



To: City Development
From: Adrian Davis
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Subject: Essential Evidence on a page: No. 94 Incrementalism (or muddling through)

Top line: Incrementalism – or muddling through – is a concept that helps us to understand better the processes of policy change and political decision making in democracies. Complex problems cannot be completely analysed and we therefore require strategies for skilful incompleteness through incremental rather than ‘big-steps’ changes.

In 1959 an American political science professor published a theory of ‘incrementalism’, often since phrased as ‘muddling through’. In this and subsequent studies he propounded that incrementalism is and ought to be the usual method of policy making.¹ This theory has been recognised by many policy makers as a touchstone for their work since.

Incrementalism implies that no more than small or incremental steps are ordinarily possible. On the one hand, one of the tenets of incrementalism is that small steps add up over time and can result in important changes in policy and process. On the other hand, the speed of change can be frustratingly slow – for the reason that small steps do not upset the democratic ‘appcart’: big steps do.² A risk of incrementalism consequently is to think small, timidly, conservatively about social change. So, incrementalism refers both to the due processes of the work of officers and to those of politicians. For the latter it is possible that a fast-moving sequence of small changes can more speedily accomplish a drastic alteration of the *status quo* than can a major, but infrequent, policy change. Moreover, if the speed of change is the product of size of steps times frequency of steps, incremental change patterns are, under ordinary circumstances, the fastest method of change.

More generally, Lindblom posited that democracies change the policies almost entirely through incremental adjustments. Policy does not move in leaps and bounds. Lindblom identified three types of incrementalism: strategic analysis – an attempt at complete analysis at one point in time as far as is feasible; disjointed incrementalism – which can be reduced to a deliberate, designed incompleteness rather than perhaps ill-considered, often accidental incompleteness; simple incremental analysis – which is analysis of no more than small or incremental possible departures from the *status quo*.

Lindblom noted that the trouble lies in the fact that most of us approach policy problems within a framework defined by our view of a chain of successive policy choices made up to the present. One’s thinking about appropriate policies with respect, say, to urban traffic control is greatly influenced by one’s knowledge on the incremental steps taken up to the present. An official enjoys an intimate knowledge of the past sequences that “outsiders” do not share, and their thinking and that of the “outsider” will consequently be different in ways that may puzzle both. Both may appear to be talking intelligently, yet each may find the other unsatisfactory. Lindblom comes to the conclusion that a rational/technological approach is not possible and he offers an alternative – or at least an explanation of why the sometimes unloved political manoeuvring of political decision-making may not be as bad as it at first appears.

¹ Lindblom, C. 1959 The science of muddling through, *Public Administration Review*, 19.

² Lindblom, C. 1979 Still muddling, not yet through, *Public Administration Review*, Nov/Dec: 517-526.