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Nondecisions reconsidered

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- 25 H. Daalder: *Politisering en lijdelijkheid in de Nederlandse politiek*, Assen, 1974, 62, zegt in dit verband: 'onder de verzamelterm 'nieuwe politieke elite groeperingen' zou ik in het bijzonder drie groepen willen noemen: studenten, wetenschappelijke medewerkers van universiteiten en vergelijkbaar docerend personeel aan scholen voor hoger beroepsonderwijs, en vormingswerkers'.
- 26 De selectie van posities volgt de in de literatuur gebruikelijke indeling. Zie ook J. May: Opinion structure of political parties, the special law of curvilinear disparity, in *Political Studies*, 21, (1973), 135-151. Van mogelijk positionele ongelijkheden binnen een categorie zal hier overigens worden afgezien. Dat dit desalniettemin een belangrijk aanbod van politieke posities verschafft, blijkt uit bijvoorbeeld onderzoek naar doorstroming binnen en tussen commissies in het Amerikaanse Congres. Ook daar is de politieke opstrevings manifest. Uit de vele literatuur hierover: M. Mezey: Ambition theory and the office of Congressmen, in *Journal of Politics*, 32 (1970), 563-579; M. Jewell and C. Chi-hung: Membership movement and Committee attractiveness in the U.S. House of Representatives, in *American Journal of Political Science*, 18 (1974), 433-441.
- 27 Voor enige politieke implicaties daarvan zie M. P. C. M. van Schendelen: Groei en achtergronden van parlementair aktivisme, in *Beleid en Maatschappij*, I, (1974), 11-120 en idem: Het Nederlandse Parlement onderzocht, in *Intermediair*, 10 (1974), 1-9.
- 28 Daalder, *op. cit.*, 67.
- 29 *Ministers of the Crown and Members of Parliament*, first report of the Committee (Chairman: Lord Boyle), London, 1971, 84-88; W. H. de Beaufort: De uitgaven van het parlement, in *Openbare Uitgaven*, juli 1974.
- 30 Zie het rapport van de Commissie Positie Raadsleden, *Een goede raad*, Den Haag, 1974.
- 31 Zie over dergelijke patronen in Westduitsland R. Lange, Auslesestrukturen bei der Besetzung von Regierungsämtern. in D. Ebbighausen, Hrsg, *Parteiensystem in der Legitimationskrise*, Opladen, 1973, 149 ff.
- 32 Bij sommige partijen bestaat, getuige de recall-gedachte, zelfs een streven tot vergaande controle van de opstrevers na hun verkiezing. Met name: PvdA, PSP, CPN.
- 33 T. Gurr, *Politimetrics*, Englewood Cliffs, 1972, 43-65; A. de Groot, *Methodology*, The Hague, 1967, 248-249. In discussies over de validiteit van bepaalde statusindicatoren wreekt zich vaak het doorelkaar halen van de termen 'variabele' en 'indicator' (Gurr, *op. cit.*, 24).
- 34 Hiervoor bijvoorbeeld Woshinsky, *op. cit.*, 13-22.
- 35 De televisie 'schenkt krachtens eigen aard een overmaat aan aandacht aan twee categorieën: de machtigen en de kleurrijke nieuwelingen' (Daalder, *op. cit.*, 66).
- 36 W. Ilchman and N. Uphoff, *The political economy of change*, Berkeley, 1969, 60-61.
- 37 M. Edelman, *The symbolic uses of politics*, Urbana 1964.
- 38 S. Faber, *Burgemeester een democratie*, Alphen aan den Rijn, 1974, 48-49. Vergelijk de recente uitspraken van het kamerlid M. Schakel (ARP): 'nu is het: een beetje jong in het parlement, snel naam maken en die springplank gebruiken voor een aardige functie elders'. *NRC-Handelsblad*, 15-11-74.

Nondecisions reconsidered*

door C. van der Eijk and W. J. P. Kok

1 Introduction

During the last decade, a lively, though often confused debate has developed in the political science community about decisions and nondecisions. This confusion can be attributed to a number of factors.

The concept has been 'defined' in a number of ways, which were not always consistent with each other. In section 2 of this article we will mention some of the ambiguities created in this way. A factor which greatly enhanced the confusion was that the concept originated in the contest between the so-called elitist and pluralist schools of community power studies, and that it was often associated with a (neo)elitist position. Because of this many scholars were not able to approach it in a detached and open-minded way, so the concept has not yet been reformulated in a more viable way. We will try to redefine the concept in such a way that it might be theoretically valuable, as well as devoid of the imperfections for which it has been criticized. We will show that this redefinition is connected with notions about the whole political process, so we will develop a model of this process, similar to the one Bachrach and Baratz indicated, and give 'nondecisions' an unambiguous place in it, by relating it to the process of agenda-building. In elaborating our argument we need to clarify the concept of 'politics' as well; a broad definition has clear advantages from analytical and comparative points of view, and it also leads to a notion of political agenda which is wider than usual. This leads to a number of research-questions which cover the overlap and interconnections between decisionmakers in different segments of society, as well as the political processes which connect these segments (section 5). The issue of researchability will be treated in section 9. We conclude that nondecisions are empirically observable.¹ In this context we will also address ourselves to the problem of key versus non-key issues. Finally, we try to put the concept of nondecision in a wider perspective. This is done in two ways. First, the connection with some forms of systems theory is shown, in a way pointing out some of the theoretical weaknesses in systemstheory. Secondly, in our last section, we conclude that the study of nondecisions is of great importance, but that it has to be related to other phenomena to avoid the fallacy of 'inputism', which manifests itself in a number of ways.

2 Nondecisions: The original conceptualization

At the end of the fifties and the beginning of the sixties, the decision ap-

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proach was the dominant paradigm in political science for studying community power (Dahl, Polsby).² This approach is characterized by, first of all, the selection of a number of key- (as opposed to routine, or trivial) issues. Having selected these, power can be inferred from participation in decision-making; research should accordingly be focused on a careful examination of a series of concrete decisions (Dahl, 1958).

Bachrach and Baratz challenge this method as being insufficient for a complete analysis of power relations. According to them, the decision method shows only one face of power: it leads us to explore the exercise of power in decisionmaking situations, but to overlook 'the equally, if not more important area of . . . nondecisionmaking, that is, that practice of limiting the scope of actual decisionmaking to 'safe' issues by manipulating the dominant community values, myths, and political institutions and procedures' (1970, 18).³

If, and only if, all important controversies or policy needs do reach 'the scope of actual decisionmaking', the decisionapproach suffices. As long as there is no evidence that this is the case, the decision-method overlooks an important aspect of power. Bachrach and Baratz derive their theoretical expectation that some controversies never reach the decisionmaking stage from amongst others Schattsneider who states:

'All forms of political organization have a bias in favor of the exploitation of some kinds of conflict and the suppression of others, because organization is the mobilization of bias. *Some issues are organized into politics, while others are organized out*' (1960, p. 71) (emphasis added).

Besides the definition given above, Bachrach and Baratz provide in different places alternative descriptions of what non-decisions and non-decision-making involve:

'political systems and subsystems develop a mobilization of bias, a set of predominant values, beliefs, rituals, and institutional procedures (rules of the game) that operate *systematically* and *consistently* to the benefit of certain persons and groups, at the expense of others The *primary* method for sustaining a given mobilization of bias is nondecisionmaking. *A nondecision is a decision that results in suppression or thwarting a latent or manifest challenge to the values or interests of the decisionmaker*'. (1970, p. 43-44) (emphasis added)

A third definition (1970, p. 57) designates as a non-decision 'an attempt to prevent an issue from reaching the decisionmaking stage'. Even though still different descriptions are provided in other places we think that the three 'definitions' above indicate most clearly the lack of rigor in the analysis of Bachrach and Baratz.

Without trying to be exhaustive, we can list a number of differences between

these three definitions.

1 — *In which phases of the political process can nondecisions be found?*

The first and third definitions center around preventing issues from reaching the decisionmaking stage. The second definition is broader and includes the decisionmaking stage as well (i.e. voting down a proposal is a decision, as well as a nondecision if the proposal challenges the values or interests of the decisionmaker) and probably the execution stage as well.

2 — *Are nondecisions the results of conscious strategy or not?*

That they are is strongly suggested by the first definition; '. . . manipulating the dominant community values . . .'. The third definition also gives this impression; 'an attempt to prevent . . .'. The second definition is a bit more open, as it takes also into consideration that nondecisions can result from the existing mobilization of bias without anybody trying to suppress something.

3 — *Are nondecisions characterized by mechanisms, by results, or by both?*

The first definition stresses the mechanisms as well as the result. The second one emphasizes mainly the result. The third definition only increases the confusion by referring to an *attempt* to reach the result.

4 — *Does nondecisionmaking work systematically and consistently to the benefit of certain actors?*

Definition two states this point most explicitly, and it seems to be implied also by the first definition, although there is not specified for whom the issues have to be 'safe'. The third definition seems to leave open this question.

Whatever ambiguity exists in the conceptualization by Bachrach and Baratz they use the concept of nondecision in an, admittedly not very elaborated, attempt to sketch a model of the political process. For studying power relations one needs knowledge about the whole political process and not only about the decisionmaking stage.⁴ A conception of the political process consisting of different stages seems less likely to distort the outcome of research than the decision-method, in which:

'(m)atters which are ignored by the community are ignored by the investigators as well' (Crenson, 1971, 4).

In section 4 of this paper we will draw upon Bachrach and Baratz' original sketch of the political process, and try to refine it, and in that way suggest a less ambiguous definition of nondecision.

3 Critique on the concept of nondecision

The introduction of the concept of nondecision by Bachrach and Baratz has triggered off a whole series of articles. In most cases the lack of attempts to reformulate the concept in more viable ways seems to indicate

that it challenged the political tastes and preferences of pluralists and their conception of American politics.⁵ This does not mean that the criticisms should not be taken seriously; on the contrary, many remarks are only too justified, and make necessary a reformulation of Bachrach and Baratz's theory.

In the following we will refer only to the reactions of Merelman (1968), Wolfinger (1971), Frey (1971), Parry and Morris (1974), and Lukes (1974); in our opinion these are the most fundamental and most influential in the field.

First of all there is the argument against Bachrach and Baratz sometimes introducing the existence of an elite by definition. Merelman (1968, 453) states that: '... the argument claims that the conflicts studied by the pluralists are unimportant. Why are they unimportant? Because they do not threaten an elite... If a conflict is unimportant (i.e. does not threaten an elite) an elite exists. If a conflict *does* threaten an elite, then an elite also exists... In all cases of conflict an elite exists. Therefore, *only by definition*, the existence of an elite in cases of conflict is 'proved'.

This argument is sound. It does not imply however that the concept of nondecisions is useless, because this does not necessarily imply an elite. A power-structure or power configuration can be more, or can be less elitist in character.

Therefore Wolfinger (1971, 1076) is also right in saying that while '... new-elitists generally look at the political scene from the left... there is nothing inherently leftist about the idea of non-decisions'.

A second point of criticism (which is sometimes connected with the first) is that nondecisions cannot adequately be studied in an empirical way. Wolfinger especially (1971) makes this point.

Frey (1971) does not share this opinion. We will return to his suggestions for research, and Wolfinger's comments hereupon, in section 9.

The third kind of objection concerns the different types of nondecisions. Bachrach and Baratz give many examples but no clear classification. Wolfinger and Merelman try to structure the discussion on this point by presenting a kind of typology, but Frey (1971, 1093) correctly states that their typologies are incomplete.

He considers the three dimensions which he distinguishes in their comments: 1 — the degree of restriction on potential influence attempts; 2 — the degree of awareness by the nondecider concerning his interest; and 3 — the preventive mechanism inducing the restriction. By dichotomizing each of these dimensions he constructs another typology. In our opinion none of these typologies are fully adequate. We will show in section 6 that the concept of nondecision can only be given a clear and unequivocal meaning, when it

refers to processes by which the *political agenda* is set; this means that a typology of nondecisions has to be based upon what happens in these processes.

A fourth point of criticism amounts to the allegation that we can discard the notion of 'nondecisions' because most of them 'can be seen to fit into the category of decisions. Such as are not explicable as decisions are primarily examples of 'false consciousness' which remains a problem to be elucidated' (Parry & Morriss, 1974, 333). Even though we will see that many nondecisions are the results of decisions of a sort, we think that the concept should not be discarded because the concept can be given a useful meaning in an agenda-building perspective (see section 6).

Bachrach (1970, 158) and Parenti (1970, 521) also remarked that many nondecisions really are decisions of a sort or products of decisions. But we must keep in mind that 'decisions' as used here are not the kind of 'key decisions' that are studied by the decision-method, not the binding decisions that are made by the decisionmakers.

A fifth, and last point of criticism links up with the problem of 'false consciousness', and implies that Bachrach and Baratz didn't go far enough in their criticism on Dahl. According to these critics they didn't make a sufficient distinction between 'subjective' and 'objective' interests. Ultimately they restrict their analysis, like the pluralists, to *expressed* policy preferences (Lukes, 1974). We will see that this criticism doesn't alter the fact that nondecision is a useful concept, but that it stresses the point that we cannot study the whole political process by decisions and nondecisions alone. In section 10 we will address ourselves to this problem.

4 A model of the political process

Before we can try to indicate where nondecisions fit in a model of the political process, it is necessary to elaborate on such a model first of all, as well as on our conception of politics.

Despite the fact that many analysts accept that the scope of politics is very broad, most of them implicitly make only use of a more narrow conception of 'politics', more in line with the colloquial meaning of the term. We want to start from Easton's definition of politics (1965, p. 21):

'those interactions through which values are authoritatively allocated for a society'.

To avoid unwarranted associations of legitimacy with the term 'authoritatively' we propose to replace this term by '*binding*'.⁶ Starting from this definition it is clear that every value which is allocated bindingly through interactions is part of the phenomena to be studied by political science. Thus, 'economic' values like income, investment, employment, consumption,

'cultural' values like education, recreation and information, as well as values like pollution (or a clean environment), communication etc., are all allocated through *political* interactions and processes. A broad conception as proposed here has clear advantages from an analytical and comparative point of view. Narrower conceptions, especially focussing on 'government', are problematic because the value-scope of 'government' is not the same for different times or places. The effect of this would be that the same interactions leading to the allocation of values, would be classified as political sometimes, while not in other cases (Helmets et. al., 1975, chapter 2).

Many political scientists seem to be unwilling to accept our position; once we look at the topics they study, most of the attention is plaid to the analysis of phenomena which are only associated with the more vulgar connotations of 'politics'. Some analysts even seem to reject a broad notion of politics whatsoever:

'If a man's major life work is banking, the pluralist presumes he will spend his time in the bank, and not in manipulating community decisions' (Polsby, 1963, 117).

In our view a banker is allocating certain community values, and thus politically active.⁷ Besides, when he takes his banking serious, he will be forced to be politically active in other ways too.

After these preliminary remarks about what we mean with 'politics' we will first summarize Bachrach and Baratz's model of the political process. They perceive all outputs and processes in the system under consideration as a function of what different actors ranging from the top-notch to below the grass-roots see as desirable.⁸ Many things which are wanted by these actors never lead to system-outputs. Some barriers have to be passed before the output stage is reached. By and large, the chances of succeeding in this are a reflection of the power and influence relations between the actors. Bachrach and Baratz see these barriers as mainly favoring the status quo: change requires a victory on every of the different barriers, the status quo needs only to win on one of them.

We will use the general outline of their model in the rest of this paper, though we will have to adapt it a bit to avoid the confusion which is inherent in Bachrach and Baratz's notions about the political process and about nondecisions (see sections 2 and 3).

This is done by making a distinction between wants, demands and issues, in a way analogous to Easton (1965).

Wants are opinions, interests, ideologies and similar ideas and attitudes which are cognized in a *non-political* way, i.e. which are not perceived as ultimately dependent for their fulfillment upon the political process. We also classify basic human needs as conceptualized by Maslow (1943) as

wants. Of course we have to keep in mind that most want are determined in a political way, they can be subject to (political) socialization, or more generally, they 'will themselves be a function of many social determinants' (Easton, 1965, p. 71). In section 10 we will treat this problem more extensively.

Demands are *politicized* wants. According to Easton 'a person or group must be brought to the point of giving voice to the idea that the members charged with the responsibility for making binding decisions ought to act as to fulfill this want' (Easton, 1965, p. 80).

Issues are not differentiated very clearly from demands by Easton. We think to attain optimal conceptual clarity and to be most closely in line with Easton's argument⁹ when we define issues as: demands which are recognized by the decisionmakers as problems to be decided upon: they are demands which became part of the agenda for decisionmaking.¹⁰

Besides this conception of issues as 'demands which are recognized by the *decisionmakers* to be decided upon', sometimes demands are recognized by the *mass-media* as problems waiting for binding decisions. We might call these *public-issues*. In an analysis of the political process it seems useful to define issues as recognized by the decisionmakers, and to analyze the role of the mass-media in that perspective. Of special importance is the question of the agenda-setting function of the mass-media, i.e. their role in the formation of issues, and in the ranking of issues on the political agenda. In which way this is related to the formation and ranking of policy preferences in the media's audiences, remains to be elucidated by research. See especially McCombs and Shaw (1972), and McLeod et. al. (1974).

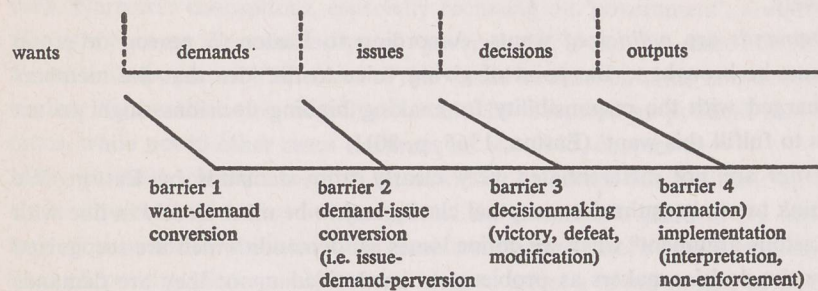
We can now describe the political process as a series of consecutive stages, as illustrated in figure 1. These stages are separated by the following barriers:

- 1 – prevention of want-demand conversion;
- 2 – prevention of issue formation, and demand perversion;
- 3 – decisionmaking;
- 4 – implementation.

Barrier 1: Prevention of want-demand conversion – Before a want can be acted upon by decisionmakers, it should be first of all translated in political terms, as wants themselves are still non-political terms. Not all wants however are converted into demands. There are a number of causes for this. Bachrach and Baratz (1970, 58) emphasize the role of 'values, beliefs, and myths that the dominant portion of the community embraces'. These make certain want-demand conversions legitimate and others not. Other causes which prevent the conversion may be lack of knowledge, anticipated reactions of others, and actions by other actors to prevent the occurrence of organizational structures conducive for want-demand conversion.

Figure 1:

A Barrier-model of the political process
(this figure is an adaptation of an analogous figure by Bachrach and Baratz, 1970, 54)



Barrier 2: Prevention of issue formation (i.e. demand-issue conversion) and demand perversion — Bachrach and Baratz give an adequate description: 'These barriers consist of procedures, customs, and organizational devices . . . that serve the function of selecting in somewhat disguised fashion from among a welter of competing public demands those . . . that key decision-makers are prepared or compelled to consider for decision. Devious roads of access and poor communication channels from certain sectors of the public to decisionmakers are not necessarily either accidental or inefficient' (1970, 60).

It becomes clear that if a demand does not reach issue status it will wither away eventually, unless its proponents can increase its weight in some way or another so that they can launch a second effort to reach issue status.¹¹ The phenomenon which we will call demand perversion refers to two, often related phenomena. First of all there is the possibility that demands are adopted partly by decisionmakers but in such a way that they lose part of their original nature.¹²

The second form of demand perversion has to do with processes of aggregation. Single demands about the same subject get combined, the resulting aggregate demands contain only a selection of the original ones. This is often necessary as it increases the life chances of a demand, but it usually has also the effect of moderating the original demands.

Threat of force, confusion, anticipated negative reactions, and the like can all be operating in this phase. Well known is the case of groups of citizens who, after having established contact with authorities, accept their own demands being watered down, for the sake of political feasibility.

This barrier is especially hard to overcome for deprived minorities. Because they lack other resources they are more dependent upon combined action than other groups. This poses first of all an organizational problem. Besides this, it offers ample opportunity for decisionmakers to 'divide and rule'.

Barrier 3: The decisionmaking process — Decisions are made about issues, i.e. on the basis of an agenda. There are no serious disagreements among political scientists about the way in which this process should be studied. The outcome of the process can be simply victory or defeat, however, it is also possible that a process of issue-perversion, analogous to the demand-perversion at barrier 2, takes place, Bachrach and Baratz call this 'modification' (1970, 54). This happens often when a 'rider' is attached to a proposal up for decision.

Barrier 4: Implementation — A decision is not always a political output. Sometimes it is, in those cases it concerns often symbolic outputs (Edelman, 1964). In most other cases there will be an implementation phase in which much can happen to prevent a certain output to be realized at all. The other phenomenon is output-perversion: channeling the output away from the intended beneficiaries to others.

5 Decisionmakers and their agenda

The model of the political process which we sketched above emphasizes the relation between outputs and wants, as mediated through power and influence structures which operate at the various barriers.

In studying a political process, we have to specify the system-level which we are looking at: a society, a community, a church, a school, a firm etc. In our presentation we will use terms referring to the level of the country. Once the system-level is specified, the task for the analyst is to find out which institutions and persons do make binding decisions (the decision-makers).

In order not to foreclose the possibility of multiple decisionmakers by way of definition, we can think of a specific set of decisionmakers for every value which is allocated. So, we can distinguish decisionmakers for 'economic' values, 'cultural' values, etc. It is now a matter of empirical research to determine if and to what extent, the different sets of decisionmakers overlap and to which degree they are interconnected 'in terms of a community of interests through the organizations and institutions, which they represented . . .' (Mokken & Stokman, 1974, 26).

In this way we avoid a too personalistic interpretation of power, in which power is only seen in dyadic, instead of network terms. Because of his definition of power, Dahl c.s. didn't investigate the possibility of interconnections

between the different elites he found (for an excellent discussion of different definitions of power, the reader is referred to Mokken and Stokman, 1975).

Decisionmakers decide upon *issues* (per definition). The set of issues, that is, problems recognized by the decisionmakers to be acted upon, we call the *political agenda*.

It is evident that analogous to a distinction between different sets of decisionmakers, we can distinguish between different parts of the political agenda. For instance, we can speak about a 'governmental agenda' and an 'economic agenda' etc. It only makes sense to differentiate between different parts of the political agenda, when it can be expected that these parts are related to relatively autonomous sectors (sub-systems)¹³ of a system.

The concept of agenda, and the idea that it consists of different parts, poses a number of questions for research:

1 – What determines whether a want does reach the political agenda at all? Cobb and Elder (1972) treat mainly this question, with special reference to the 'governmental' agenda.

2 – What determines on which part of the political agenda a want ends up, i.e. which set of decisionmakers is to decide upon it?

3 – What are the relations between the different parts of the political agenda, and between the different sets of decisionmakers? This relation can be investigated in at least two ways, statically, and dynamically. In a static analysis we can look for instance at the overlap and interconnections between decisionmakers of different segments of society. A dynamic analysis will focus upon the way in which the process in one (sub)system affects that in others, for example, it might very well be that the issue of workers-control and -participation in the economic sphere, is partly caused by a revitalization of democratic norms in the governmental sphere during the last decade.

6 Nondecisions, and the mobilization of bias

Until now we have mainly been busy defining our concepts: politics, wants, demands, issues, outputs, decisionmakers, and agendas. We are now at the point where we can try to define nondecisions in a more precise way than Bachrach and Baratz did. To achieve this we will start from their definition(s), and resolve the points of ambiguity in them (see section 2). The first point had to do with the question in which phases of the political process nondecisions can occur. Bachrach and Baratz seem to hesitate between two possibilities: nondecisions occur in the phases before the decisionmaking stage (i.e. nondecisions prevent wants to reach this phase). Elsewhere they seem to imply that a defeat at *any* of the four barriers des-

cribed in section 4 implies a nondecision. In our opinion, this last solution is an unfortunate one; it would force us to say that some decisions (i.e. about issues by decisionmakers) are nondecisions, while others are not. This can only reinforce the babylonian confusion of terminology. Would it make sense, though, to designate certain happenings in the implementation phase as nondecisions? We do not think so: the systemic effect of the 'defeat' of a want in the implementation phase is quite different from a defeat in the stages before the decisionmaking. In the first case the matter has gained issue-status, that is that it has been recognized by the decisionmakers as a problem to be decided upon; in the second case this is not so. Because of this, we think that the term nondecision will be most unequivocal if it is applied only to certain phenomena which take place *before* the decision-making stage. Phenomena, which take place *after* the decisionmaking stage should be designated with different terms.¹⁴

The second point of ambiguity concerns the point whether nondecisions are defined as the result of a conscious strategy or not. In our opinion it is quite possible that conscious strategy results in phenomena which we may call nondecisions. However, in a theory about the political process at the level of a political system it is completely irrelevant whether this is the case. The important characteristic is a systemic one: barriers are passed, or they are not. This renders a definition focussing on conscious behavior unnecessary. Besides, it is also unwarranted, the definition should embrace all phenomena which have the same systemic impact. This means that also other entities than individual human behavior might cause nondecisions: social institutions, the distribution of resources etc.

The statement above resolves also the third question raised about the original conceptualization: are nondecisions characterized by mechanisms, or by outcomes? In our opinion they are defined by outcomes, because in a model of the political process as described in section 4, it is irrelevant whether certain phenomena occur because of threat of force, because of anticipated reactions, because of the distribution of resources, or what have you. Our last remark about the original conceptualization had to do with nondecisions benefitting certain actors systematically and consistently. In our opinion this is a matter to be approached by empirical research, not by definition, so this aspect should not be included in our definition. We think that a definition in line with the remarks above is not subject any more to Melman's critique about introducing the existence of an elite by definition.

We now can define *nondecisions* as: *all those instances where behaviors and/or social processes result in preventing a want from reaching issue-status, that is, agenda-status.*

A distinction of different types of nondecisions can be made according to

their systemic effect:

- prevention of want-demand conversion;
- prevention of demand-issue conversion;
- demand perversion.

In section 10 we will treat processes of prevention and perversion in a wider perspective.

It will be clear that many nondecisions are really the results of decisions of a sort. We should keep in mind though, that these are decisions *of a sort*, they are not the kind of key-decisions which are associated with the decision approach.

What now is the distinction between nondecisions, and the mobilization of bias? In our opinion, the term 'mobilization of bias' can best be understood as a general reference to the idea that the way in which the political process develops is dependent upon the structure of the political system, that is, values, norms, resources and institutions. This means that the mobilization of bias makes itself felt in the political process through nondecisionmaking, but also in a number of different ways: want-generation; defining the realm of 'politics' (in its colloquial meaning)¹⁵; decisionmaking itself, and implementation as well (see section 10 for examples of this).

To put it differently: the mobilization of bias manifests itself in all phases of the political process. The task for theory development is to pin down the different forms in which it operates, and to make these forms amenable for empirical research.

7 Key and non-key decisions and nondecisions

Until now we have just been talking about (non)decisions without distinguishing them according to importance. It is evident that the analyst has to make some kind of selection to be able to study powerstructures through the analysis of (non)decisionmaking. It is also evident however, that most analysts are interested in generalizing their results to a scope more encompassing than the concrete phenomena they studied. This is only possible if the phenomena selected are representative of a larger universe (which has to be definable), or when the selection has been made according to importance. Frey (1971, 1083-5) demonstrates convincingly that the first solution is impossible, and that the second 'is a value judgement and ultimately subjective. 'Importance' is basically a normative and evaluative term'.

Still, most justifications for selections made by the researcher, are cast in terms of importance. In community power studies this led to a debate between Dahl and Bachrach and Baratz about whether or not the issue-areas studied by Dahl in New Haven really were important. Attempts to develop criteria for the relative importance of an issue have been under-

taken by, amongst others, McFarland, and Bachrach and Baratz. A first prerequisite for such a criterion is that it must be deducible from the 'puzzles' a model creates.

In our case, a criterion for importance has to be linked to the different ways in which the existing 'mobilization of bias' manifests itself. Efforts in this specific direction have already been undertaken. Bachrach and Baratz state that: 'A key issue, . . . is one that involves a genuine challenge to the resources of power or authority of those who currently dominate the process by which policy outputs in the system are determined' (1970, 47-8).

This formulation is not fully adequate. First it seems to imply the existence of a single elite, thus making it impossible to decide upon importance when there are different elites. Secondly, only challenges to elite positions would be classified as important, thereby qualifying reinforcements as unimportant. Nonetheless, the emphasis on power and authority structures seems to be correct. Frey remarks this too:

'the scopes most interesting for political analysis. . . tend to be those involving power over the allocation and distribution of power itself' (1971, 1091).

McFarland introduces this aspect in a more indirect way:

'whether or not the issue involves possible change in the procedural rules of the game' (1969, 82).

We draw upon all these formulations when we define *key-wants* as *all those wants which imply in case of their fulfillment a change in the existing structure of power and influence in the system*. In an analogous way *key-demands*, *key-issues*, *key-(non)decisions*, etc. can be defined.

An argument could be made about a possible circularity, and hence unverifiability of our presentation. Phenomena for research are selected upon importance, that is, upon their potential for changing the existing power-structure. To estimate this potential, one needs knowledge about this power-structure, which can only be obtained by studying key-wants, key-demands, etc., and so, the circle seems to be complete. In most cases this argument is not sound: the analyst can depend upon prior research in his field, enabling him to make an intelligent guess about some aspects of the power-structure, and hence, about importance. Besides, the notion of 'importance' is invoked mainly as a scanning device, a selection has to be made from all the phenomena which one might pick up for research. After the research has been concluded, the newly gained knowledge might lead to the conclusion that the topic important after all, but in science, as elsewhere, it is still better to have tried and failed, than not to have tried at all.

8 Nondecisions and Easton's system-theory

Easton (1965) devotes much attention in his theory to the conversion of inputs into outputs. Inputs are of two kinds, demands and support, generated by the intra- and extra-societal environments of the political system. The outputs affect these environments again and thereby help to shape the inputs themselves (feed-back). Although some 120 pages of his book are devoted solely to the role of demands (as inputs, source of stress and their conversion and regulation), his main question does not concern their life-cycle but the persistence of the political system as such.

Even though it is possible to establish a certain correspondence between Easton's input-output analysis and the non-decisionmodel, his emphasis, and thereby his interpretation and evaluation of the same phenomena is quite different.

In Easton's approach demands act as a source of stress on a system. First, when they remain unfulfilled, they may lead to a decline in support and thereby stimulate active opposition (p. 57).

Furthermore: '... a system is able to accept and process only a determinate amount of information with respect to what is demanded... Every political system must have some finite *capacity* with respect to the number of demands it can accept for processing...' (58) (emphasis added).

Besides this *volume stress*, there is also the problem of *content stress*. Some demands ask for more time and attention than others, especially when they cannot be handled in a *routine fashion*.

Easton's main concern is how the political system (and the authorities in particular) succeeds in manipulating the capacity to process demands so that persistence is assured (and the position of the authorities guaranteed). This regulation of the conversion process is achieved by structural and cultural regulators ('gatekeepers' and cultural norms). For '... demands just do not suddenly become transformed into outputs, nor are they just inexplicably blocked. They must run the gauntlet of a number of preliminary processes...' (Easton 1965, 72).

In figure 2 we give a simplified version of Easton's diagram showing the possible paths taken by demands as they move through the system (74-5). The environments provide wants, which are inputs for the system. A number of wants are never articulated in the form of desires for binding decisions, they are smothered at what Easton calls the boundary threshold (consisting of 'gatekeepers' and cultural norms). Even behind this boundary threshold the demands can be modified in content or reduced in number or even disappear completely as is depicted by the arrows. It becomes clear, by comparing figure 1 and figure 2, that there are close relations between the different barriers which we have distinguished in section 4 and the processes

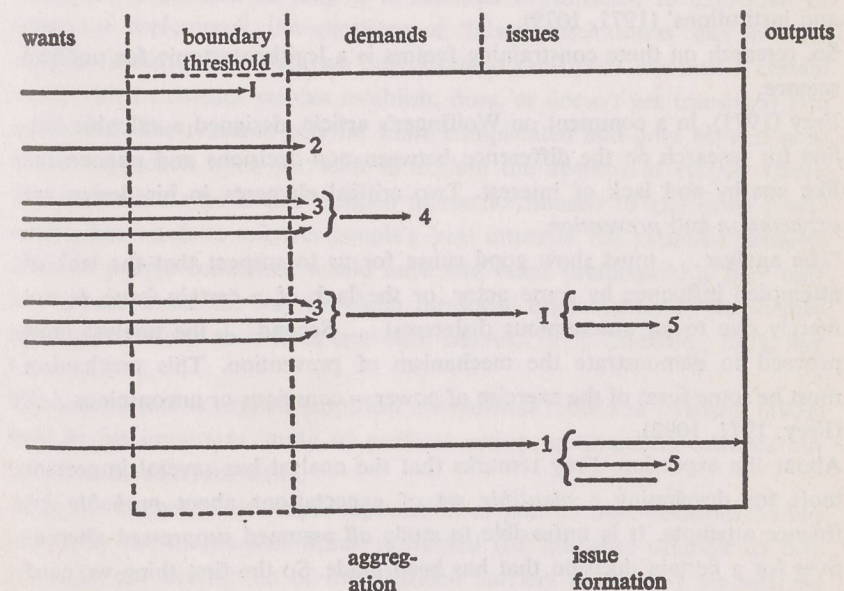
described by Easton.

The following relations can be observed:

	figure 1 barrier	figure 2 barrier
prevention of want-demand conversion	1	1
prevention of issue-formation	2	2,4
demand perversion	2	3
decisionmaking	3	5
implementation	4	—

In spite of this correspondence there remain important differences. To mention a few: Easton's approach does not draw much attention to various questions concerning patterns of control, power and influence. He more or less contends that the most important criterion for input selection is efficiency (to prevent demand overload) and that, within the limits set by this criterion, further selections occur randomly. We contend that this is not the case, the 'mobilization of bias' results in a skewed selection of inputs, first

Figure 2:
A simplified version of Easton's model of the political system (Easton, 1965, 74)



of all, because it has an impact on which demands can be processed efficiently, and which not; secondly, because efficiency is not the only, nor an always-present criterion.

Besides this, input-output analysis '... contains something of an elitist orientation' (Young, 1968, 48). It is not '... particularly well suited for the analysis of mass political phenomena ...' (Young, 1968, 46).

The agenda-approach, on the contrary, emphasizes the role masses can play in changing a political agenda (see: Cobb and Elder, 1972).

9 How to study non-decisionmaking empirically

How do we study the processes which occur at barriers 1 and 2 of our model, i.e. non-decisionmaking? The prevention of want-demand conversion (barrier 1) is the most difficult to investigate. Here the problematic question of 'real' and 'false' consciousness appears.

Wolfinger (1971) refers to this when he states that instances of non-decisionmaking cannot empirically be differentiated from other phenomena like apathy, pessimism and lack of interest. He also contends that the core of the problem lies in 'determining people's 'real interests', as opposed to what they say they want or what they are trying to get through political action'. But although he concludes that 'non-decision is an unnecessary idea' (1971, 1104) he nevertheless admits '... that the political agenda is constrained by a variety of factors including political socialization, ideology, procedures, and institutions' (1971, 1079).

So, research on these constraining factors is a legitimate topic for political science.

Frey (1971), in a comment on Wolfinger's article, designed a valuable outline for research on the difference between non-decisions and phenomena like apathy and lack of interest. Two critical elements in his design are *expectation* and *prevention*.

'The analyst ... must show good cause for us to suspect that the lack of attempted influence by some actor, or the lack of a certain issue, is not merely due to an autonomous disinterest ... Second ... the analyst must proceed to demonstrate the mechanism of prevention. This mechanism must be some form of the exercise of power — conscious or unconscious ...' (Frey, 1971, 1092).

About the expectation, Frey remarks that the analyst has several important tools for developing a *plausible* set of expectations about *probable* influence attempts. It is unfeasible to study *all* assumed suppressed alternatives for a certain decision that has been made. So the first thing we need is theory, a 'reasonable general understanding of what leads various political actors to protest, rebel, vote, bargain, ..., and so on ...' (1971, 1095).

A useful starting point for detecting nondecisions is by looking at those who profit from what the decisionmakers do or fail to do. (Frey, 1971, 1096; Bachrach and Baratz, 1962, 952).¹⁶ Wolfinger is quite right in remarking that the consequences of political actions are often not what the actors intended (1971, 1074). However, sometimes these unintended results give a clue to the operation of the mobilization of bias (partly resulting in nondecisions). This is especially the case when '... a small group can permanently maintain its marked privileges despite the growth of institutions formally intended to challenge them ...' (Lockwood, 1964, as cited by Crewe, 1974, 39).

For Wolfinger (1971, 1103) this usage of a 'plausible set of expectations about probable influence attempts' fails as an instrument to detect nondecisions because: 'if the predicted behavior were not observed, one could conclude either that a nondecision had occurred, or that the theory was wrong'.

However the conclusion that a non-decision has occurred is not made at this point or research. As a second step one has to look for *prevention* attempts of mechanisms; the theory only assisted in selecting research phenomena, so that not all of them have to be scanned in search of possible non-decisions. Only after this further examination one has to decide between the possibilities of non-decisions, or a wrong theory.

It will be clear, that as long as a research is restricted to expressed or conscious preferences, the questions of 'false consciousness' can in principle be avoided. For then we only have to determine whether a certain want, which existence we can establish, does, or doesn't get translated into a demand. The research gets far more complicated and goes beyond non-decisionapproach when we want to explain the absence of certain wants. The researcher who is not inclined to restrict himself to expressed preferences, but wants to uncover people's 'real interests' has to make plausible that the people concerned would have had other preferences if they only knew more about the way in which the social organization of which they are a part, affects their lives (see also: Balbus, 1971, Connolly, 1972, and Lukes, 1974).

The second tool is explicit empirical *comparison* (1096) as Crenson (1971) used in his important study of political action an in-action towards air-pollution in different cities.

After the analyst justified his expectation of possible non-decisions he has to specify the mechanism which prevented the influence attempt to take place. In our description of the different barriers (section 4) we referred already to different mechanisms that can operate (anticipated reactions, lack of knowledge etc.).

Research into the next phase of non-decisionmaking (barrier 2) is easier. Once we have established that a want has overcome barrier 1, we can find out whether it reached agenda-status, i.e. issue-status. The criterion for deciding upon conversion from demand into issue has to be dependent upon the specific research context and the parts of the political agenda involved (see section 5). Demand prevention can be studied by content-analyzing the different ways wants and demands have been formulated. How to study the mechanisms involved here is also dependent upon the research-setting. We can think of interviews with those who were involved, scrutinizing of minutes etc.

As we already indicated, research about the decisionprocess itself should be done by way of the decisionmethod.

The last barrier of the model is the implementation phase. This can be studied in two ways. First of all, we can use policy (output) analysis. If we do this, we cannot designate anything in this phase non-decision making, for reasons indicated in section 6. Another way to study the implementation process is by changing system-level (see section 6), in this case we can apply the concept of nondecision.

10 Biases in (non)decisiontheory

In our analysis so far we have mainly emphasized the fate of a want and the various barriers that bar the entrance to the decisionmakers and which have to be overcome by a want to reach agenda status.

The accentuation of this particular phase of the political process results logically from our focus on the dispute that originated as a consequence of Bachrach and Baratz' attack on the validity of the conclusions reached with the decisionmethod. Bachrach and Baratz made an invaluable contribution to political science by pointing out that the decisional method shows only one face of power. Besides emphasizing a second face of power, they also called some attention to feedback processes in their model, as most proponents of the decision-method also did. Their analysis, and our elaborated version of it as well, however, still fails, as a meaningful comprehensive approach, because it looks almost exclusively at the 'input' side of politics. This results in the 'fallacy of inputism' (the term is from Macrides, 1968, 84).

This input bias is prevailing in many 'fields' of political science: (non)-decisiontheory, political socialization, political participation, attitudinal studies, many contextual studies — mainly those fields where the 'behavioral revolution' has had most of its impact.

Macrides (1968) sees as the characteristics of 'inputism' the substitution for explicitly political phenomena like governmental structures and forms as

topics for explanation, of all factors which are *potentially* relevant for a wide class of political phenomena, thereby not only neglecting 'the political' but explicitly avoiding it. A major reason for this is the cultural bias of western political scientists. One of the myths of democratic liberal theory is that the political process is determined by the 'parallelogram of opposing forces'. In this vision, the state is considered as a 'black-box' and its role is '... reduced to the narrow confines of an organization that channels, reflects and expresses, commands and instructions that come from 'elsewhere'' (Macrides, 1968, 85).

The decisional structure is perceived as having a very great responsiveness and penetrability for the grievances of every (potential) group. So one only needs to study all (potential) inputs, and the job is done, because 'politics constantly remains a dependent variable' (Macrides, 1968, 85). But for 'developed' countries can be said what Pye already remarked for 'transitional' societies '... instead of the government responding to pressures from society, the process is in many respects essentially reversed' (Pye, 1962, 43).

Many Marxist analyses show a likewise neglect of the important role of the State. They often consider that all '... levels of social reality, including the State, are simple epiphenomena reducible to the 'economic' base. Thereby a specific study of the State becomes (also) superfluous' (Poulantzas, 1972, 239).

In the remainder of this section we want to make some remarks about three important results of inputism.

(1) *Neglect of the output side of the political process* — The concept of nondecision has originally been focussed on the input side of politics. Later Bachrach and Baratz extended the meaning of the term to the implementation phase as well, but we have indicated that this leads to terminological confusion. Nonetheless the output side of the 'black box' can be analyzed in roughly the same terms as the input side. We have seen that the issues which develop are not representative of all the wants in a society because of nondecisions. These cause certain wants never to reach issue status (*prevention*) and certain wants only to reach issue status after a modification of their content (*perversion*).

These phenomena of *prevention* and *perversion* also play at the output side. Therefore, an output-focussed approach is indispensable as a complement in order to know *who* gets what (Dolbeare, 1970, 81).¹⁷

A good example of prevention is the case of social security funds. In many countries much of the money made available by explicit decisions is never spent. This is not caused by a *malafide* administration, but by the fact that many of the potential benefitters do not even know that they are

eligible for support. In this case the mobilization of bias manifests itself through the distribution of resources: information, skills (like alfabetism) and organization.¹⁸

An example of perversion at the output stage is that often developmental aid is more profitable for industries of the donating country than it is for the 'receiving' country.

Even though we will not elaborate very far on this point, we think that it is unfortunate to call these phenomena 'nondecisions'. Some of the reasons for this are already spelled out in section 6, here we want to add one other: once a want has reached agenda status it has often gained a place in the notions of legitimacy existing in the system. This itself is already an outcome of the political process, the outcomes after the decisionmaking stage are of a different nature, which might best be reflected by different terms.

Summarizing: at the input stage the mobilization of bias manifests itself in *nondecisions* (prevention and perversion of wants reaching the agenda), in the output stage the manifestation is *nonimplementation* (prevention, or nonexecution; and perversion).

(2) *Feedback affecting the mobilization of bias* — This is the kind of feedback which is usually recognized. However, our impression is that this recognition is perfunctory. What is needed is theorydevelopment and accompanying research indicating how outputs affect existing institutions (and their procedures and habits), values and norms, and the distribution of resources, and last but not least, how outputs affect wants. In the way we earlier sketched the political process, wants were seen as nonpolitical, but themselves subject to many social determinants. We contend that one of the major determinants of wants is the output of (broadly conceived) politics.

(3) *Output directly affecting agendabuilding* — Outputs affect the mobilization of bias, and thereby, the process of agendabuilding. However, agendas are partly determined *directly* by policies and outputs. If we do not take this into account we still make the same deterministic fallacy of inputism. Much of what is called 'the real stuff of politics' consists of efforts to set the agenda in a way bypassing want-issue conversions. Decisionmakers do not merely react to those wants that gain enough impact and support to develop into issues, they develop issues by themselves. If they do not they will be criticized for being 'unimaginative', 'running behind the facts' etc., or, more important: decisionmakers mostly have themselves notions of how things should be; '... political leaders are active participants in the agendabuilding process and not simply impartial arbiters of disputes' (Cobb & Elder, 1971, 97).

This kind of agenda-setting which is not connected with the wants of others than the decisionmakers, can be a conscious strategy to change the relative priority of other issues (creating an overload to justify the neglect of certain issues). A well-known example is the 'common-enemy' phenomenon: to avoid internal cleavages becoming manifest, decisionmakers (usually *they*, not *we*) invent a common enemy. A last and important way in which the agenda is set directly by policies and outputs, is incremental decisionmaking. Even though it cannot always be said that it is intended, one of the results is that often this years and next years agenda overlap for quite a part, hereby diminishing the demand-processing capacity of the decisionmaking institutions.

Notes

- 1 In an earlier version of this article, a case-study was added along with our theoretical argument. It concerned the issue (in the Netherlands) and nonsue (in Belgium) of a union of army-conscripts. Copies of this study can be obtained from the authors. A further elaboration of it, mainly treating the development of the conscripts-union in the Netherlands, can be found in a forthcoming study by Kok.
- 2 In sociology the decision-method never reached such a prominent status.
- 3 The word 'nondecision' can only be understood correctly if it is seen as emerging from a reaction to the *decision*-method. Unfortunately, the decision-method has been mainly associated with pluralist interpretations, and is often thought as being capable of reaching only such conclusions. Lukes (1974) clearly indicates that this is not necessarily so. Ellemers (1968) and Mokken and Stokman (1974) show convincingly that the decision-method is only one of a series of strategies for studying power, each of which makes only sense under certain circumstances.
- 4 Besides this, one can object to the decision-making approach that it does not consider that large numbers of 'matters of the greatest social importance ... are not objects of anyone's decision at all' (Wolff, 1968, 118).
- 5 Polsby (1963, 113) agrees with: 'an unspoken notion among pluralist researchers that at bottom *nobody* dominates' and he also states that 'the claims of small, minorities are *usually* attended to' (118) (emphasis added). See also Crenson (1971, 4) who contends that many political scientists think that the answer upon the question why only certain important topics get to be issues 'lies beyond the scope of political science — that there is no political explanation for the existence of non-issues ...' because the American political system has a very high 'penetrability' in their view. Noteworthy is that European analysts react more moderately to the idea of nondecisions and are more prone to the idea of nondecisions and are more prone to incorporate the concept partly or totally in their own theories (Parry and Morriss, 1974; Mokken and Stokman, 1975).
- 6 This interpretation of the meaning of Easton's use of the term authoritatively is supported by De Vree (1968) and Rosenthal (1974). 'Binding' means that the allocation will be accepted, whether out of 'free will',

routine, or out of fear. Of course it is also possible to drop the term altogether: allocations are, or are not made. Part of the confusion about this matter arises from the double meaning of the term 'allocation', which means the assignment, as well as the process of assignment.

- 7 See for an elaboration of this point, with special reference to banking, Helmers et. al. 1975.
- 8 The radical critique by Lukes (1974) and Balbus (1971) points exactly at this. Bachrach and Baratz's approach takes different want' as given, thereby excluding the problem of the generation of these wants.
- 9 Easton states for instance that 'the emergence of issues . . . establishes some priorities among the whole range of demands waiting to be acted upon, and thereby helps to reduce the pressure of the volume seeking consideration as serious alternatives for policy' (1965, 141).
- 10 Cobb and Elder, in their excellent analysis of agenda-formation, make a distinction between a 'systemic' and a 'formal' agenda. 'The systemic agenda consist of all issues that are commonly perceived by members of the political community as meriting public attention and as involving matters within the legitimate jurisdiction of existing governmental authority' (1972, 85) and 'the formal agenda . . . as that set of items explicitly up for the active and serious consideration of authoritative decisionmakers' (1972, 86). It is evident that Cobb and Elder use here a narrower conception of politics than we do. The notion of legitimacy which they introduce in their definitions is problematic. In our opinion it can not be assumed beforehand that notions of legitimacy are undifferentiated for different parts of the political community. Moreover it seems unwarranted to restrict the subject matter of agenda's to *legitimate* 'issues'.
The 'systemic agenda' seems to be the set of (legitimate) demands as defined by us, while the formal agenda resembles more our agenda-notion.
- 11 One way of increasing the weight of a demand is to mobilize support. This can be done for instance by trying to raise the political consciousness of groups which are potentially supportive of one's own demand. It will be clear that the mass-media can play a very important role in this respect. Prominence in the media sometimes diminishes the life chance of demands and issues. Well known is the case of fluoridation in many communities, as well as cases of intended mergers between firms, which didn't materialize after they got publicly known in an early phase.
- 12 A common way in which this happens, is by channeling demands through 'informal or *ad hoc* bodies — interdepartmental committees, . . . advisory committees, and specially commissioned tribunals or investigatory committees —' (Crewe, 1974, 17). The effect is usually that the original demand is replaced by the recommendation of these committees.
- 13 Whether it makes sense to differentiate between various agenda's is highly dependent upon the concrete political system that is being studied. Only after the research has been concluded a definitive evaluation of the usefulness of the distinction can be made. In our opinion, the 'governmental' and 'economic' agenda's get more and more intertwined in many of western societies nowadays, whereas the 'religious agenda' was of much more importance in mediaeval Europe than it is at the moment.
- 14 In a certain way we can still classify certain parts of the implementation pro-

cess as nondecisions. This requires however a *change in the level* of analysis. Until now we have been speaking about processes which occur in a country. Complex political systems can be conceived as consisting of different subsystems. One of its subsystems is the *bureaucracy*. If we now change our focus from the country to the bureaucracy, we see that the decision reached by the decisionmakers of the country, serves as input for the subsystem, the bureaucracy. We can now repeat the whole line of reasoning summarized in figure 1. In most cases, the decision of the higher system will immediately pass barrier 1 and form a demand for the subsystem. In the subsystem a new process of agendabuilding will take place, this process will again be biased, so nondecisionmaking will take place here too. Note, however, that this can only be called nondecisionmaking if we analyze the working of the subsystem involved. The stronger the control of the higher system on its implementing subsystem, the more the political process in the subsystem will be predetermined.

- 15 Schattschneiders phrase 'some issues are organized into politics, while others are organized out' can be read to point to decisionmaking, as well as to the definition of politics, colloquially. In the first case the phrase means that some wants reach the agenda almost by default, while others do not reach the agenda at all, in the second case it refers to different parts of the agenda. The importance of the distinction between these parts is that they are often associated with *different* values, norms and institutions (i.e. different notions of legitimacy, decisional procedures etc.).
- 16 The expectations relating to non-decisions, or non-issues, can be derived from *policy-analysis*, when this shows 'glaring inequalities . . . in the distribution of things avowedly valued by actors in the system . . . without (...) ameliorative influence attempts by those getting less of these values' (Frey, 1971, 1097).
- 17 Morriss (1972, 460) criticizes Dahl for exactly this reason, because in the New Haven Study he didn't bother to analyze the payoffs of certain decisions for the various actors.
- 18 Another case of prevention is described by Pressman and Wildavsky (1973). They notice that for the implementation of some programs a number of decision points has to be passed: acts of agreement for the program to continue. If there are 70 agreements needed, assuming a 80 per cent probability of agreement at each, the cumulative probability for success is .000000125!
In this way programs can be designed in such a way that it is very improbable that they ever will be implemented.

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