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The processes political leaders use to make rational policy decisions can be explained by two theories, the Poliheuristic Theory and the Bureaucratic Politics Model. Decision making is based on the assumption of rational thought. General decision making for individuals involves weighing options and can occur within seconds, but for political leaders many more factors (called attributes or dimensions) must be taken into account. The Poliheuristic Theory and the Bureaucratic Politics Model attempt to explain how and why foreign policy is made by showing how political decision makers balance and decide between policy alternatives. They also delve into how and why political leaders decide to eliminate or implement these policy alternatives. The theories are applicable to many instances in history. However, in times of crisis when rational and effective decisions must be made quickly they may not always apply. Such crises occurred in 1945 during the Second World War, and many times during George W. Bush’s term from 2001-2009. Other applications can be made to Game Theory and United States policy decisions made during the Cold War.

The process described by the Poliheuristic Theory is unknowingly used by political leaders to make decisions on policy alternatives. Policy alternatives are affected by certain dimensions that include diplomatic, political, economic, and military attributes. The diplomatic attribute deals with foreign policy issues. The political attribute pertains to how politicians are viewed in the public’s eyes and how their policy decision making reflects on their effectiveness. This can determine whether politicians get reelected or not. The economic attribute greatly affects public opinion because it factors money and everything involved with it (trade, business, stocks, oil prices). Lastly, the military attribute relates to the art of war: the number of troops needed, number of troops sent, number of casualties, and the successes and failures of the wars being waged. Individually, these attributes each represents a different view on policy alternatives, and therefore they collectively help determine whether or not an alternative should be implemented. The decision making process for political leaders is limited to a very narrow amount of attributes. This guarantees a restricted number of policy alternatives to decide from; if certain alternatives do not meet the basic requirements of the most vital attribute, they are eliminated immediately. The attributes are independent of one another in the sense that not all have to be considered for every decision, but an alternative must be acceptable to all those that are considered for it to be in the decision making process at all; if the alternative is acceptable in terms of one attribute but not in another, it is eliminated. Determining what attributes take priority in specific situations is decided by three key players in the Poliheuristic Theory. These three key players are an expert adviser, a political decision maker, and a median voter. The theory shows how the political decision maker must resolve the conflicts that arise among the three players. Two such conflicts can occur; the decision maker can disagree with the median voter and agree with the adviser, or he or she can disagree with both other players. The disputes arise because experts and non-experts have differing views on what, when and how decisions should be made. Experts, or in this case, expert advisers, scientifically and narrowly focus on policy alternatives and base their opinions on statistical results of making certain decisions. They assess probabilities and payoff matrices to form their opinions. Non-experts, or the political decision makers and the median voters, view decision making as a means of maximizing their own utility or satisfaction and therefore base their opinions on that. Of course, the political decision maker does have a certain degree of experience in assessing probabilities and therefore has a better knowledge of what decisions should and should not be made. The Poliheuristic Theory was displayed in 1954 when Eisenhower made the decision to not interfere militarily in Dienbenphu to support the French fighting there. He used the strong satisficing rule, or, in other words, he made the decision that corresponded with the request of public opinion. He had three policy alternatives: an air strike, sending ground troops, or not acting at all. Both the two former options lacked public support and the first did not have the support of experts in government as well. The latter alternative, though the most passive, was the chosen decision. (Dacey, Carlson: 38-43) Furthermore, other studies claim that there are two models of decision making, one being the Poliheuristic Theory and the other being the Bureaucratic Politics Model. This model specifically centers on United States foreign policy decisions and how the influence of advisers affect the decisions made. Many advisers from different groups representing different public opinions greatly influence a president’s decisions. The Bureaucratic Politics Model centers on how political leaders, specifically the President, make their decisions based on the influences of special interest groups and their political advisers. The actors in those different groups use their influence to sway the decisions made. The groups’ influence is determined by how much they want to persuade the specific decision at hand, their ability to sway the politician, and the influence of other groups that want their opinion to be voiced. These persuasions from the bureaucracy allow the politician to understand what his constituency wants. Of course, the politician must also incorporate the executive government’s influence into his decision making. His cabinet of advisers also has a great influence on his decisions. The politician, in the case the President, will base his decisions on whatever group or adviser relates best to his own personal beliefs. However, some political analysts argue that because the information presented by these groups and organizations are at times biased the president ultimately has the greatest influence on the decision made (hence the term executive decision). This argument goes along more with the general decision theory which assumes that all decisions are made under the basis of rational thought. The President will act how he believes he should act given the environment and his own interests. These political analysts also assume that how the President believes he should act will correspond to either what public opinion wants or what his political advisers advise. An instance in history during which the Bureaucratic Politics Model was observed was when President Jimmy Carter decided to send a rescue mission to free the people captured in the Iran Hostage Crisis. The influence of the groups and public opinion was so strong in this situation that Carter almost had no choice but to do what he did. (Christensen, Redd: 71-73)

Political leaders will make decisions regarding all these factors and will observe their success or their failure. Whether they follow the Poliheurstic Theory of the Bureaucratic Politics Model can be tested by being applied to historical situations but not all situations follow the decision making processes explained by the two models. President Truman made an executive order to drop the atom bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. This rapid decision was made during a time of crisis. The war was never-ending. The Japanese kamikazes would fight to the death and there was a stalemate that was causing great casualties on both sides. President Franklin Roosevelt had died and the public was mourning his death. They wanted the war to end. Often, in times when immediate and rapid decisions must be made, not all components of the Bureaucratic Politics Model and the Poliheuristic Theory are taken into account. In this case, the median voter, or the public opinion, was unknown to politicians. Because the Manhattan Project was so secretive the public did not know enough about the atomic bombs or even the war over seas to actually have an opinion on the matter. The only public opinion that was apparent was the fact that they wanted the war to end. Not even the cabinet of FDR’s advisers knew enough about the atomic bomb to have solid judgment on the right course of action. However, they did know about the problems with the war and used their knowledge to persuade Truman on what to do. Now looking back many would not have chosen to drop the bombs knowing what destructive force they had, but because the decision was made so quickly. Despite the lack of the median voter’s opinion, Truman did take into account some of the different attributes explained in the Poliheuristic Theory such as military and economic attributes. The decision to go to war in Iraq did not follow the Poliheuristic Theory of decision making and in only some ways followed the Bureaucratic Politics Model. George W. Bush made an executive decision to go to war. Of Bush’s immediate advisers, only some supported his war in Iraq and others strongly disagreed with it (such as Colin Powell). In this case Bush neglected both his advisers and public opinion, and therefore did not follow any of the decistion processes described by the Poliheuristic Theory. The decision to go to war is an example that is consistent with what some political analysts argue must be incorporated into the Bureaucratic Politics Model. As stated before, they claim that ultimately the president is the sole influence on policy decision making and that groups and organizations do not have as much influence as it seems. Bush lacked popular support across the board, but he decided to act regardless. It is surmised that Bush acted rashly in this instance because he believed that the United States was experiencing a time of crisis, which some people may argue is true. Bush had to do something to combat the terror attacks and the growing injustice that was fueling terrorism in the Middle East, so he made his own decision as to what was best for the nation.

Decision theories in political science can be used to explain a myriad of decisions made by political leaders around the world and all throughout history. The Poliheuristic Theory and the Bureaucratic Politics are just two examples of the analysis of this political decision making. Political leaders weigh their opportunity costs and overall decide what they believe is best for their nation, but also regarding the opinion of their advisers and the public. Other cognitive applications of decision theory include Game Theory. During the Cold War, the United States was constantly trying to match up or one-up the Soviet Union. Their mental battle was like a game. If the Russians go to space, the United States had to as well. These decisions were made also regarding external factors, but still followed the patterns explained in the two models of political decision making.