DECISION-MAKING IN A GOVERNANCE CONTEXT: AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

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Abstract
In political science in general and specifically in the field of policy analysis, an eternal question concerns how decisions and policies arise. Just as political science has been influenced by movements such as governance and new public management, the analysis of decision-making has to adapt to new circumstances. Modern societies today are more complex and more polycentric than before and include competing actors that represent different interests. Hence, the need for an inclusive perspective seems obvious. Adding a methodological perspective, it is hard to know when these actions represent expressions from individuals or, alternatively, groups. In other words, when do individual actors’ actions transform into influencing norms, values, and cultures that affect the political system? By reviewing and analyzing earlier research on how decision-making is reached, the overall ambition of this article is to create a framework for analyzing processes of decision-making at local levels. Such a framework, that takes into account both the complexity of modern multi-governance and adds methodological perspectives of macro, micro, and causal mechanisms, can be used in future research to achieve richer pictures of how decision-making is carried out.

Keywords: decision-making, governance, policy, causal mechanism, macro, and micro.
INTRODUCTION

During the last 30 years the public sector in Western democracies has undergone drastic changes. These changes, introduced through such ideas as new public management and policy networks, have meant privatization, decentralization, and policy formation through networks and markets. This has led to the traditional hierarchical model of government steering becoming challenged by a new style where steering is currently done in a complex environment with varying outcomes. In the foreground of the theoretical concepts that capture this described development, governance is found. Most fairly described as a paradigm, it cannot be considered especially bold to argue that governance prevails in research that focuses on decision-making processes in political systems. However, how decision-making should be analyzed when the point of departure is a concept that imply that various actors are involved in steering political development (e.g. Pierre & Peters, 2000; Björk et al., 2003; Hedlund & Montin, 2009; Stoker, 1998) and thereby shape political decision, is still unclear. This also adds some methodological considerations. First, the admission that many actors are involved in decision-making can also be expanded to come to the idea that actors representing different levels of a political system are likely to take part, leading to perspectives of meta-governance (Jessop in: Bang, 2003; Meulemann, 2008). This creates a spatial dynamic that is not restricted to a horizontal context and demands that scholars be careful in their methodological considerations. Taking it to a more abstract level, this will make it necessary to reflect upon the distinction between actors and structure in relation to decision-making (e.g. Bourdieu, 1988; Giddens, 1984; Simmel, 1976).

Neither governance (Rhodes, 1996, 1997) nor the claim for more holistic methodological perspectives (Przeworski & Teune, 1970) are new features in political science. Added to this fact can be that central theories concerning decision-making (Downs, 1957; Simon, 1957; Lindblom, 1959, 1979) make up essential parts of the very core of political science and public administration. This means that a need for additional research in this field is strongly motivated. Traditionally, research on decision-making has been driven either by theoretical or empirical ambitions. This article has another perspective. By deriving ideas governance as a legitimate way to describe modern societies, methodological claims for addressing the vertical variation are brought to the fore. Hence, the purpose of this article is to create a unified framework for analyzing the complexity in decision-making processes. This framework simultaneously needs to cope with the fact that, one the one hand, various actors are involved in this process and, on the other hand, vertical variations exist and need to handle the distinction between actors and structure. Building on this, this article will give one perspective on the following research question: how can processes of decision-making be analyzed at the local levels of political systems?

Clearly, this article needs some sort of delimitation. One measure for reaching this is to restrict the focus to decision-making at a local level. Besides an analytical
argument, which is that the actual output of a political system is most obvious on this level, there are also empirical motives for such a delimitation. In many of the Western democracies, especially the Scandinavian ones (von Bergmann-Winberg, 2001), a large part of the welfare production is carried out by municipalities. In the following sections more elaborated perspectives will be given on both governance and its methodological consequences. This way of increasing clarity will be complemented with some short empirical examples on how decision-making is carried out.

This article will begin with a background description of how decision-making can be viewed. Following that is a presentation and synthesizing of the two elements discussed namely governance and methodological perspectives. They will be discussed in terms of their relevance for decision-making in a local context. By applying the theoretical conclusions of such research the article will result in a framework for how to analyze decision-making processes in a local context. In connection with this, two short empirical examples are given before concluding the article.

**Background perspectives on decision-making**

In short, the policy process could be illustrated as a chain of events:

- **Problem**: First of all we must identify a problem to be solved.
- **Initiation**: At this stage it is about bringing up an issue on the political agenda.
- **Preparation**: In this phase, the policy issue is prepared so that a decision can be made.
- **Decision-making**: Here, a political decision is made and the decision will then be implemented. For our purpose, the phase of decision-making is central.

In attempts to understand these processes, three models have been developed that have dominated political sciences. The first one is the rational model (Simon, 1957). The central aspect of the rational model is fulfilling the goals of the organization. This means that a rational decision-making process is a process where all the options are invented and the one that best fulfills the goals of the organization is chosen. Another theory is Lindblom and Braybrookes’ theory of incremental changes (Lindblom & Braybrookes, 1963; Lindblom, 1965). In short, this theory sees decision-making as a process that involves several steps and in which political decisions are adjusted over time. Both Simon’s and Linblom’s theories have their main focus on the actual decision-making. Other theories, such as pluralism (Dahl, 1961), focus much more on the surrounding environment of the decision-making. For the pluralists, a central mechanism of decision-making is how different actors and interests can shape the
political decisions and be a part of the process. The pluralist theory has had a theoretical development towards network-theory and governance. Relating this to the perspective of governance, it takes its departure in how different actors shape decisions, but combines both the internal and the external system aspects of decision-making. In addition, in a governance perspective, actors can also influence the implementation of a decision.

**DEPARTURE IN THEORY AND METHOD**

Addressing the formulated research question will make two parts necessary. When arguing that the paradigm of governance is the most adequate for describing and analyzing modern societies, a theoretical inventory of this perspective needs to be included. A certain focus will be put on updated ideas of how societies today are steered. The second part follows on from looking at governance’s focus on crucial actors found from different hierarchies. Perspectives having a background in theory of science will be discussed in relation to the distinction of structure and agency and ways to merge these aspects. With the focus being decision-making, an attempt will be made to separate out the surrounding conditions for political changes that *de facto* are carried out by actors.

**Governance**

In the Anglo-American literature, the term government is used to refer to the formal institutions of the state and their monopoly over legitimate coercive power. Government is characterized by its ability to make decisions and its capacity to enforce them (Stoker, 1998). This is challenged by the changes in the public sector. The starting point of the governance perspective is that the traditional hierarchical model for governing is challenged by new forms of organization and steering. The political changes that the public sector has undergone have challenged the hierarchical order. The emergence of new conditions for the organization of society has led to new processes and methods of governing (Kjaer, 2004, Kooiman, 2003). Hedlund and Montin (2009) claim that in a Swedish context this development is a movement from hierarchical governing to interactive governance. They stress that the new type of governance is developing in mutual interaction between different actors (Hedlund & Montin, 2009). Their premise is that the complexity of the governing processes increases as more actors are involved in the policy-making process. In Weber’s ideal bureaucracy, private and public are kept strictly separated and bureaucracy is seen as a neutral implementer of the decisions that the elected representatives have taken (Kjaer, 2004).

Governance refers to a complex set of actors and institutions that are drawn both from and beyond government (Stoker, 1998). This means that in a governance structure policy is created both inside and outside the traditional, hierarchical, political sphere. The traditional view of the policy process and the decision-making
process is that they are created in the political sphere by the central government in parliament or by local governments. Governance recognizes that policies are created and decisions are made in coalitions outside the traditional political system in policy networks and markets.

Governance has blurred the distinction between different actors, particularly the one between private and public actors. The traditional model of government, both on a national and a local level is that it is the agent for providing social services and other common goods. Creating markets where different actors compete with each other also creates a situation where actors will increase in numbers. In a market situation it is not only the citizens and the political sphere that are relevant. We have to add actors such as producers, clients, and customers.

New Public Management (NPM), refers to introducing private sector management methods and market competition into the public sector. This means less government in terms of producing social services and more steering in terms of monitoring and ensuring the quality of the service produced and providing the necessary resources. By creating markets where social services are produced, the public sector becomes disaggregated, which creates a situation with more actors and stakeholders. In the New Public Management perspective, two main theoretical tracks can be identified. One is the business-oriented track, carried out mainly at an internal organizational level, such as in public administrations. The second is the market-oriented track that includes a focus on competition. As mentioned earlier, many NPM reforms have had private firms as a model. This could be described as the business-oriented track. The working principles have taken inspiration from management reform. The aim has been that organizations should resemble a company in terms of working and management. Public administrators are managers rather than bureaucrats. With leaders as managers, there will be an increased focus on management by processes rather than on a traditional, bureaucratic governing.

Introducing a market situation in the public sector, the central aspects of decision-making are competition and customer choice. The market model is the bureaucratic model's opposite. It is not based on an activity to be planned, but rationality is determined by how the actors act, in terms of what product they choose. The market model is based on the assumption that the market provides the best and most efficient allocation principle. Exposing public organizations to competition is seen as a good way to make sure of getting great value for money, flexibility, and speed, and that such activities are conducted in a cost-effective manner (MacCarthaig, 2008; Almqvist, 2006). In a market system there is also an inbuilt mechanism, which is the possibility of financial gain. This possibility creates an incentive to act. Demand can be seen as such an incentive. If there is a demand there is also the platform to offer a product or service. This gives consumers a great influence. They control the demand and ultimately the structure of the market because their choices affect which actors on the market (Hernes, 1985). A part from the political aspect of this, it empowers citizens in terms of their roles as consumers because their choices affect different
structures. It also means that decision-making in the market model is relatively
decentralized (Hernes, 1985). This could be identified as the market-oriented track
identified within the NPM-perspective.

For others (see Rhodes 1996, 1997), governance stands for policy-making in
networks. The central aspect of decision-making in networks is cooperation. The
networks are usually described as self-organizing, where the actors come together
and use each other’s resources. The driving forces behind the networks are the
different set of resources. Rhodes (1997:15) defines networks as “self-organizing,
interorganizational networks characterized by interdependence, resource exchange, rules of
the game and significant autonomy of the state.” In Rhodes’ governance perspective,
there is no monolithic power center. Instead, there are several centers from which
steering is carried out (Rhodes, 1997). Central to this type of network is that they are
self-organizing, there is interdependence between the actors, and there is an
exchange between them in terms of resources. Resource utilization is what creates
the networks. Actor A has something that is valuable to actor B and that the latter
would benefit from, and vice versa. There is also resource dependency between the
actors that make networks self-organizing. The networks are also characterized by
significant autonomy from the state. Montin (2006) argues that relations between
actors in networks are often horizontal, but can also be vertical. This is due to the fact
that the hierarchical governing model is still an important factor when it comes to
decision-making. Networks are often dependent on the state and networks often
exist in the shadow hierarchy. The state’s role is then to coordinate the actors.

For others (see Pierre & Peters, 2000) the hierarchical model for policymaking is still
relevant. The hierarchical model, or the bureaucratic model, is generally understood
as top-down governing. In theory, there is a clear division between those who make
the decisions and those who implement them, which gives rise to a clear division of
responsibilities.

In the classic hierarchical model, the roles of the actors are based on a narrow
definition. In the hierarchical model the administration is distinguished by the fact
that it is independent from any other outside actors. The only dependency that exists
is on the rules and legal system (Peterson & Söderlind, 1993). The purpose of the
bureaucracy and its divisions and rules is to achieve efficiency. The uniqueness of the
bureaucratic organization is that the rules of the bureaucratic organization were
based on technical knowledge and rational thinking, not on the usages and customs
of other forms of rule-governed organization (Smith, 2008). The essence of the
bureaucratic organization is that it builds on its formalization and objective expertise.
Its strength, according to Petterson & Söderlind (1993), is that it can carry out
standard operating procedures in a stable and predictable environment. Organizational principles include everything from how goods and services are produced to how the wider society is organized (Smith, 2008). In this perspective the
degree of flexibility in the model is limited. The bureaucratic principle of
organization means that the government has full control over the means of
production and the result. In this way, efficiency and full control are achieved. The bureaucracy then becomes a means to coordinate production and consumption of what is produced.

Due to the changes described above, different governing styles become relevant. The different models can, at the same time, both overlap and compete with each other. This situation is where meta-governance becomes relevant. Meta-governance is described by Meulemann (2008) as governance of governance. In a situation where the governing is a mix of three governing ideals (hierarchies, the market, and networks) an overall governance structure is needed to coordinate the governing ideals. Meta-governance could be seen as a dynamic combination of three ideal types of governance. Meta-governance is thus a way to coordinate actors in an environment characterized by several governing ideals. Meta-governance can be understood as “negotiated decision-making” (Jessop in: Bang, 2003). In summary, meta-governance can be viewed as an overall governing structure where different parts and the actors' actions are coordinated, implying a need for coping with different vertical dimensions when steering and making decisions in modern societies.

**Methodological perspectives on decision-making**

We have seen how governance has resulted in new challenges for political systems. However, how this has changed the conditions for scholars interested in examining public policy, especially in decision-making, has not been elaborated upon. The methodological consequences of a study object characterized by governance, where government steering involves actors from various political levels, puts a focus on how research in this field can be carried out. Hence, some more methodological perspectives on how to look at decision-making need to be discussed.

Analyzing decision-making is something of a core issue in political systems. Therefore, research in this field needs an understanding of how decisions are reached. A few criteria can be addressed. First, using a more methodological nomenclature, explanations of decision-making processes should address a holistic perspective, meaning that they ought not to be satisfied with identifying patterns but should also try to explain how decisions are causally shaped (Lidén, 2011a). Second, as has been stressed in the discussion above, various types of actors are involved in these types of processes. However, sometimes they are acting individually and sometimes groups of them are speaking with one voice, for example in the form of networks (Rhodes 1997). Research in this area needs to take this into account. Third, actors are always embedded in a milieu. They are, for example, influenced by norms, values, and cultures from surrounding societies. Considering this is crucial for reaching valid results.

In contemporary research in the social sciences, a growing belief is found in methodological individualism (Rothstein, 2005:36-38; Udehn, 2002). The reasons for
applying this type of micro perspectives are often presented in a convincing way, for example: “The key word is ‘individual’. In the social sciences, a satisfactory explanation must ultimately be anchored in hypotheses about individual behavior” (Elster, 2007:36). One of the most obvious consequences of this renewed interest is a particular focus on causal mechanisms (Gerring, 2010). The general idea with this concept is that the phenomena of causal mechanisms are the entities that connect \textit{explanans} with \textit{explanandum} in an explanatory model (Hedström & Swedberg, 1998; Hedström, 2005). A universal illustration of causal mechanisms is provided through the I-M-O model where input (I) is linked with output (O) through an intervening causal mechanism (M). The primary leverage that the introduction of the causal mechanism brings is that, potentially, an additional question can be answered that it was not possible to answer in earlier research. More specifically, this means identifying not only the covariational patterns between \textit{explanans} and \textit{explanandum}, but also explaining how such a relationship is brought about.

There are some important consequences following from this. First, and already implied, a micro perspective is needed for analyzing causal mechanisms (Gerring, 2005, 2007a; Mahoney, 2001) since this makes it possible to open the “black box” and allow a within type of analysis (Gerring, 2007b). Connecting this notion to theories of decision-making, one could argue that the general idea of even illustrating a policy process is to explain, among other things, decisions carried out in a political system (Parson, 1995). Second, the question of whether causal mechanisms are deterministic (Mahoney, 2001) or not is disputed. Taking into account recent research (Falleti and Lynch, 2009) that highlights the importance of context, even for causal mechanisms, and the fact that social science is based on probabilistic laws (King et al. 1994), the latter standpoint seems more plausible.

So far, and following from the first criteria formulated previously, analyzing decision-making leads to a necessary interest in causal mechanisms. However, for the other two criteria to be reached another methodological dimension needs to be added. Discussing social phenomena from a spatial dimension makes it clear that they are not only exposed to a horizontal context but are also under the influence of a vertical one (Przeworski & Teune 1970: 12). An example will show that this is hardly surprising. Study a local councilor and it will be obvious that he will not only need to consider the opinion of his fellow party members but will also need to take into account policies, regulations, and ideas from international organizations, the central government, and his party organization on a national level before making a decision (cf. with multi-level governance). Hence, this actor is part of a social system and it is not only their motives or beliefs from “within” that characterize the actor’s decision-making processes. But how does it work when this kind of structures influences local decision-making? On a more abstract level, James Coleman’s (1986) famous model of the linkage between macro, micro and macro levels is a suitable point of departure. In Figure 1 this model has simply been merged with the I-M-O model discussed earlier.
Figure 1 Elaboration of the macro-micro-macro model

Macro level:

Micro level:

Some important consequences are shown in the figure. In line with the principles of methodological individualism, variables found on a macro level need to be related to certain actors or group of actors on micro levels. This is due to the fact that it is, in the end, this actor or actors that make decisions that have the potential to lead to political changes (Elster, 2007). In this situation these decision-makers are potentially exposed to both macro and micro influences. Together with their own motives and beliefs this shapes their acting. Added to the traditional framework is the fact that the micro-micro linkage is carried out through causal mechanisms. Turning to the outcome of this model, it is not necessary carried on a macro level, though it can be. For that to happen, several actors need to interact and jointly create a collective outcome that can be positioned on a macro level. In the case of political decision-making this can, for example, be a new regulation that is implemented by a group or institution in society.

This methodological discussion can be summarized in the following statement: in analyzing decision-making in political systems, not only the explanatory variable but also the causal mechanisms that lead to a decision need to be studied in connection with the fact that specific actors, or groups of actors, are those who make decisions and that they, potentially, are influenced by circumstances from both macro and micro levels. If such a point of departure is taken into consideration when analyzing decision-making, the previously discussed criteria can be reached and the validity potentially increases.

Theoretical and methodological conclusions

So, how can these perspectives be used when analyzing processes of decision-making? The paradigm of governance is not a unified theoretical construction but points out several important notions that need to be taken into account. Modern governing includes actors and institutions both from within and outside the formal political organization (Stoker, 1998). Some scholars (Rhodes, 1996, 1997) do not even hesitate to describe the decision-making process as characterized by self-organizing networks. The common denominator of this vast paradigm is maybe that governing today includes many actors and institutions with different spatial origins. The methodological discussion supports this idea, arguing that there exists an interesting
relation between macro and micro levels. In addition, understandings and explanations of the decision-making process should strive for models that include both correlations and causal mechanisms (Lidén 2011a).

**A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYZING DECISION-MAKING**

Taken together, the discussed theories and the reviewed literature provide valuable information on how to look upon the process of decision-making. The essence of the theory of governance reflects a complex governing structure where, potentially, groups are influencing the outcome of decisions while originating from different spatial positions (Stoker 1998). The main feature of the methodological discussion is that both macro and micro levels need to be taken into account when analyzing decision-making so that the threads that connect input with output can be explained. In sum, we have on the one hand an empirical reality that is complex, where both actors and structures influence decision-making and, on the other hand, methodological claims that stress the need for systematizing this reality so that it is possible to analyze it. Clearly, some sort of framework for making this possible must be regarded as needed.

To reach this, two dimensions can be distinguished. First of all, and in relation to the paradigm of methodological individualism, structural conditions can be separated from actors-oriented explanations. In analogy with both Elster (2007) and the scholars that emphasize the need for examining causal mechanisms (Gerring, 2005, 2007a, 2007b, Mahoney, 2001; Hedström & Swedberg 1998), structures are regarded as potential influences on individuals’ behavior and thereby decision-making; however, they cannot by themselves cause decisions. Both this and the second dimension are ways of coping with the spatial variation established through governance. Turning to the second dimension, it makes a distinction between actors’ and structures’ origin from either inside or outside the organization where the decision-making is carried out. Really, this distinction can be regarded as obsolete, by it do has analytical values. By making an analytical separation between endogenous and exogenous origin, analytical leverage is increased (e.g. Lidén, forthcoming), and the theoretical contribution will be easier to systematize. The framework is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1 A framework for analyzing decision-making**

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Looking more closely at the four fields in the typology, it can be seen that exogenous structural conditions are characteristics of a whole society. These variables are frequent in the aggregated research that, for example, comparative politics represents, e.g. indicators of levels of development or political culture. Structural conditions from inside can also influence the process of decision-making and can, for example, reflect cultures, norms, and values that characterize an organization. However, they can also reflect traits of more concrete character, such as economic conditions. Turning to the right hand side of the typology, actors outside the political system demand the implementation of certain policies (Easton, 1965). In line with the paradigm of governance (Stoker, 1998), important actors can be expected to be found here. Finally, the beliefs and convictions of actors inside the political systems are crucial sources for the process of decision-making. These key actors are either politicians or civil servants.

Obviously, this typology does not fairly reflect the various conditions and actors that influence and explain decision-making. First of all, there exist many possible situations where borderline cases can occur. Second, the fact that these different types of influences are interrelated as a complex chain of explanations gives a truer picture. However, by turning to a few short examples of an empirical nature the relevance of the framework can be discussed.

**Short empirical examples**

The traditional view of decision-making has been that actors at different stages of the political process influence decision-making. The focus has been on stages such as initiation and preparation, when different actors tried to influence the decision-making and make it go in different directions. With regard to decision-making, the central actors were politicians. With the transition to a more governance-oriented steering, new actors have come to influence decision-making. The actors are located at other stages in the decision-making chain: at the decision-making and implementation stages.

An example that can illustrate this development is the establishment of independent schools and how this affects the possibility of carrying out the policy that has been decided on (Nyhlén, 2011). Through the creation of markets where private actors establish themselves, a competitive situation is created that affects decision-making in the municipalities where schools choose to establish themselves. The establishment of the independent school could be seen as an *exogenous* factor. This is because, for the local government the independent schools are an external factor because of the fact that the municipalities have a limited influence over the independent school establishment. The result is that the municipalities have to change their organization in terms of the number of schools, personnel, etc., because of the independent schools that have been established. As an *endogenous* factor would partly result in an attitude of change in relation to the school system. Different parties have different views on how the school system is being changed and which
elements of private actors should be included. This means that there may be political will in a community that advocates a policy which may then impact on the decisions taken. There may also be various political views about the priorities to be made in the municipalities.

Another example is also taken from Swedish society. In a study (Lidén, 2011a) that, among other things, examines to what extent Swedish municipalities are e-democratic, the suggested framework can be used. A case study focusing on how the municipality of Ålkarleby offers its citizens the opportunity to take part in political information and discussion through the internet makes this approach legitimate. Identifying the causal chain that leads to the current situation of e-democracy in the municipality starts with initiating factors that are exogenous to the organization of the local government. Structural conditions referring to an increase in the level of education in society have been transformed into internal political visions by the political leadership. In other words, citizens have made demands on the political system to develop e-democracy. These visions, together with corresponding economic investments in the area, provided other possibilities for the internal, endogenous structure for the organization that was to carry out the policy that had been decided on. When executing these e-democratic ambitions, certain actors positioned in the administration of the municipality were crucial. However, other actors, representing the political leadership, later proved how future ambitions in the area of e-democracy can be prevented through changing internal structures. This can be compared with the differentiation of the concept of power (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962; Lukes, 2005), which can also make power prevent issues from reaching the agenda. Summing up, in this example the causal chain is initiated by structural demands from the surrounding society that influence the political organization by changing its own internal structures. In the last step, the change in policy is carried out by actors in administration, but can also easily be influenced by other actors representing the political leadership.

CONCLUSIONS

As argued in the introduction, this article presents one way of how to look upon the decision-making process with a particular focus on local governments. The two theoretical bases used have proven to be a suitable way for, potentially, reaching a wider understanding of these processes. This is due to the fact that they are examples of modern theoretical developments that are consistent with the reality that political science studies. It recognizes the complex governance of modern societies that includes different actors but also influencing structures. In that way, the combination of these can represent one possible way for a fuller understanding of decision-making.

In line with the purpose of this article, the framework that has been reached offers a new theoretical solution to how decision-making can be explained. In that sense, this contribution is different from explanatory theories such as the rational choice or
incrementalism. Instead, these types of theories, and others, can be embedded in this framework, thereby making it possible to better systematize complex causal chains, reflecting different analytical levels when it comes to understanding and, if possible, explaining how decisions are made.

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