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**A Load of Old Garbage:  
Applying Garbage-Can Theory  
to Contemporary Housing Policy**

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# **A Load of Old Garbage: Applying Garbage-Can Theory to Contemporary Housing Policy**

## **Abstract**

This paper reviews the applicability of John Kingdon's garbage-can model of agenda setting and alternative specification for understanding the complexities of policy making in the housing policy context. Garbage-can theories reject conventional 'policy cycle' models which envisage policy development processes as rational and underpinned by the logic of problem solving. They posit that there is only a loose relationship between problems and the policy solutions offered by national governments.

Using a case study from the Australian housing policy context, this paper explains the principles of Kingdon's garbage-can theory and evaluates its usefulness. The authors argue that, with certain adaptations, it is a useful descriptive and explanatory model for understanding complex housing policy-making processes. A modified framework is used to explain how the Australian housing policy agenda has become narrowed to focus on safety net assistance for the most disadvantaged, while housing policy problems have continued to worsen. By providing a model for understanding the forces which drive irrational and reactive policy change, it is hoped that the groundwork will be laid for pursuing a more genuinely problem-solving approach in housing policy.

## **Key words**

housing policy  
housing assistance  
policy making  
governance

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