the high differentiation of the functions generated a rather complex situation.

However, some elements of this model are clearly recognizable.

The most important one is the emphasis on **effectiveness**, i.e. on the success of public policies. This represents a distinguishing feature of the welfare state and it becomes the new legitimation model of public power. Even if in most cases this *functional legitimation* does not fully replace the legal-rational legitimation of the previous phase, it is clearly recognizable and represents the basis of public powers during the XX century.

During the last phase of the XX century, however, the *welfare state* model entered a crisis leaving space for a further change that has probably not come to an end yet.

The main reason for the change regards the modification of collective problems and therefore of the tasks assigned to administrations. It is the different nature of the policies of contemporary states that explains the transformation of governmental structures.

As an example, we can consider the following three points:

1. The development of economic globalization, the increase in the markets' dimensions and of the financial market in particular, has weakened many of the tools governments could use to manage the economy; this does not mean that the population's demand for economic development and full employment has decreased nor that governments are considered less responsible for the prevention of and for the exit from economic and/or financial crises.
2. A vast improvement in the knowledge in the field of natural sciences has shown the growing interdependencies between industrial development and

environmental transformations, at a local and at a global level; the "sustainable development" imperative poses very difficult and urgent challenges for governments.
3. The unbalanced global economic development has fostered migration flows as never before, that deeply changed western societies; an open question regards how to guarantee public order, broadly speaking, in a multi-ethnic society where large minorities do not share anymore a lot of the values that were in the past considered fundamental.

These three examples identify the type of policy problems that governments face nowadays. Obviously it is impossible to forecast if and when the present phase will come to an end. However we can try to point out some fundamental features of contemporary policy processes.

The first of these features is the increase in **decisional complexity**. Today we see a growth of the decisional networks, both on the vertical axis (different geographical scales) as well as on the horizontal one (especially relations between public and private actors).

Starting from this last dimension, new types of actors enter the decisional processes. Just think about the creation of independent administrative authorities—bureaucratic bodies that do not respond to elected political representatives—with the task of regulating a series of key sectors, from monetary policy to competition protection, from consumer protection to privacy protection. Or think about the core role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), sometimes composed by professionals as well as by volunteers, in the implementation and sometimes also in the formulation of several public policies, from social services to development aid to the poorest countries. Again, let's consider the expansion of the so-called Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) that act as "watchdogs" over the government's activity, often in relation with the independent authorities we mentioned before. All these new actors join in with the traditional ones and the result is a pluralisation of the points of view inside the decisional processes, increasing the gap between the actual ways in which public decisions are made and what is foreseen by constitutional law.

On the vertical axis, the sum of the two trends towards globalization and territorial decentralization led to the creation of the term *multi-level governance*, needed to indicate how in almost all policy sectors, final results depend on the actions and the decisions made by different subjects operating at different territorial levels: global fora, continental bodies (just think of the European Union), national states, regional authorities, local communities, etc. This means that it is often impossible to identify the authors of the decisions, with sometimes devastating consequences on policy accountability.

A second feature of public policies in the contemporary age regards the increase of **uncertainty**, To say it in a few words, governments often do not know if their

decisions will solve the collective problem they are facing, or if they will make it worse. What is under discussion today is whether the preferred alternative risks generating negative effects (negative externalities, in economic terms) in other fields or even if it is negative for the problem itself. Hence, a series of dilemmas apparently without a solution. Is nuclear energy an effective and efficient answer to development needs, or does it expose to unacceptable risks and/or load future generations with unbearable costs? Is building infrastructures for vehicle mobility (roads, parking spaces, etc.) a way to improve mobility or is it an incentive to the use of private vehicles increasing congestion?

Various factors determine this growing uncertainty.

First of all, it is connected to the increasing decisional complexity that we discussed previously. If the effectiveness of a local policy also depends on what will be established in an international treaty, it is clear that the actors do not control a key element of the issue they have to face and, therefore, their forecasts on the effectiveness of the choice are groundless.

Secondly, the acceleration of the changes caused by globalization processes increases the chances of exogenous shocks making it impossible to foresee if and when the trends will peak and change direction. Financial crises and technological breakthroughs represent examples of the shocks that influence policy effectiveness. But, at a different level and with certainly more serious consequences, who would have said, 50 years ago, that we would have experienced a growth of religious fundamentalisms in the transition from the second to the third millennium?

Thirdly, the development of knowledge and scientific progress widely increased our capacity to identify possible relations between different phenomena without a correspondent increase in our capacity to tackle them. Using a medical metaphor, the development of diagnostic capacities, the ability to identify the different factors at work, has not been matched by a corresponding progress in finding the appropriate therapies.

This means that we have to honestly admit that there are problems we just do not know how to solve, meaning that we are just ignorant about them. The existence of economic theories that are ferociously competitive about the factors that can determine the economic development of a territory, shows that we are just not certain which behaviours are able to reach a widely shared goal.

Finally, and this is the third of the main features of contemporary public policies, we are witnessing an increase in **conflicts** among social groups, among political actors and between citizens and public authorities. Some of these conflicts may be cyclical, meaning that a period in which choices are highly shared is followed by another in which contrasts seem to be more intense. However as regards the relationship between citizens and public authorities, it is reasonable to assume that it is a structural phenomenon. Evidence of this are the opinion polls that in all developed countries witness a significant loss of trust in government. Further evidence is the increasing role, quite novel in the sector of public policies,

played by the courts, that are more and more often called to solve conflicts where social groups criticize the decisions of public bodies. The use of direct democracy is also growing in many countries with successful referendum initiatives. In conclusion, the method to transmit political demand and the ability of the elected representatives to respond seem to have got stuck. This can be the effect of a political system that evolved in a self-referential manner, losing contact with its electors. Or, and more likely, the reasons of the transformation lie in the modification of the values shared by the citizens of developed countries: the loss of trust in an indefinite social and economic progress corresponds to the emergency of new values (the so-called post-materialist values—Inglehart 1977) and in any case, the intolerance of the need for sacrifice (which in some cases means giving up small or big privileges) for a future that we no longer believe in. Cause and effect of these changes is also the progressive de-ideologisation, at least along the lines of the political cultures that developed in the XIX and XX century, and the birth of new identities and new feelings of belonging that are often very ancient and refer to religion, ethnic groups, territorial and linguistic affiliation, and many other dimensions. However that may be, this social fragmentation seems to deeply characterize the world of public policies too and it is certainly at the basis of the conflicts that often take policy makers by surprise.

The typical features of the policy making processes (complexity, uncertainty and conflict) do not only regard large problems with long range consequences. We actually find exactly the same features if it comes to approving a European directive, a national law or the construction of a parking space in an urban area. The NIMBY syndrome (Not In My Backyard), that is the populations' refusal of the localization of a wide range of infrastructures, demonstrates how it is not the size of the intervention that generates conflicts and untreatable problems, but it is the confluence of a series of factors that we will see later.

1.4 Decisional Models

The previous considerations give us very confused image of policy decisions, meaning the processes through which the solutions to collective problems are selected. Hence the need to adopt a theoretical model, i.e. to identify the variables that can be used to investigate the whole class of phenomena that we decided to call "policy decisions" and to make explicit assumptions about the behaviours that influence their outcomes.

As Allison (1971) taught us in his study of the Cuban missiles crisis, the models are "conceptual lenses" we cannot do without and that, implicitly or explicitly, consciously or unconsciously, we use in order to describe and explain the reality.

In the first page of Allison book we find the following quotation by Alexis de Tocqueville:

> I have come across men of letters who have written history books without taking part in public affairs, and politicians who have concerned themselves with producing events without thinking about them. I have observed that the first are always inclined to find general causes, while the second … are prone to imagine that everything is attributable to particular incidents, and that the wires they pull are the same as those that move the world. It is to be presumed that both are equally deceived.

The fact that in order to find a meaning of the world that surrounds us it is necessary to use theory, and not only empirical investigation, can seem counter-intuitive, but it is not less true. In fact we need conceptual models so much, that we even use them without knowing it. As J.M. Keynes said "Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist".

In the following pages, we will introduce four different decisional models. With this term, we intend "an analytical construct that identifies the essential elements" of the decisional process and therefore "the decision maker, his cognitive features, the activities of research for a solution, the modalities and the criteria of the choice and most of all… the relations among these different elements" (Bobbio 1996, p. 13).

These models are often assigned a descriptive value even before an explanatory one, either implicitly or explicitly; but often enough they are also assigned a prescriptive value, meaning that they are used to indicate how decisions should be made if we want to maximize effectiveness and efficiency in the solution of the problem.

In the final paragraph of this chapter, we will present a model that is widely based on one of those proposed in literature, but that includes some elements from the other models and seems to be able to realistically take into account how policy decisions actually work in the real world. The elements that are part of this model will be analysed and operationalized in the following chapters.

1.4.1 The Rational Model

It is traditional to start the presentation of the conceptual models able to represent the decisional process by the so-called rational model.

From Aristotle's logic to the economic planning experimented by communist regimes, passing through most of economic and management literature, the main idea seems to be that the choices made by individuals should be—and usually are—connected to a series of operations.

Basically, according to the rational model, the individual who has to make a decision should:

1. put his/her values and goals in order of priority;
2. know all the possible means to reach the goals;
3. evaluate the consequences of each alternative;
4. calculate the costs associated to the choice of all the available alternatives;
5. choose the alternative, able to maximise the benefits and to minimise the costs.

It is clear that, first and foremost, this is a prescriptive model, as it assumes that the best decision for the solution of the problem is the one that will be made at the end of a process as similar as possible to the one above. As a matter of fact, public and private management manuals contain a large number of prescriptions that refer exactly to this model. Some of them have been mostly adopted for budget and investment decisions, as for example the *Planning, Programming, Budgeting System* in the USA in the 60s or the *Rationalisation des Choix Budgetaires* in France. But the use of the cost-benefit analysis is also explicitly foreseen by national and European regulations in the case of Regulatory Impact Analysis, considered the best way to minimize the risk of placing unjustified burdens on citizens and firms.

Why this model has been and still is so successful?

First of all, this depends on the fact that, as noted by Bobbio (1996, p. 17), it promises to "create a space taken away from politics", in which important choices, not the ones on big options and general goals, but the ones representing the heart of public policies, can be made exclusively at a technical level without requiring long and hard debates. Making the right decision is just a matter of technically defining the form and the parameters of an equation and inserting data in a computer.

But a second reason for this model's success is that it seems to explain everything that happens in the real world of policy decisions and in particular their failures.

In fact, the model assumptions are that (Bobbio 1996, p. 18):

1. a clear separation between aims and means is possible, and the former are fully determined before the latter are chosen;
2. the decisional process can be carried out by a single decision maker or, in any case, by a body able to express organized and not contradictory preferences;
3. the analysis of alternatives and relevant consequences is able dispel the main uncertainty sources;
4. there are enough resources for the analysis and in particular there is enough time to investigate the consequences of all possible options, and even before, to gain the necessary knowledge on the existence of these options.

It is quite clear that the contemporary presence of all these conditions is almost impossible, and therefore we always have a ready "explanation" for any unsatisfying result. There were not enough resources, information or coordination, communication was not appropriate, and so on. Most of the prescriptions that management consultants formulate basically suggest that we have to try and make decisional processes more rational, closer to the ideal model previously described.

And this is where the problem lies.

In fact, if the model were only used from a prescriptive point of view it would probably be useless and quite expensive, but not too dangerous.

The problem is that we all tend to use it from a descriptive and explicative point of view, as an easy way to understand someone's objectives by observing their behaviour. The syllogism is therefore the following:

MAJOR PREMISE: All people wanting A choose X
MINOR PREMISE: Mario choose X
CONCLUSION: Mario wanted A

It is quite clear that the syllogism is based on a condition the (ontological) truth of which we can never be sure about, but cast the first stone if you never thought like this. In everyday life we often think this way, and many times correctly. Adapting an example proposed by Regonini (2001, p. 94), if we see a friend of ours running down the road in a suit and tie, we imagine, and this is totally plausible, that he is late for an appointment.

However, especially in the field of policy decisions, due to decisional complexity, uncertainty of the results and latent or open conflicts, basing the interpretation of what happens on a similar model can lead to a misunderstanding of what happened and, most of all, of why it happened. The search for who is responsible for the 2008 financial crisis shows a continuous fluctuation around the rational model: bankers (or governments) are guilty as they acted irrationally on the basis of incomplete information and inconsistent conditions, or they are guilty as they actually made totally rational choices from their point of view and pursued objectives that were not in the common interest. The idea that the results arose for totally different reasons from the intentions and from the knowledge of a bunch of people is completely absent in the many conspiracy theories that we find in the newspapers or on the internet all too often.

It is obvious that the problem lies in the conditions given by the model and in particular in the assumption that there is one decision maker acting in a unitary logic, perfectly informed about the objectives, the available alternatives and the consequences in terms of costs and benefits of each alternative.

Do we therefore get rid of the good along with the bad and renounce to any explanation of decisional processes based on logic and on the assumption that individuals pursue their own interests?

1.4.2 The Bounded Rationality Model

Not necessarily, according to Herbert Simon (Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences) in *Administrative Behaviour*, published right after the end of the Second World War (Simon 1947).

The rationality of an actor, he says, lies not the fact that he is omniscient, that he/she knows all the objectives, all the alternatives, all the consequences of each alternative, but the fact that his/her behaviour is at least potentially *purposive*,

aimed at reaching a goal, even if this is not completely defined at the beginning of the process. The decision maker will try to behave consistently, but will inevitably suffer from a series of intellectual limits:

1. a limited knowledge of the alternatives available;
2. a limited intellectual capacity (there is a limit to the number of issues or aspects of the same issue that can be contemporarily considered);
3. a limited memory;
4. a limited attention span (the amount of time spent in searching for the solution of the decisional problem cannot go beyond a certain limit).

In such a situation, the rational decision maker looks for **satisfying** courses of actions, or actions that are "good enough" on the basis of the information he has, avoiding any pretence of optimization, i.e. of maximisation of the effectiveness of the solution.

The **bounded rationality model** is, in its essence, the following: the acceptance of the cognitive limits and the explicit adoption of a less strict decisional criterion compared to the one implicit in the rational model. It has a prescriptive value, meaning that it suggests to accept the first alternative that appears satisfactory without searching any further, and a descriptive and explicative value, meaning that it assumes that the decision maker's choice not only needs not to be the one best way to solve the problem, but can also be based on incomplete or even wrong analyses.

This position is even more understandable if one takes into account that Simon especially talks about decisions that are not made by one decision maker, but are created inside complex organizational and institutional contexts and therefore require coalitions. Moreover, Simon highlights how his model can essentially be applied to new and big decisions, while routine decisions are usually made according to standard operating procedures enforced by organizations in order to minimize the chances of making mistakes.

Actually, this kind of mechanism explains a great deal of our individual decisions much better than the previous one, from choosing a new car to choosing the location of our summer holidays. If we had to follow the indications of the rational model, we would risk keeping our old car or staying at home for the whole summer holidays.

This last comment shows how the limited rationality model has got a key element in common with the previous one, meaning the idea that the decision can be referred to an individual able to put his/her preferences in a transitive priority order (according to which if choice A is preferred to choice B and choice B to choice C, then choice A will be preferred to choice C). As shown in the following box, this is not always possible if the decision is made by a collective actor.

This is Condorcet's paradox, later expanded by Kenneth Arrow in the so-called impossibility theorem, according to which it is impossible to create a single social

Condorcet's Paradox

A commission is appointed in order to decide the most appropriate technology for the electric power generation, choosing among solar energy (S), nuclear energy (N) or fossil fuels like oil (O). The members of this commission are one environmentalist, who we will call Green, one technologist, who we will call White and an economist, who we will call Red. They are three rational people, who are fully aware that their opinion may not necessarily prevail and therefore they should have a second option in order to possibly avoid the most negative one of the three. In a logic of sustainable development, Green prefers renewable energies, therefore solar energy, rather than fossil fuels, but he still prefers oil to nuclear energy which he believes implies very serious risks. On the other hand and in a logic of technological and industrial development, White prefers nuclear to solar energy but is however quite in favour of the latter due to its potential compared to the use of oil that is still based on old technologies. Finally, Red, who only considers the cost of the KW/h produced, believes that in the current situation the use of oil is more efficient than nuclear energy, that implies extremely high investments, but that the latter is much better than solar energy, deeply inefficient from an economic point of view. The following matrix summarizes their positions.

	Green	White	Red
First choice	(S) better than (O)	(N) better than (S)	(O) better than (N)
Second choice	(O) better than (N)	(S) better than (O)	(N) better than (S)
Consequence	(S) better than (N)	(N) better than (O)	(O) better than (S)

What happens with a voting? Solar energy has two preferences (Green and White) against oil that only has one (Red). Oil can however count on two votes (Green and Red) against nuclear energy that only has one (White). From the transitive property, it should follow that solar energy is preferred to nuclear energy, but the situation is actually the opposite as we can see from the matrix, with White and Red prevailing on Green.

welfare function through the aggregation of individual preferences under democracy conditions (for further information, see Dunn (1981, pp. 227–230)).

In other words we have to face the challenge to find a model that appropriately represents collective choices.

1.4.3 The Incremental Model

The starting point of Charles Lindblom, the scholar who proposed the incremental model, in an article dated 1959 significantly titled "The science of muddling through", is that the close observation of policy making processes highlights the following recurring features [Lindblom (1959) cit. in Parsons (1995, p. 285)]:

- the values, objectives and empirical analysis of the action to be carried out are not distinct, but closely linked,
- since aims and means are not distinct, the analysis of the appropriateness of the means required to reach the aims is often limited,
- the test a "good" policy must pass is typically the fact that different analysts agree on its adoption, without necessarily agreeing that it is the most appropriate mean for a shared objective,
- the analysis is drastically limited in the sense that (a) important and possible consequences are neglected, (b) important alternative policies are neglected and (c) important values are neglected,
- a series of subsequent comparisons reduces or eliminates any trust in the theory.

The combined effect of these features is that the result of a policy making process actually able to reach a conclusion, is usually a decision departs but a little from the status quo, that is **incremental**. Lindblom wonders if everything only depends on the total irrationality of decision makers, or if it corresponds to some specific and not necessarily negative feature of contemporary political systems. The answer to this question will progressively come to light during the following 40 years and essentially develops at two levels.

First of all, and not differently from Herbert Simon, Lindblom states that the research for absolute rationality, that he calls synoptic, is meaningless as it is impossible to reach and potentially damaging because it can lead to serious and sometimes irreparable mistakes. Actors' cognitive limits, the constraints deriving from the political and institutional context and the impossibility to foresee the insurgence of exogenous shocks are all factors that make the prescriptive usefulness of the rational model minimal and its explanatory value non existing.

Nothing new up to here.

But Lindblom makes a further huge step forward by emphasizing the fact that the choice emerging from the decisional process is almost never an act of will of the single decision maker, but the product of social interaction. All public policy decisions are co-produced by many actors, with different values, objectives and action logics. Even when the choice can be formally referred to an individual decision maker, in selecting the alternatives he/she will have to take into account the preferences and the resources of other actors, in order to avoid the exercise veto powers or sabotages during the implementation of the decision.

More precisely, Lindblom believes that the actors of policy making processes are usually in a situation of **partisan interdependence**, meaning that they have objectives and interests that are in a structural conflict although they need each

other. A typical example could be the absolutely normal case of a decision that has to be jointly made by various public bodies: the representatives of each administration will do their best to maximise the advantages for their administration, but they also know that, in the end, they will have to find an agreement. This configuration explains the decisional criteria and the most likely results of decisional processes: we choose what we can agree upon, therefore we will choose the closest alternative to the status quo, the incremental decision.

Lindblom's model immediately appeared to be highly realistic and it influenced a large number of analyses and empirical researches.

Lindblom actually claimed that not only the analytically superiority of the model, as it was able to better explain what happens in reality, but also its appropriateness from a prescriptive point of view, as it gives useful information to improve the type of analysis necessary to prepare the decisions.

In particular, there have been different versions of the incrementalism of the analysis. The initial choice was to suggest to decision-makers the opportunity to operate by "successive limited comparisons", in order to simplify knowledge needs. This means to proceed sequentially, only assessing the options that depart minimally from the status quo at the same time not taking into consideration the larger consequences of said options. After this, Lindblom proposed a more complex version of the same approach, called "disjointed incrementalism" and "strategic analysis". The most important point, however is the fact that the incremental analysis is, in any case, better that the synoptic rational analysis, because it is aware of its own incompleteness, while the synoptic analysis is equally incomplete, but tends to hide it.

Furthermore, the incremental analysis works also because it is based on the existence of a plurality of actors and the knowledge produced derives from their interaction. This is clear in a specific type of interaction called negotiation: "when a government decides to control salaries in order to fight inflation, the challenge of defining the right level of salaries can go beyond anyone's capacity…. In this case, a form of interaction called negotiation among enterprise representatives, workers and government in a tripartite commission" can define the acceptable salary increases (Lindblom 1980, p. 27). But more in general, directly assigning to the actors the task of generating the analysis that has to inform and influence the decisional process, ensures that the knowledge produced will certainly be relevant for some of them. On the contrary, to expect that the professionalization of the decisional analysis is able to produce more appropriate information and models is often deceitful [for a discussion of this issue, see Lindblom and Cohen (1979)].

In any case, the real importance of interaction among actors is the fact that it determines better results.

First of all, it is not true that the incremental model ignores the need, and sometimes the urgency, of deep policy changes: "a fast-moving sequence of small changes can more speedily accomplish a dramatic alteration of the status quo than can an only infrequent major policy change" (Lindblom 1979, p. 520).

Secondly Lindblom approach goes further beyond the proposal of a methodology for decision making. He explicitly states that a society based on preferences and on interactions tends to work better than one based on reason (Lindblom 1977, Chap. 19, pp. 247–260). In the book *The Intelligence of Democracy*, leveraging on the double meaning contained in the title, he states that understanding democracy means to recognize its intelligence, implicit in the fact that in democratic systems it is possible to have more points of view at the same time, and therefore to surpass the cognitive limits of any unitary actor. Surely, the process resulting from this could seem confused and contradictory, but a brief comparison of performances in terms of innovation, economic development and social equity is sufficient to realize that authoritarian systems have nothing to teach to democratic ones.

Two final remarks.

The first is that, as seems clear, the unit of analysis in this model becomes the decisional process, i.e. the set of interactions through which the final decision is generated. As stated by Bobbio (1996, p. 32) it is not just a matter of observing "the solitary path made by a single decisional centre". This transformation is particularly important because, as we often said and will keep repeating, the point of view assumed in this volume is the innovator's, meaning the actor who tries to introduce a non-incremental change in how a collective problem is dealt with: understanding the context within which his action will be carried out is much more important than prescribing how he should search for the best solution to the problem.

The second remark is that the incremental model is deeply grounded in the political analysis, meaning that it explicitly considers the fact that an important part of the interactions have to deal with the "fight for power", that is to say with the competition to gain an authoritative position and with the need to influence other people's behaviour to achieve one's own goals and interests. All this, in a context where the distribution of resources among actors is always unequal and often very unbalanced.

Even if, the higher the decisional complexity gets, the more decisional processes that take place in the private sphere will tend to be similar to the ones carried out in the public sphere, there is still a strong political aspect in public policy decisions that Lindblom's model clearly highlights when stating that the essential decision making criterion is agreement among actors, meaning the consensus at the basis of authority's legitimation mechanisms in contemporary political systems.

1.4.4 The "Garbage Can" Model

With the fourth, and last, decisional model that we will focus once more on decisions in general, meaning in any organizational context. In brief, this model states that in all decisional situations where there is ambiguity at the level of objectives (badly defined by the actors), of the usable technology (that isn't very clear), and of actors'

participation (that tends to vary in time) the decision derives from the accidental meeting—mediated by the intervention of contingent factors—of problems, solutions, participants and opportunities of choice. This is the core of the model proposed by James March and Johann Olsen in 1979 that they called "garbage-can model". The authors explain the metaphor as follows: "Suppose we view a choice opportunity as a garbage can into which various problems and solutions are dumped by participants. The mix of garbage in a single can depends partly on the labels attached to the alternative cans; but it also depends on the what garbage it is produced at the moment, on the mix of cans available and on the speed with which garbage is collected and removed from the scene" (March and Olsen 1979, p. 26).

It is interesting to see that the starting point of this idea is represented by the consideration that in a private company there are various objectives partly in contrast with one another: to increase sales, to improve the market share, to increase production and profits. Nowadays, we would also add: to decrease debts and to ensure liquidity, to produce dividends for shareholders and especially, to support shareholder value in the market. In other words, even in organizations that the economic theory defines monolithic, like firms, the decisional process actually sees different groups of participants who negotiate to reach an acceptable compromise as regards what decision it is better to make. Of course, this is even more true in political and administrative contexts where public policies are decided.

This plurality of possible goals is translated in a decisional model, widely based on randomness, essentially for two closely linked reasons.

The first is that the actors' preferences are not exogenous but are formed during the process. For example, they depend on the preferences expressed by the other actors: if X, who is my enemy, pushes for solution A, I will oppose it and will bring forward alternative proposals. But they can also depend on a transformation of the context, on the fact that I lost interest in participating, or that other and more serious problems gained importance.

The second is that decisional processes are often carried out over very long periods. It is believed that Keynes answered a critic by saying "When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, Sir?", which means that the longer a decisional process takes, the more likely it is that the same course of action can have different consequences and meanings at different times, and that actors will modify their behaviour. But time also determines another very important effect: actors simply change, some enter and some leave the decisional arena.

Therefore it is the conceptualization of the decisional process, intended as the actions aimed at finding the solution to a problem, that becomes critical: besides problems in search of a solution, we also have solutions in search of problems and participants in search of problems to solve, satisfaction for interests or alliances to create.

Temporal alignment becomes thus the key element in order to interpret results, meaning the combination of a problem and a solution in one of the garbage cans, at one specific moment. This tends to happen accidentally and chance becomes the main cause for the "happening" (as we cannot talk about choice and awareness) of decisions and their outcomes.

The main assumptions of this model are at the basis of the conceptual framework created by John Kingdon, called *multiple stream approach,* to explain how policy issues are included in the political agenda (Kingdon 1984). Basically there are three different streams: the stream of problems, made by those issues someone believes need to be solved; the stream of public policies, a kind of primordial stew where ideas and solutions sometimes emerge, sometimes disappear; and the political stream that determines the importance and urgency of an issue on the political agenda. Sometimes, but not always predictably, the three streams merge, making it possible to deal with that particular issue using that particular idea.

It is quite clear that the *garbage can* model is essentially descriptive and interpretative, and it is able to explain and justify a wide number of situations, especially in the light of the typical features of the policy decisions we mentioned in Sect. 1.3.

However, it would be wrong to think that it does not also contain prescriptive elements.

At a first level and in the event of extremely chaotic situations, it justifies and suggests the idea that, instead of trying to simplify the problem to make it more manageable, it is better to make a random choice, hoping to stimulate a chain reaction that sooner or later will lead to a simpler decisional structure, that we are not able to foresee at present (Grandori 1984).

More in general, the representation of decisional processes as garbage cans stimulates focus on the ways to "create and support identities, preferences and resources that make a political community possible" (March and Olsen 1995, p. 28). Not by chance, the same scholars who elaborated the garbage-can model were central 20 years later in rediscovering institutions as means to provide some order in a world made chaotic by rising complexity.

1.5 A Realistic Model of the Decisional Process

The following chart deliberately simplifies what we can consider the essential features of the four models discussed in Fig. 1.1.

Each one of these models contains important clues to understand how decisions are made. So, the synoptic rational model attracts our attention to the fact that individuals usually try to choose the best solution for the satisfaction of their interests. The bounded rationality model reminds us that our knowledge is imperfect and that we are often satisfied with the first "rather good" solution that we find. The incremental model highlights how most of the decisions, especially in public policies, are the result of compromises among actors with contrasting interests. And, finally, the garbage can model shows how the passing of time is not irrelevant, since it can make the connection between problem and solution either possible or impossible.

We can imagine that, as the complexity of the decision grows, especially intended as plurality of the participants' points of view, the best way to understand

Decisional model	Decision maker	Cognitive conditions	Decisional criterion
Synoptic rational	Unitary	Certainty	Optimization
Bounded rationality	Unitary /coalition	Uncertainty	Satisfaction
Incremental	Partisan interdependence	Partiality	Mutual adjustment
Garbage can	Changeable	Ambiguity	Chance

Fig. 1.1 Decisional models

what happened is to move towards the bottom of the chart. In the light of the features of contemporary public policies this means that we suppose that in most cases neither the rational/synoptic model nor the one proposed by Herbert Simon are able to explain what really happened.

On the contrary, the prescriptive value, in the meaning of giving clear indications on how it is possible to reach the best decision from a specific actor's point of view, tends to decrease, going from the top to the bottom. The comprehensive rational model requires decision makers to make important analytical efforts that are only apparently facilitated by the discovery of techniques like linear programming or costs/benefits analysis and that require the ability to make long-term forecasts. On the other hand, the garbage can model does not contain real indications about how to behave, apart from what we will shortly mention about decisional *timing*.

However, as often repeated, both the analyst and the decision maker need a model to refer to, otherwise they risk not being aware of their own assumptions and therefore suggesting explanations or creating strategies that are inconsistent or contradictory.

For this reason we will make a clear choice towards the incremental model, meaning that we will assume that most policy decisions are made by actors with contrasting interests who need to reach an agreement to achieve their own goals. As we will see, this agreement does not mean that everybody will be happy with the outcome of the process. The basic reason that leads us to prefer the model proposed by Charles Lindblom is that it provides the best representation of the conditions that usually take place in political/administrative contexts. It is not a coincidence that politics has been defined as "the art of compromise" and that not only the creation of alliances within the power élite, but also the citizens' consensus are considered a key element for the stability and effectiveness of political systems. Decisional processes characterized by complexity and uncertainty are basically political, which means they deal with power.

This does not mean of course that Herbert Simon's ideas on one side and March and Olsen's on the other, should not be taken into consideration and cannot enrich the understanding of the phenomena we are interested in.

In particular, Simon not only taught us that each actor has cognitive limits that we have to take into account while interpreting or forecasting behaviour, but he also pointed out that a rational actor does not need to be omniscient, he just has to be *purposive*, trying to reach a goal even if it is not perfectly defined since the beginning of the process. This is why in the following pages we will consider the contributions of the rational political theory and in particular the ones coming from the application of the game theory: the actors of the incremental model also behave rationally.

March and Olsen's work shows how an actor interested in modifying the real world should consider the context the decision develops in and in particular the importance of the moment in which the choice between the available alternatives is made. The flow of events makes the specific connection between problems and solutions possible at time t, while this would not happen at time $t - 1$ nor $t + 1$. The main indication of the model is to pay attention to the *timing* of the decision a point that we will expand somewhat when considering the strategies available for policy innovators.

The incremental model, however, has a fundamental advantage. It explains why decisions made in the public sphere usually do not depart much from the status quo. Therefore, it leaves an open door on the issue of how it is possible to introduce non marginal changes, and this is the exact problem this volume tries to give an answer to. It indicates the type of analysis that those interested in introducing important changes in the ways of solving collective problems have to carry out, since the main features of the model—partisan interdependence among decision makers, mutual agreement as a decisional criterion, limitations to the analysis—are valid regardless of the nature of the problem or of the radicalism of the solutions proposed.

But if the incremental model tells us how the decisional process will develop, it does not tell us, nor it could tell us, what are the decisions that will be made, nor, in specific and general terms, what kind of decisions it is possible to make.

Therefore we have to go beyond Charles Lindblom's conceptual framework and to specify the variables that contribute to determine the possibility of an intentional and non-incremental change of a public policy, of the way to deal with a collective problem.

The model proposed in this volume and that will be explained in the following chapters, can be summarized as follows:

> The outcomes of a public policy decisional process depend on the interaction of different types of **actors** with different goals and roles who, within a **network** that can have different characteristics, exchange **resources** using different **patterns of interaction**, to obtain a **stake**, within a given **decisional context**.

In the Chap. 2 we will concentrate on the actors, on the decisional networks and on the resources, while in the subsequent chapters we will focus on the analysis of the content of the decision, on the patterns of interaction and on the decisional context.

The challenge, or the general objective of this volume, is to understand what specific combinations of these variables (let's repeat them: actors, resources, stake,

patterns of interaction) make non incremental policy decisions possible, within a specific decisional context and from the innovator's point of view, considering that in administrative and political systems actors have important cognitive limits and are bound by the need to reach an agreement.

In an explanatory key, the model is needed to cast light on the elements that explain how it was possible for a specific and important transformation of the ways used to deal with a collective problem to take place (and, after all, this is a common experience, although these events are quite rare). In a prescriptive key, the model suggests to the reformers the type of analysis they have to make to evaluate the decisional feasibility of their proposals.

A couple more warnings.

1. The conceptual framework proposed does not aim to define the features that an institutional system has to assume to secure the decisional feasibility of changes. Clearly, some of the acquisitions deriving from the application of the model implicitly contain proposals of useful institutional transformations in specific contexts or sectors. However, the validity of the model is relevant at the level of the individual decision and the individual decisional process (and therefore also to the decision to transform the institutional system), not at the level of the political system in which they occur. Any inference from the micro-level (where our analysis is placed) to the macro-level is completely undue.
2. As it should be clear, the model does not say anything about the substantial quality of the innovation proposal, meaning that it is not able to predict if it will be able to effectively solve the problem or be the correct solution to face that specific problem. The model assumes that this analysis is carried out by whoever proposes the change before and during the decisional process itself.

Certainly, the idea at the basis of Lindblom's model is that knowledge generated during social interaction is able to significantly enrich the ways in which to deal with collective problems. As we will see in Chap. 6, moreover, there is a whole family of decisional strategies, the "inclusive" ones, that claim to be able to improve the content of decisions. However, this result cannot be assured from the beginning due to the cognitive limits we recalled many times and it is not necessarily true that the solution mostly agreed on is also the most correct. What is probably valid for the system—a society based on preferences and on interactions is generally more likely to solve collective problems, compared to one based on intellect—does not apply to the single decision. In any case, the ontological uncertainty that accompanies many public policies, guarantees that very often effective solutions to several problem simply do not exist.

Our model rather realistically assumes that the innovator proposes the solution to the collective problem even if important modifications may occur between the initial proposal and the final decision. From the innovator's point of view, the decisional problem can be conceptualised as the existence of an unsatisfied

opportunity: the X alternative is available and able to solve problem Y. The analysis of the decisional process is needed to identify the elements that made a specific choice possible (i.e. decisional success).

This decisional success is possibly translated in a substantial failure, meaning that not only the collective problem was not solved, but it even got worse due to the decision made. The model is not able to say anything to this end, as it only explains and assesses the feasibility of the choice. And however, if it is true that sometimes it would have been better not to make any decision at all, it is also true that fighting for a politically (broadly speaking) impossible course of action is certainly not a better alternative.

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