

achieve these ends. Identifying those means is a largely technocratic undertaking that draws on multiple disciplines, is heavily quantitative, and is keenly interested in assessing causal relationships. The rationalist approach follows this generic process for generating knowledge useful for answering questions about what should be done:

1. Define the problem. For a policy analyst, a “problem” typically implies some state of the world that is and will remain unsatisfactory or undesirable without government intervention (Mohr 1995, 14).
2. Identify alternative courses of action. This means generating a series of policy options that will have a desired impact on the problem. Linking alternatives to problems implies a causal link—if government does X, Y will happen. Rationalists draw heavily on social science theories to understand such causal links.
3. Estimate outcomes. This involves creating a set of criteria on which to judge various policy alternatives, then generating estimates of how each policy alternative is likely to perform on those criteria. For example, a policy analyst may wish to estimate the impact of various policy alternatives on the basis of costs, particular outcomes (say, a reading program on test scores), and distribution (who bears the costs and who reaps the benefits). Importantly, this means dealing with uncertainty because these potential impacts are not observed but future events that must be forecast.
4. Compare alternatives. This means ranking the different alternatives according to their forecast performance on the various criteria from step 3.
5. Choose the most preferred alternative. The alternative that scores the highest, or is judged most likely to achieve a desired objective or fulfill a desired value, is the alternative forwarded as the best option to translate into government action—that is, to become a public policy.³

The rationalist approach, in other words, is just an updated version of Franklin’s moral algebra. The theoretical and methodological horsepower employed in modern rationalist approaches has increased considerably since Franklin’s time, but the basic framework remains the same. In its modern Lasswell-like form, the original idea behind policy analysis was to put teams of experts into the highest reaches of government to put this problem-solving process into action (Dror 1968). Policymakers would come to the analysts with problems, specify the desired outcomes, and set the values used to rank policy alternatives. The analyst would supply the technical know-how and employ the best social science theory and methods to identify the objectively best alternatives. The hope (since proven naive) was that in this way policy analysts would deal