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DOGE's attempt to be a force for genuine reform will depend on its decision-making

COMMENTARY | The Elon Musk-backed efficiency initiative should rely on sound decision-making as well as selecting sustainable preferences, argue two scholars.

[ALI ABBAS](#) and [FRANK V. ZERUNYAN](#) | MARCH 24, 2025 02:39 PM ET

DOGE

DEPARTMENT OF GOVERNMENT EFFICIENCY

THE FIRST 100 DAYS



Government efficiency or the attempt to bring private-sector-inspired innovations to control the deficit is not new. Almost every modern-era president has campaigned or proposed fiscal reforms to control the deficit. Fiscal responsibility is managing the government's finances prudently and balancing spending and revenue to keep the debt under control. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, every state but Vermont has a balanced budget requirement.

The federal budget was last balanced in 2001 under President Clinton. The Congressional Budget Office projects the current budget deficit of \$1.9 trillion to rise 118% of GDP in 2035. This condition is untenable unless some restraints are placed to control spending.

The focus in the current administration has been on wasteful spending of government funds, blaming how and why projects were funded in a previous administration, layoffs, and who should be blamed for previously funded projects. This blame game is not novel, either. Every president since President Clinton has attempted to "change the way Washington does business." President Obama said, *"We cannot begin to tackle the challenges we face in the short term to revive our economy and in the long term to put us on the path to growth without restoring fiscal responsibility and accountability to government."*

under prior administrations provide the license for the Department of Government Efficiency to be a force of genuine reform.

However, this license must be strategic and based on the science and practice of good decision-making.

The Importance of Transparency in the Decision Process

We are collectively decision scholars and practitioners. Our research and practice connect good decision-making to good governance. Like in good governance, the challenge of good decision-making requires transparency, accountability, efficiency, and results. It is insufficient to examine a project's cost or outcome alone.

A good decision is made by considering several elements: (i) the value it produces based on the preferences desired, (ii) the feasible alternatives, (iii) The information available at the time of making the decision, and the uncertainties that are incorporated to capture the consequences and various scenarios that follow the decision, (iv) The logic that is used to make the decision, (v) The frame that is incorporated, which includes the different perspectives of individuals affected by the decision.

A common mistake in decision-making is not considering sufficient alternatives and not considering downstream options that may be necessary upon the revelation of new information. Also, failure to think about the possible scenarios may result in unintended consequences that would be expensive to remedy. A process that captures these elements will require transparency.

What skews this good decision-making is mutual admiration encounters, which are subject to many cognitive biases, including the "Us vs. Them" concept of hyper-partisanship or confirmation bias, where we only see what supports our viewpoint and ignore information and evidence that may contradict it.

In many situations, leadership in the United States has examined past decisions, such as the John F. Kennedy Bay of Pigs invasion decision. Kennedy adviser and historian Arthur Schlesinger recalls, "*Our meetings were taking place in a curious atmosphere of assumed consensus, [and] not one spoke against it.*" Soon after, Kennedy revamped the decision-making process, asking individuals to act as general skeptics and having meetings without Kennedy present to minimize the effects of obedience to authority and mutual admiration.

What is different in President Trump's administration decision-making, and why it is even more essential to have a straightforward decision process, is that it is not the same administration examining the decision-making process but a different administration auditing past decisions in a hyper-partisan era. Unfortunately, this decision-making process and the president's heavy presence revives many biases and motives, among others, that complicate the path to good decision-making.

The Change in Preferences and its Implications

Decision-making and preferences refer to selecting choices among options influenced by a set of preferences. What is essential in this process is to identify what preferences are used in the decision-making and what tradeoffs among the different objectives are incorporated. We have not seen these preferences spelled out in DOGE's decision-making process.

Elections have consequences, including changes in preferences. For example, many socially inspired preferences of the prior administration are no longer essential for this one. Diversity, equity, and inclusion are not necessary objectives in this administration, but they were in the previous one. Therefore, the decisions made by a funding agency may have been reasonable based on the preferences of the last administration but not of this administration.

four years with election cycles are not sustainable enough to govern a large organization like the federal government. Constant preference changes cost unnecessary effort, time, and money. More importantly, swift public policy changes may prevent viable alternatives from being considered. For example, an investment in a cure for a disease may not be feasible in four years. Changing preferences too soon will make the alternative of curing the disease infeasible.

Therefore, governments must exercise caution when setting preferences. Allowing a small group to set preferences may be dangerous. Benjamin Franklin noted, "*For when you assemble a number of men to gain the advantage of their joint wisdom, you inevitably assemble with those men, all their passions, their prejudices, their errors of opinion, their local interests, and their selfish views. From such an assembly, can a perfect production be expected?*"

The Opportunities for DOGE


Government Executive

through transparency, accountability, efficiency, and results. To ensure ethical decision quality, we propose 11 elements described through a timely acronym: *AMERICA Together Working For Success*.

1. Awareness. Ethical awareness includes identifying acts of deception.
2. Motives: Motives of individual participants to decision-making, including conflicts of interest.
3. Environment: The operating environment includes obedience to authority and mutual admiration.
4. Rationalization: Reasoning to be convinced of a bad decision.
5. Information: the availability of information or data when deciding.
6. Cognitive biases: the impact of cognitive bias in decision making.
7. Alternatives: putting extra effort into brainstorming alternatives the decision team may consider.
8. Tradeoffs the team is willing to make if they cannot meet all objectives or preferences.
9. Wellbeing: Ensuring that decision-makers are not subject to fear, anxiety, or compromise.
10. Formulation, which involves examining the decision from different perspectives.
11. Success of all stakeholders and not just shareholders.

President Trump's executive order states that DOGE aims to implement his agenda by "modernizing federal technology and software to maximize government efficiency and productivity." The opportunity to do so highly depends on sound decision-making and selecting sustainable preferences.

Professor Ali Abbas' research focuses on decision analysis, risk analysis, multi-attribute utility theory, and data-based decision-making.

Professor Frank Zerunyan's principal areas of expertise include governance, public-private partnerships, civic and ethical leadership, land use, medical regulation, negotiation, and executive education. 

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