

# This Week's Citation Classic

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**Lindblom C E.** The science of "muddling through."  
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[Yale University, New Haven, CT]

Incremental decision making (consisting of a specified set of interlocked strategies) is contrasted with decision making as envisaged by conventional (at that date) decision theory. Incrementalism is argued to be feasible and useful; the ideologized decision making of conventional theory is not. [The *Science Citation Index*<sup>®</sup> (SCI<sup>®</sup>) and the *Social Sciences Citation Index*<sup>®</sup> (SSCI<sup>®</sup>) indicate that this paper has been cited in over 490 publications since 1961.]

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"In *Politics, Economics, and Welfare*, R.A. Dahl and I in 1953 had introduced incremental decision making as an only moderately significant concept for understanding a method of decision making, an aspect of politics, and especially a key feature of democratic politics.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, we were influenced—more than we realized at the time, I would now guess—by Karl Popper's concept of piecemeal social engineering.<sup>2</sup> If I recall correctly, my subsequent interest in returning to the concept and making more of it was stimulated by a 1956 conference in which conferees tried to explain national differences in antitrust policy, to which discussion I offered the explanation that incremental policy-making ties each nation to its own peculiar past. Stimulated by that discussion, I tried my hand at an academic article or two on incrementalism<sup>3</sup> and was then invited by William B. Shore, executive editor of the *Public Administration Review*, to develop the concept less academically for his readers.

"I thank Shore for two contributions that account in some large part for the success of the article. He urged me to write what I had to say as simply and clearly as possible and with less of the abstraction that characterized my more academic paper(s) that he had seen on the subject. He also proposed the remarkable title under which the paper was published in *Public Administration Review*.

"Another explanation for the success of the article was—and is—the state of social science then and now. Although the reception of my work on incrementalism gives me pleasure, what I wrote represents no great discovery or insight. Incrementalism is a common, though not universal, obvious feature and useful method of policy-making, as well as personal decision making. Only a careless—at the same time overly tidy—and pretentious social science could have developed a conventional view of decision making so naive that incrementalism could strike many as a great clarification of decision strategies. I believe that none of my children saw anything noteworthy in the article or in the concept of incrementalism until their education had confused their earlier commonsense insights.

"Professional discussion of incrementalism, from my hand or from anyone else's, though never ending, has rarely been distinguished on any account. In particular, scholars have attributed to me a variety of forms of the concept of incrementalism strange to me (for which I am foolishly grateful despite irritation that they write before reading). I have tried to straighten out confusions in the literature, including large ones of my own making, in 'Still muddling, not yet through,'<sup>4</sup> invited by the editor of the journal to celebrate the twentieth birthday of the original article."

1. Dahl R A & Lindblom C E. *Politics, economics, and welfare: planning and politico-economic systems resolved into basic social processes*. New York: Harper, 1953. 557 p.
2. Popper K R. *The open society and its enemies. Volume 1. The spell of Plato*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963. 351 p.
3. Lindblom C E. The handling of norms in policy analysis. *The allocation of economic resources: essays in honor of Bernard Francis Haley*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1959. p. 160-79.
4. .... Still muddling, not yet through. *Public Admin. Rev.* 39:517-26, 1979.