

models increasingly reflects a reaction to, and an attempt to account for, many post-positivist criticisms.

In this chapter we examine these two approaches to policy analysis and assess their ability to provide useful explanatory frameworks for answering the question “What should we do?”

The Rationalist Approach

Joseph Priestly was a notable eighteenth-century scientist, philosopher, and theologian who indirectly prompted an early expression of the rationalist approach to policy analysis. In the early 1790s Priestly was struggling with a decision over whether to leave the ministry and take up a more lucrative offer from the Earl of Shelburne, a well-known British statesman of the time. This presented Priestly with the individual version of the public policy analyst’s question: “What should *I* do?” One of his friends, Benjamin Franklin, wrote Priestly a letter describing a system of “prudential or moral algebra” developed to solve exactly this sort of dilemma. When unsure of what course of action constituted the best response to a question, Franklin said he did the following:

1. Divided a sheet of paper in half and listed the pros of a decision or course of action on one side and the cons on the other.
2. Assigned weights to the pros and cons, i.e., assigned them numbers reflecting their importance or desirability.
3. Struck out equalities. If one pro carried equal weight as one con, he would strike them both out. If one pro carried the weight of three cons, he would strike those out. Eventually, the pro or con side would reveal itself to have more weight.
4. Used the information from these calculations to make the decision.¹

Franklin’s system of “moral algebra” succinctly captures the basic notion of the rationalist approach to policy analysis (indeed, it has been cited as an early form of cost-benefit analysis; see Boardman et al. 2001, 1). More formally, policy analysis is traditionally defined as “an applied social science discipline which uses multiple methods of inquiry and argument to produce and transform policy-relevant information that may be utilized in political settings to resolve policy problems” (Dunn 1981/2011, 35).²

The rationalist approach to policy analysis clearly takes its cue from Lasswell’s notion of the policy sciences. It takes an instrumental view of public policy: policies are viewed as means to address problems or achieve goals, and the central objective of policy analysis is to identify the most desirable means to