

1 On political judgement

Characterising political judgement

This book presents a new account of the limited number of basic forms of political judgement, showing how they work with and against each other in shaping decision-making. It offers a fresh causal explanation of these styles of judgement, although it draws upon classical works.

Politically to judge is to select and to commit to action, but it involves much that comes beforehand.¹ Political judgement is the thought style exhibited in and shaping the pattern of political decision-making. It can only be measured over a series of decisions that decision-makers consider causally related. A thought style is the *manner* in which ideas, categories, propositions, feelings, etc., are believed, rejected, construed, framed, classified, used and felt.² For example, propositions may be believed with greater or less dogmatism; emotions may be felt with greater or less complexity and ambivalence; categories and their boundaries may be marked with greater or less rigidity, with greater or less exaggeration of differences between cases within and beyond a category, allowing for more or for less negotiation, hybridity, etc.; aims and intentions may be pursued more or less tolerantly of compromise. Style is contrasted with the *content* of thought, which consists in descriptive, explanatory or prescriptive propositions accepted. Political ideology is a key aspect of content. Indeed, this book shows that people with diametrically opposed ideologies may exhibit similar thought styles; conversely, ideological allies may think in quite contrasting styles.

It is a mistake to suppose that ideology is the substance and style the mere presentation of thought. Thought style matters as much as, and sometimes more than, ideology, in shaping decisions and outcomes. Judgement style selects issues, focuses political emotion, sustains capacity for action, guides commitment and determination. Potential opponents and supporters respond as much to style as to ideology. Style determines radicalisation and moderation. Political decision-making is as much about how we think as about what we think.

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Policymaking groups typically show a mix of different thought styles. Political judgement, then, describes the weighted mix of thought styles through which politicians and their advisers³ determine whether they face a condition or a problem; understand and misunderstand their allies and opponents; classify their problems, options (if any) and conflicting imperatives; understand circumstance, causation, constraint or opportunity; recognise possible instruments; select analogies; construe risks; become willing to bear some risks but not others; conceive linkages between issues; relate reasons for action to goals for policy; and do or do not risk medium- or long-range anticipation, and in detail or only in outline. These things, Vickers (1995 [1965]) called ‘appreciation’.

Committing to a course of action, by deliberation or otherwise, is more than forming an appreciation of circumstances and selecting means for a priority goal. It is a social and political process, and not just a mental one, of settling what is feasible, meaningful, apt, acceptable, adroit or astute to do, how to reason about it and how to present it. Appreciation, appraisal, settlement, decision and commitment or its attenuation are critical aspects of judgement. Deliberation and persuasion are social processes, as are developing and sustaining categories for appreciation. What people involved centrally or tangentially in judgement can deliberate upon, and be persuaded of, and what will count as a reason for them, are all shaped by their informal social relations and institutions.

Although the case studied in this book is indeed one of deep crisis, political judgement is not only called for in crises. Indeed, some crises do not require deep political judgement, at least in the first instance. Designing immediate responses even to some types of crises (major oil spills, for example) may be a largely technical matter, although their aftermath typically gives rise to problems that will require fully political judgement (Boin *et al.*, 2005).

Yet political judgement is not neatly separable from other kinds of judgement contributing to political decisions, despite reformers’ occasional efforts to insulate technical judgement – for example, on the interpretation of intelligence, or judgement of military feasibility, or economists’ assessment of forecasts or even professional diplomats’ judgement of the scope for further negotiation – from purely political aspects. In practice, political considerations infuse technical ones: on decisions of any magnitude, political judgement processes provide the framework for practical synthesis of the various technical judgements.

In circumstances calling for political judgement, there is no dominant rule to be followed, no superordinate principle to be conformed to, no authoritative algorithm to be followed, no uniquely trusted form of calculation to be undertaken, that reliably yields a superior decision.

Imperatives clash; people are divided. Policymakers face genuine dilemmas (or trilemmas, etc.). All the good things cannot go together; something valuable must be surrendered.

Whatever the merits, in some codes of morality, of the principle, ‘let justice be done, even though the heavens may fall’ (*fiat iustitia, ruat caelum*), it generally fails what many people expect of judgement that is political at all (let alone *good* political judgement), although we shall see that this claim can indeed be influential in some political circumstances. For politics are precisely the fields of adjustment between fundamental values – even, *in extremis*, between justice and other goods. The philosopher and historian of ideas, Isaiah Berlin, argued in a well-known (1996) article on political judgement that this principle is part of a catastrophic utopianism in politics that often flows from the excessive commitment to a single principle (whether of justice or anything else). Conversely, he argued that *good* political judgement recognises multiple, irreconcilable values and frameworks of understanding. Appreciating these conflicting imperatives is, for Berlin (1979), the virtue of the fox which knows many things, by contrast with that of the hedgehog which knows only one (cf. Tetlock, 2005, *passim*).

In dire circumstances, political leaders may be forgiven, if they exercise judgement with due care, for coming to a decision involving breaking a moral rule, perhaps even a law, if they are prepared to face the consequences later. In the most extreme situations, political considerations may quite reasonably require it. Since antiquity, philosophers have discussed the conundrum for political judgement described as the condition of ‘dirty hands’, where sometimes coming to intelligent and astute settlement between rival claims will result in politically justifiable but morally indefensible action. During centuries of debate about the idea of ‘reasons of state’ (*raison d’état*), worrying about the relationship between judgement and wrongdoing has been a central theme, although by no means the only or dominant one (Meinecke, 1998 [1957, 1925]). The philosopher Hannah Arendt (e.g. 1992) struggled with this problem, finally coming to believe in the pre-eminence of moral over instrumental considerations in most major settings for political judgement. Yet the argument for the independence of political judgement rests on the recognition that politics are not simply moralities writ large, even if they cannot and should never be simply amoral, still less merely immoral, practices (Bourke, 2009). Moral considerations neither exhaust nor automatically trump all prudential ones; yet they can never be extruded from political judgement.

Nevertheless, calls for political judgement themselves carry normative freight of their own. When politicians are asked to exercise judgement,

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they are often being asked to exercise a certain kind of restraint or moderation upon the imperatives expected to weigh with them (Bourke, 2009). In calling for *good* judgement, we typically expect political leaders to find a path that neither follows the vocal minority's selfish interests nor the majority's temporary mood, but which neither indulges short-term desires for vengeance nor puts a country's short-term interests before its longer-term ones. In asking for judgement that meets the requirements of being political at all, we call for decisions to recognise that authority cannot sustainably rest on domination, that there must eventually be some accommodation between imperatives and people in conflict.

When we care about judgement at all – and not only about a notion of good judgement – we care about the manner of policymaking, not simply the option finally settled upon. Calls for judgement (as opposed to rule-following or principled action) ask policymakers to exercise a peculiar thoughtfulness, self-consciousness and sense of solemn responsibility in their deliberation, showing appropriate respect for the gravity of the problem or condition, the tragic character of the conflicting imperatives, and the requirement not to give way to the immediate, the obvious, the simple and the pressing.⁴

Perhaps this seems too high-minded. Certainly, partisan interest, coalition building and sustaining one's own position in office cannot be forced out of political judgement; nor is it a reasonable standard for political judgement to ask that they should. We may praise a Robert Peel who is prepared to break his party and his administration in pursuit of a decision that he regards as right for his country. But to make that a general condition of political judgement is supererogatory and absurd, if government is to be carried out at all. For the duty to sustain government, within the limits of the constitution, is one that rightly weighs with every politician in office, not only – even if always partly – for selfish reasons, as well as with citizens. High and low political considerations do, will and should intermingle in judgement that is adequately political. To complain of this is simply to complain about the human condition of politics and of rule. If sometimes we ask for a Robert Peel or an Abraham Lincoln, much more frequently we should reasonably ask only for a mere Benjamin Disraeli, a Harold Wilson or even an Andrew Jackson. Politicians in office may make policy judgements which are later seen as wise, but do so for reasons of partisanship, spite or furthering their own careers. It is similarly muddled to complain that domestic politics enter into, for example, foreign policy judgement, or that policy decisions are taken with an eye to votes or support on the backbenches: calculating what can secure enough support to be feasible is central to genuinely political judgement (Hurd, 1979, 35–36). If we are to ask sometimes

that decisions be made precisely against the common wisdom, then, in democracies, we can and should not expect such decisions themselves to be commonplace. Democracy privileges the common wisdom, requiring it to be set aside only with the weightiest justification and willingness, if necessary, by officials to bear the consequences of their uncommon wisdom at the subsequent polls.

Capabilities for recognising, appreciating and making decisions about political settlements and taking responsibility for them afterward are neither lightly cultivated nor cheaply sustained. Nor do those capabilities reside principally in individuals or their personal dispositions. Politics are those practices by which we contain from coming to sheer violence, the conflicts which are the inevitable condition of our living together (Crick, 1964; Stoker, 2006). Political judgement is therefore conditioned by the need to accommodate conflicting preferences, ideas and practices, and to institutionalise capacities for such accommodation. Political judgement must therefore often tolerate inconsistencies abhorred by tidy-minded intellectuals. Some inconsistencies are so deep that they render settlements unviable. Other settlements are unviable precisely because they lack adequate inconsistency (6, 2006a; Margetts, 6 and Hood, 2010) – what Bagehot (2001 [1865–7, 1872], 102) called a ‘studied and illogical moderation’. Judgement that is political at all, and perhaps good judgement most of all, is therefore a dynamic process by which mutually inconsistent practices are brought into such relationship with each other that, if the judgements prove successful (as they often will not, especially in the longer run), they can constrain each other from the runaway bandwagoning effects in any of one set of practices. If that sounds too noble, it is important to recognise that it often involves squalid and never wholly consistently principled compromise, in order to avoid the still greater squalor that often attends utter refusal to compromise.⁵

Problems for political judgement

‘Wicked’, not ‘tame’, problems call for political judgement (Rittel and Webber, 1973). Wicked problems admit no definitive solution. They afford only incomplete and ambiguous information. Cases of apparently similar types differ so significantly that we fear to risk drawing inferences from one to another.⁶ Imperatives conflict, creating dilemmas rather than continual trade-offs. Decisions are made under severe constraints. Policymakers face blame and obloquy for any of the available outcomes. Weighing imperatives usually involves difficult comparisons among very different kinds of considerations not readily reduced to a common numeraire. There is little hope of widespread consensus on what to do

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in particular disputes. The question, ‘What to do?’, cannot be settled by appeal to empirical evidence alone. Occasionally, people with contrasting political and moral positions can agree on examples of competent or astute political judgement, often for different reasons. But extending agreement to many circumstances would likely prove infeasible.

Some policy problems are comparatively straightforward. For example, the decisions are indeed political ones about what funds to allocate for common procedures in a system of socialised health care such as the British National Health Service (NHS). Rival groups of professionals and patients lobby for and against a variety of options; ultimately, political considerations can settle priorities. But demand and need can usually be forecast with workable confidence. Technical requirements are reasonably well known. Likely health benefits from many existing procedures can be calculated with acceptable confidence. Managers have some idea of how long it might take to increase or reduce activity, given the time taken to bring new facilities and trained staff into the system or else to decommission facilities and lay staff off or reallocate them to other functions. Available and relevant information does not suffer from very great imperfection (ignorance of other players’ actions) or incompleteness (ignorance of the options and pay-offs from the options available) or even uncertainty (low or unknown and quite possibly low probabilities of information being accurate). Moreover, the decision-making body is fairly straightforward, consisting in the government of the day and within the government, mainly the health ministers and their officials. For decisions of this kind, there is usually time and money enough to commission experts to analyse the likely costs and benefits of the main options, and information required for that analysis can be obtained relatively easily from NHS data collections. In short, these are relatively tame problems.

Political judgement is called for, by contrast, in situations where policymakers face many of the following deficits from the ideal conditions:

ignorance: lack of contextual information about the conditions under which other players are making decisions, what they want, how they think, or about what they might count as a welcome or unwelcome pay-off;

uncertain information: information, to which an actor is unable, given their ignorance of other facts, to assign any probabilities of its truth or relevance, for example, about what the probabilities of particular pay-offs might be, even though those pay-offs can be classified as welcome or unwelcome to other players, should they transpire;

incomplete information: lack of knowledge of the structure of the game – that is, lack of knowledge about the strategies available to other actors, and of the pay-offs each would receive, given the utilities they are believed with some confidence to be operating with;

imperfect information: lack of knowledge in the game – that is, lack of knowledge of what other players in a game have done or inability to update existing knowledge about other players' actions with new information;

potentially misleading information: an actor has to assign a significant, non-trivial probability that the information available to them is disinformation – that is, another player has guilefully provided information to mislead them;

limited processing capability: limited capacity to conduct long or complex chains of reasoning, including counterfactual, anticipatory or hypothetical reasoning, with the time, information and skills available for decision.

These information conditions can be characterised together as *opacity*. As opacity deepens, so does a problem's intractability. The type of fact about which one has no information, or only uncertain, incomplete or imperfect information, also matters. Uncertainty about other players' preferences, goals or utilities means that one cannot be sure of their pay-offs, so deepening incompleteness of information in very serious ways. Political judgement is demanded precisely when no one is sure what game is being played, why, with whom or for what. The politician working in conditions of ignorance can only wish for those of mere uncertainty.

As resource conditions for choice such as the costs of search, analysis or skills to appraise information rise, or as time available for choice shrinks, so too does tractability fall further. These can be called decision-making conditions of *pressure*.

Finally, problem intractability rises as the decision-making body's own complexity increases. For more complicated agents have more goals and find it harder to rank them in a consistent schedule with sequentially structured trade-offs. More decision-makers have first to be accommodated in prior coalition-building exercises. Accommodating these goals gives rise to costs of searching for and analysing information and of conciliating people. These are *conflicted* decision-making problems. In the face of such increasing opacity, pressure and conflict, depending on the solution concept used, in many rational choice modelling exercises decision-makers face either rising numbers of equilibria or none at all.

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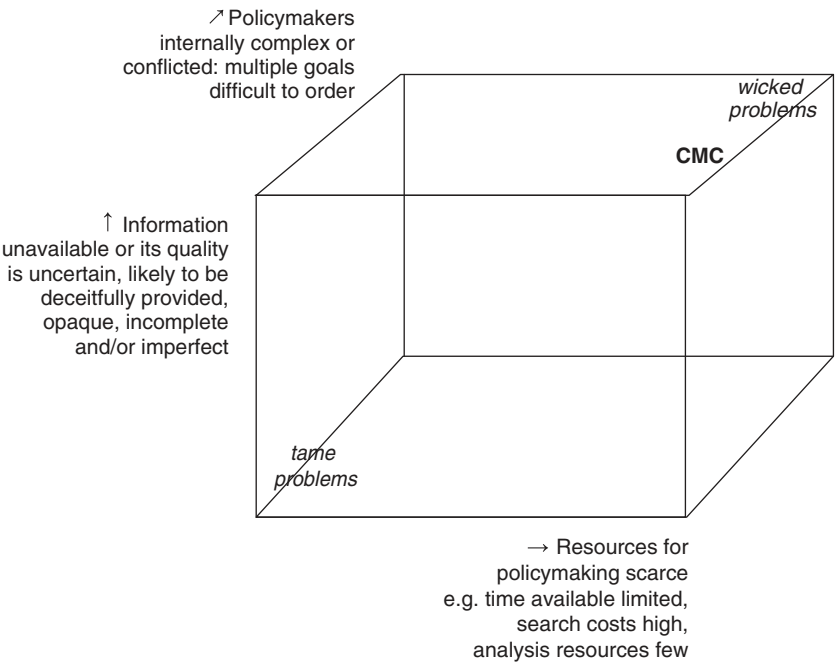


Figure 1.1 Types of problem requiring decision. CMC: Cuban missile crisis

Equilibrium selection becomes highly sensitive to small changes in beliefs or weightings.

Figure 1.1 shows a simple, three-dimensional representation of the difference between tame and wicked problems.

The case study of the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962, examined below, presented the Soviet, the American and the Cuban administrations with just such a highly opaque, pressured and conflicted decision-making situation. It can therefore provisionally be placed, for at least the US and Soviet decision-makers, roughly at the point marked by the abbreviation ‘CMC’ (Cuban missile crisis) in Figure 1.1.

Argument

This book develops a causal account of factors leading political judgement to exhibit particular styles. It offers a richer understanding than most rival theories can of social relations marking different basic informal institutional processes within which styles of judgement are cultivated

and exercised. Showing that social relations have systematically patterned causal influences upon styles enables us to learn something important about how political judgement works and why it works in these ways.

Proposing an explanation of political judgement style is ambitious enough. Doing so by using the case study that has been used to test a great many other theories is doubly so. Offering an explanation to rival those offered in one of the great classic texts of political science – Allison's *Essence of decision* (1971; Allison and Zelikow, rev. 2nd edn, 1999) – only compounds the trouble. But this approach has important merits too. Examining a theory of political decision-making against the available data from the Cuban missile crisis has rightly become an important rite of passage for any ambitious tradition of theorising, to demonstrate its intellectual maturity. This rite has the merit of enabling the theory to be compared directly with other traditions. Moreover, the richness of the available data about the events of October 1962, their antecedents and consequences, is enough alone to justify the choice.

The interest of the case does not lie in any excellence of the political judgement of the principal protagonists. Normative argument is not the aim of this study, but for the record, it is perhaps worth saying that all sides made decisions that led to the crisis, during its height and in its aftermath, that could readily be regarded as blunders. This was as true of the political advisers, military staff from senior to junior ranks, and technical analysts, as it was of the leading politicians.

The Cuban missile crisis is particularly valuable for examining a theory of political judgement of the kind presented below, because it provides diversity in the styles of the informal organisation among policymakers which the theory predicts to be fundamental in shaping styles of political judgement. Moreover, these rich data enable exploration of important causal processes.

This book's aim is to establish a theoretical framework, illustrating it with a comparative case analysis, showing thereby the framework's initial plausibility and interest. The empirical material is drawn from the mainstream of academic historiography of the October 1962 crisis. The book does not offer a new history of the Cuban missile crisis: it presents no previously unknown empirical facts. Rather, it offers *explanations* not previously presented. Science does not progress only by the discovery of new facts, but also by conceptual, methodological and theoretical development, the better to explain already known facts, solve problems and resolve anomalies in theoretical understanding (Laudan, 1977, *passim*, but esp. 66 ff.).

In this vein, every theoretical argument about political judgement and the policy process, whether or not it examines the missile crisis in detail, must engage with the achievements of Allison's work. His three models

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of decisions by a rational state actor pursuing its interests, of organisational processes shaping decisions, and of decisions emerging from the internal conflicts and bargains of the various parties within the administration, are derived respectively from three classical thinkers. The first is from Machiavelli: states are regarded as unified collective actors, pursuing interests taken to be more or less fixed for the period in question, and doing so with guile and ruthlessness. Starting from Weber's work on bureaucracy (Gerth and Mills, 1958) and routinisation (Weber, 1947), Allison's second model regards governments as organisations following rules and routines institutionalised in them. Simmel (1955; Levine, 1971) provides the third model with the idea that decisions arise from conflict and cooperation in networks of individuals.⁷

One classical writer missing from Allison's antecedents is Durkheim. This book shows that his legacy provides the basis for a distinctive and powerful understanding of political policymaking. Durkheimian traditions have generally had less influence in political science than those of Machiavelli, Weber and Simmel, to say nothing of Marx, de Tocqueville, Dewey, Schumpeter, Bentley or Easton. This is partly because Durkheim's own writings on politics (Giddens, 1986), when finally collected, appeared fragmentary, scattered, suggestive and inadequately developed. In recent years, as misconceptions stemming from Parsons about Durkheim's real achievements have been dispelled, the relevance of his political writings has been appreciated more widely (e.g. Cladis, 1992; Cotterrell, 1999; Rawls, 2003b). To date, though, little has been done to apply his argument to the policy process or to political judgement.

This book follows a methodological tradition of taking an approach to explaining judgement in general found in a great classical writer on another subject rather than their specific writings on politics, and developing it into a theory of political judgement. This was Arendt's (1992) method. She set aside Kant's explicitly political writings (Reiss, 1991 [1970]), drawing instead upon his treatise on aesthetic judgement to develop her account of moral judgement in political contexts. In the same way, the present book begins from Durkheim's account of classification (Durkheim and Mauss, 1963 [1902–3]), ritual and the social shaping of religious thought (1995 [1912]), suicide (1951 [1897]) and moral education (1961 [1925]), and only tangentially from his writings on the democratic state (1957 [1950]) or the origins of German militarism (1915). This book argues thereby that the social sciences, like other sciences, often make progress by further mining in seams first opened up by the founding figures.

The framework offered derives from the work of the Durkheimian anthropologist, Mary Douglas. It draws most heavily on Douglas'