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How Do Issues Get on Public Policy Agendas?

John W. Kingdon

The purpose of this chapter is to provide some context to other studies of agenda-setting. It discusses both a context of governmental institutions and a context of theory within which one might better understand the setting of public policy agendas. I come to this task not as a sociologist, but as a political scientist who has spent the bulk of his career studying governmental institutions and trying to understand legislative processes and the formation of public policies by governmental officials.

Let's first understand how I will use words. I take a governmental agenda to be a list of subjects or problems to which governmental officials and those close to them are paying serious attention. So an agenda-setting process narrows a list of conceivable subjects within any domain (e.g., within health, transportation, or social welfare) to those that actually are the focus of attention. Within agenda subjects, a second and quite different process narrows a very large set of possible alternatives from which choices could be made to the set of alternatives that are seriously considered. Then an authoritative choice (e.g., a legislative enactment or presidential decision) is made among the alternatives in the choice set. So agenda-setting and alternative specification are not the same as final choices. We're talking, here, not about how issues get decided, nor about how decisions are implemented and what impacts they have, but rather how issues come to be issues in the first place.

This chapter has three parts. First, I discuss some of the major conclusions that emerged from my larger study of agenda-setting in the federal government (Kingdon 1984). Second, I consider the place of ideas (as opposed to forces like interest group pressure or career election incentives) in public policy formation. Third, I reflect a bit on the place of social science in public policy.
Incrementalism is probably the most common model of policy change, and it does describe some processes well. But agenda change often does not proceed incrementally, in small steps. Instead, issues "hit" suddenly. There's a tremendous flurry of activity, and government policy changes in major ways all at once. The New Deal, the Great Society, the Reagan Revolution in the first 10 months of 1981; all illustrate this pattern of spasms of reform interspersed with periods of rest.

A satisfying model of agenda-setting needs to comprehend sudden change, to tolerate enormous complexity, and to model messy processes in orderly ways. A good place to start is with the Cohen-March-Olsen (1972) model of "organized anarchies," large, multipurpose, fragmented entities like universities or the federal government. According to this model, separate streams of problems, solutions, participants, and choice opportunities run through such organizations, each stream with a life of its own and largely unrelated to the others. People generate solutions (proposals) whether or not they are solving problems, for instance, and then look for problems to which to hook their solutions. Urban mass transit, for example, has at various times been portrayed by its advocates as a solution to the problems of traffic congestion, air pollution, and energy shortages as each of these problems has heated up. Outcomes then depend heavily on how these fairly separate streams are coupled—which solutions get linked to which problems, which participants are present when decisions are made, which problems and which solutions stay under consideration when a choice opportunity presents itself.

In my revised version of the Cohen-March-Olsen model, there are three streams: problems, proposals, and politics. People in and around government recognize and come to concentrate on certain problems rather than others, they propose and refine policy proposals (alternatives), and political events like shifts in national mood, changes of administration, or interest group campaigns move along on their own. These streams develop largely independently of one another. Proposals are generated whether or not they are solving a problem, problems are recognized whether or not there is a solution, and political events move along according to their own dynamics.

At certain critical times the three streams come together, and the greatest agenda change occurs. A problem is recognized, a solution is available, and the political conditions are right. Advocates of proposals seize on those times of opportunity (open policy windows)—such as changes of administration, renewals of enabling legislation, or shifts in partisan or ideological balances in Congress—to hook their solutions to problems that seem pressing or to take advantage of propitious political happenings.
Something is done when the window is open, or the opportunity is lost and advocates must wait for the next window to open.

I now discuss each of the three streams in turn, and then discuss their coupling.

Problem Recognition

Why do important people in and around government pay attention to some problems and not to others? Fairly often, government simply monitors the performance of systems through standard indicators like highway deaths, cost of Medicare, commuter ridership, or disease rates. Sudden shifts in these indicators or performance contrary to expectations produces attention. At other times, it takes some sort of focusing event, a disaster or crisis. Plane crashes focus attention on airline safety, for instance, in a way that one-by-one automobile deaths don’t do the same job for highway safety, even though highway deaths are far more numerous.

There is a difference between a problem and a condition. As one of my respondents said, “If you have only four fingers on one hand, that’s not a problem; that’s a situation.” So problem recognition is not simply a matter of observing objective conditions; it involves interpretation as well. Conditions become problems when we feel we should do something to change them. How do we come to that sort of conclusion?

Conditions sometimes become problems when they conflict with prevailing values. Uneven access to health care is or is not a problem, for instance, depending on whether one thinks of health care as a right. Another fascinating way for conditions to become problems is to place them in one category or another. If transportation of the handicapped is a transportation problem, for example, then low-cost and effective solutions like dial-a-ride or subsidized taxi service are appropriate. But if transportation of the handicapped is classified into the category of civil rights, then retrofitting subways for elevators and providing bus lifts is warranted. The struggle for appropriate categories makes all the difference in framing the issue.

Getting people to see a condition as a problem is a central political accomplishment.

The Policy Stream of Proposals

Picture a community of specialists in health, transportation, or any other area: researchers, congressional staffers, bureaucrats in planning and evaluation offices, academics, and analysts working for interest groups. Ideas float around in such communities. Specialists have their notions of future directions and their specific proposals. They try out and revise their ideas
by going to lunch, attending conferences, circulating papers, holding hearings, presenting testimony, publishing articles, and drafting legislative proposals. Many, many ideas are considered at some point along the way.

The process by which proposals are selected from this very large set resembles biological natural selection. Much as molecules floated around in the “primeval soup” before life came into being, ideas float around in a “policy primeval soup” in these communities of specialists. Both molecules and ideas bump into one another and combine in various ways. In each type of evolution, new elements are sometimes introduced (mutation), and others are formed from previously existing elements (recombination). Thinking of policy change as recombination solves an intriguing puzzle: How one finds sudden and substantial policy change at the same time that there is “no new thing under the sun.” There is change, but it’s the recombination of familiar elements.

The policy primeval soup takes a long time to bubble around. Development of proposals must be done long before the opportunity for actual adoption presents itself, because at that point, it’s too late to hone a proposal. Gradually, a policy community arrives at a “short list of ideas,” a consensus at least on what the few live options are. In the process of policy evolution, some ideas fall away, others survive and prosper, and some are selected to become serious contenders for adoption.

By what criteria are some ideas discarded? First, the proposal must be technically feasible, and specialists ask such questions as the following: Will it work? Can it be drafted? Are the details ironed out? Second, there must be an acceptable budgetary cost, and items that seem too expensive are shunted aside. Third, proposals must be acceptable to the mass public or to attentive publics. Some ideas are dropped because specialists think they would run into a buzz saw, and it’s not worth their trouble. The values held in important publics constrain the choices that can be made in specialized communities.

The Political Stream

Our third stream, the political stream, is composed of changes of administration, shifts in partisan or ideological balances in Congress, shifts in national mood, partisan realignments, or interest group pressure. This stream is an important endogenous part of policymaking, but it proceeds according to its own dynamics, such as elections, nominations, partisan politics, and interest group campaigns.

The following examples suggest the tremendous importance of this stream. A widespread perception that the national mood favors governmental activism at one point in time or favors smaller government at
another time, for instance, profoundly affects which items are possible and which ones are not. Or the values of elected officials—the current president and administration, or the distributions of values in Congress—are absolutely critical to what can be pushed and what must wait. Or social movements like the civil rights, consumer, environmental, or taxpayer revolt movements sometimes sweep across our land bowling over everything in their paths.

Joining the Streams

Advocates (policy entrepreneurs) continually push their pet proposals or push attention to particular problems, and try to keep issues alive in good times and bad. But an open policy window presents them with a special opportunity. These entrepreneurs keep their proposals at the ready, and become particularly active when a problem floats by to which their proposals can be the solution, or when a development in the political stream can be used to their advantage. At those critical points in time, they play a major part in joining the previously separate streams, by hooking their solutions to problems, or by seeing that proposals from the policy stream are considered when the political conditions are right. Much like a window for a space shot, policy windows stay open only so long. If you don’t seize your opportunity when you have it, you must wait for the next one to come along. Thus Lyndon Johnson told his major advisers that the election of 1964 opened a window for Great Society proposals that would last only 2 years, and a tremendous amount of major legislation was passed before it closed.

Generally, alternatives or policy proposals are generated in the policy stream, and agenda change comes from changes in the problems or politics streams. So windows sometimes open because problems become pressing. The stock market crash of 1987 created a golden opportunity to work on the federal budget deficit, for example, which as it happened was not seized. Or windows open because of a change in the political stream. The election of the Reagan administration, for instance, created many opportunities for the Heritage Foundation at the same time that it shut down any chance for comprehensive national health insurance. Sometimes windows open predictably, as with the scheduled renewal of enabling legislation. At other times, they open unpredictably, as with an airline crash.

Events in the problems or political streams may set the governmental agenda (the list of subjects to which governmental officials are paying serious attention). But to make it beyond that to an agenda of active decisions, all three streams must be joined. People recognize a problem, a proposal is ready that can be related to that problem, and the political conditions are right. If one of the three is missing, then the item’s place
on a decision agenda is probably quite fleeting. There is no single-factor explanation for agenda change; several things come together at once.

One of my respondents, a lobbyist, captured the whole process in an absolutely beautiful image. He showed how some of the process is governed by large events not under anybody's control, how people wait for their opportunities, how they must be prepared ahead of time, and how the joining of the streams is crucial. He said:

When you lobby for something, what you have to do is put together your coalition, you have to gear up, you have to get your political forces in line, and then you sit there and wait for the fortuitous event. For example, people who were trying to do something about regulation of railroads tried to ride the environment for a while, but that wave didn't wash them in to shore. So they grabbed their surfboards and they tried to ride something else, but that didn't do the job. The Penn Central collapse was the big wave that brought them in. As I see it, people who are trying to advocate change are like surfers waiting for the big wave. You get out there, you have to be ready to go, you have to be ready to paddle. If you're not ready to paddle when the big wave comes along, you're not going to ride it in.

IDEAS AND POLITICS

The foregoing discussion of agenda-setting makes clear that policy formation is not simply driven by such conventional political processes as reelection incentives, interest group pressure, and marshaling votes and power. Instead, argumentation, persuasion, and marshaling evidence and information are also important. In other words, participants traffic in the world of ideas (see Kingdon 1988, for a more complete statement). I take "ideas" to mean either (1) goals or motivations other than self-interested pursuits, or (2) theories that people hold about how the world works (e.g., about cause and effect relationships) that can be used to further self-interest as well as other goals.

One clue to the importance of ideas is the investment in time, money, and energy that people in and around government make in them. They hire analysts; they marshal arguments and collect evidence in support of those arguments; they reason and persuade. Even the most hard-bitten, self-interested lobbies have policy analysts, and don't rely simply on appeal to their self-interest or on their political muscle. If ideas weren't important, savvy people like these, who know what is a productive use of their resources like their time and money, wouldn't invest so much in them.

Much of current writing on ideas and politics takes the posture that ideas are quite different from self-interest, and that the two also work at counterpurposes.
So both research and theory attempt to distinguish the effects of ideas from the effects of self-interest. A major problem with this attempt, however, may be that the two cannot be disentangled, either empirically or theoretically. Empirically, the two work together. A reelection minded congressman, for instance, also believes in certain principles of good public policy, and most of the time he takes both the expedient and principled course at once. Theoretically, people attach meaning to their behavior, even their self-interested behavior. Those meanings are not simply after-the-fact rationalizations for actions, but affect those actions. In persuading others and in explaining his votes, for example, a politician also persuades himself and his explanations affect his decisions. So people often find it impossible to pursue only their "raw" self-interest. They can't arrive at positions without both self-interest and principle.

If my account of agenda-setting above is right, ideas don't drive changes by themselves, because they must be coupled with more conventional political forces, but ideas do have a considerable independent impact on the outcomes. One account of the movement in the 1970s and 1980s toward deregulation in many public policy domains, for example, emphasizes the sheer power of the idea (Derthick and Quirk 1985). Economists' work on natural monopoly, capture, and the inefficiencies of regulation, together with conservative ideology, powerfully affected public policy, and extended into transportation, communication, banking, retailing, and many other areas. My account of agenda-setting, although certainly emphasizing the importance of such ideas, also stresses the importance of coupling those ideas in the policy stream with such events in the political stream as the taxpayer revolt, the rebellion against "big government" as represented by some aspects of the Great Society programs, the election first of Jimmy Carter and then of Ronald Reagan, and the political impulse to "get government off our backs." The ideas are themselves important; but their combination with other forces is critical.

How can an idea be introduced into public policy discussions? My description of agenda-setting above makes clear the importance of timing. The window, when officials are receptive to a new idea, is open for a short time and that opportunity must be seized then. This observation has two implications. First, social scientists and others who wish to have their ideas considered cannot wait to develop their ideas or proposals until the opportunity arises, because they are too late at that point. A long period of research, honing, and settling on proposals is needed well in advance of the policy-making opportunity in order to be ready to take advantage of it when it (sometimes unpredictably) presents itself. Both the soundness of the basic research and the policy implications must be made clear well in advance. Second, advocates including social scientists must be willing
to invest time in their ideas. Just getting the attention of governmental officials is a major accomplishment, even under the best of circumstances. Using open windows takes skill, knowledge, and luck, to be sure. But of all the attributes of successful policy entrepreneurs that I could name, sheer persistence is probably the most important.

SOCIAL SCIENTISTS AND PUBLIC POLICIES

Frustrated social scientists sometimes ask why governmental officials don’t pay greater attention to social science than they do. We can’t seem to get them interested in certain subjects that seem obviously important to us, and their priorities seem elsewhere. Or when they do get interested, they take our proposals and use, change, and bend them to their own purposes sometimes beyond recognition. Why can’t we get subjects on their agendas? Why do we lose control of the process when we are successful in getting them to pay attention?

One perfectly reasonable answer is another question: Why should politicians and other policymakers pay attention to social scientists? After all, we don’t have the claim on them that their constituents ought to have in a democratic system, and we don’t enjoy the legitimacy that is conferred by virtue of being elected or being directly responsible to elected officials. As for controlling the course of our proposals once a policy-making process takes them over, this inability to control the process is true of everybody, even the president. Proposals will always be bent around to suit the purposes of various decision makers, and bargains and compromises will always be the order of the day. Furthermore, social scientists often bring their own biases into their recommendations just like everybody else does, and a political process must recognize that fact and apply the appropriate discounts. In general, how are social scientists different from anybody else? What special claim might they be able to make?

One such claim would be an appeal to expertise. If public policy needs to deal with drug use, teen pregnancy, racism, unemployment, or a host of other problems, then perhaps social scientists who have studied these things would be a useful resource. But that claim turns critically on the existence of a solid foundation of basic research in which the methodology is sound, the findings are firmly established, and the interpretations of data are not subject to dispute. It turns furthermore on the relevance of that research for practical public policy problems. Social scientists need to ask themselves realistically how often their expertise really is a reliable guide to public policy, how sure they really are of their findings and interpretations, and how much the purposes of public policy really can be served by the research. Without solid
claims to expertise, social scientists are just another interest group in the political process, no more and no less important.

So let's think about the comparative advantages of social scientists. What are we good at, or what can we become good at? Hints at possible answers are found in the nature of policy-making discussed above. First, it's important to the process of making public policy that problems are recognized as problems. Social scientists can be very good at documenting the existence, frequency, incidence, and intensity of a condition. We know how to gather data about all manner of conditions—frequencies of various crimes, demographic trends, disease and mortality rates, transportation ridership, unemployment, income dynamics, social worker caseloads, and government spending authorizations and outlays, to name just a few. We can even make reasonable projections (often with a little less assurance) into the future. So the monitoring of conditions is both important to agenda-setting and comfortably within a social scientist's kit bag.

Transforming conditions into problems (see above) is more problematic. In the course of monitoring conditions, social scientists often make that transformation implicitly, either by juxtaposing the condition to a widely held value or by framing the data in a category that heightens its importance. But our professional ground for doing these things is more shaky than for documenting the conditions themselves. We can document a certain poverty or unemployment level in a population, for instance, and we may believe that the level is inappropriate or intolerable. But it's really up to a political process to establish how inappropriate or intolerable it is. Social scientists can play a part in that process as well as anyone else, but we have less special claim to expertise in the realm of judging the values involved than we do in documenting the condition itself.

Second, policymakers are often very much in need of solid information about how the world works. They particularly need to know, if they undertake a certain kind of intervention, what will follow from it. Readers will recall that this concern for how the world works or for cause and effect is the second type of "idea" as defined above. Social science sometimes has good answers to such questions. We might especially be able to show policymakers that the world works in ways that might not have occurred to them. We have studied certain processes in basic research thoroughly enough to claim reasonably that we know what is going on. We may not be able to predict all of the effects of an intervention with great assurance, or we may be able to anticipate some consequences better than other consequences. But because of our base of knowledge about how the world works, we may be able to make these cause and effect connections better than other people can.

Of course, there's an obvious caution buried in this observation. Social scientists' claim on the policy-making process is weaker when our knowledge
is less solid than we would like it to be. It takes both an impressive fund of basic empirical research and reliable theory to generate a high degree of confidence in claims of cause and effect. And there is ample reason for caution. If social scientists make claims to policymakers that cannot be reasonably sustained, particularly in the name of social science, then the credibility of the enterprise is threatened. We need good, solid research and interpretations of data on which we can agree, in order to convince policymakers that we should be heard on the grounds of our expertise.

Unfortunately, that's easier said than done. Social phenomena are devilishly complicated. It is inherently difficult to sort out cause and effect. We can document the incidence of poverty, for instance, but are much less able to agree on the importance of all of its various hypothesized causes. This inherent complexity of social phenomena weakens our confidence in various possible interventions, or at least it should. All of this reason for caution argues for a tentativeness and an experimental approach to intervention. Again unfortunately, tentativeness is exactly what the political system does not tolerate very well.

Third, social scientists can often be involved in the process of generating proposals that takes place in what I have labeled the policy stream. There are entire communities of specialists on a whole series of social policy problems, and social scientists are and should be prominent in those communities. If a policymaker would want to design a new approach to long-term health care, for instance, social scientists who specialize in the economics, psychology, and sociology of aging would naturally be among those to consult. Social scientists who are actively involved in this policy stream, however, quickly discover that their knowledge must be adapted to the practical problems of policymakers to be useful. In other words, policy proposals need to meet the criteria of technical feasibility, budgetary acceptability, and value acceptability (see above) with which practical people wrestle continually.

One development within the policy stream to which social scientists might contribute as much as anybody else is a gradual reorientation of world views or categories within which people think. Within the community of transportation specialists, for instance, it makes a tremendous difference whether people think of transportation as naturally market-driven or as something that needs central planning. Or within the health insurance policy community, there's a major difference between using insurance simply as a device for paying the bills and using insurance as an instrument for redirecting incentives in health care delivery. Processes of highlighting some problems rather than others or of demonstrating the consequences of various alternatives, among the processes in which social scientists can participate, sometimes contribute to reorienting whole
approaches within policy communities. When the problem of Medicare costs became unmistakably severe, for instance, policymakers changed their orientation toward insurance from simply paying the bills to creating cost-saving incentives.

EPILOGUE

We often wonder how a given group can get something on a governmental agenda. For that matter, how might social scientists do so? An important part of an answer must be that there are very few actors who can "get" something on an agenda. Persistence is important, of course, as is expertise and cultivating the right connections. But being heard in the policy process is often more a matter of being positioned to take advantage of opportunities when they arise, than it is doing a set of things fully under one's control. And realistically, even the most knowledgeable, savvy, and influential activists lose some of the time. Both researchers on and activists in the setting of policy agendas come to appreciate the complexity of the processes, the inability fully to predict courses they will take, and the frustrations of attempting to control them completely.

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