
5 Agenda Setting in Public Policy

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In *The Semisovereign People*, E. E. Schattschneider asserts, “the definition of the alternatives is the supreme instrument of power” (Schattschneider 1960/1975, 66). The definition of alternative issues, problems, and solutions is crucial because it establishes which issues, problems, and solutions will gain the attention of the public and decision makers and which, in turn, are most likely to gain broader attention. This chapter considers the processes by which groups work to elevate issues on the agenda, or the process by which they seek to deny other groups the opportunity to place issues. Of particular importance is the fact that it is not merely issues that reach the agenda, but the construction or interpretation of issues competes for attention. The discussion is organized into four major parts. In the first, I review the agenda-setting process and our conceptions of how agendas are set. In the second part, I consider the relationships between groups, power, and agenda setting. In the third part, I discuss the relationship between the construction of problems and agenda setting. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of contemporary ways of measuring and conceiving of the agenda as a whole and the composition of the agenda.

THE AGENDA-SETTING PROCESS

Agenda setting is the process by which problems and alternative solutions gain or lose public and elite attention. Group competition to set the agenda is fierce because no society or political institution has the capacity to address all possible alternatives to all possible problems that arise at any one time (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988). Groups must therefore fight to earn their issues' places among all the other issues sharing the limited space on the agenda or to prepare for the time when a crisis makes their issue more likely to occupy a more prominent space on the agenda. Even when an issue gains attention, groups must fight to ensure that their depiction of the issue remains in the forefront and that their preferred approaches to the problem are those that are most actively considered. They do so for the reasons cited by Schattschneider: the group that successfully describes a problem will also be the one that defines the solutions to it, thereby prevailing in policy debate. At the same time, groups fight to keep issues off the agenda; indeed, such blocking action is as important as the affirmative act of attempting to gain attention (Cobb and Ross 1997).

Central to understanding agenda setting is the meaning of the term *agenda*. An agenda is a collection of problems, understandings of causes, symbols, solutions, and other elements of public problems that come to the attention of members of the public and their governmental officials. An agenda may be as concrete as a list of bills that are before a legislature, but also includes a series of beliefs about the existence and magnitude of problems and how they should be addressed by government, the private sector, nonprofit organizations, or through joint action by some or all of these institutions.

Agendas exist at all levels of government. Every community and every body of government—Congress, a state legislature, a county commission—has a collection of issues that are available for discussion and disposition, or that are being actively considered. All these issues can be categorized based on the extent to which an institution is prepared to make an ultimate decision to enact and implement or to reject particular policies. Furthest from *enactment* are issues and ideas contained

in the *systemic agenda*, in which is contained any idea that could possibly be considered by participants in the policy process. Some ideas fail to reach this agenda because they are politically unacceptable in a particular society; large-scale state ownership of the means of production, for example, is generally off the systemic agenda in the United States because it is contrary to existing ideological commitments.

It is worthwhile to think of several levels of the agenda, as shown in Figure 5.1. The largest level of the agenda is the *agenda universe*, which contains all ideas that could possibly be brought up and discussed in a society or a political system. In a democracy, we can think of all the possible ideas as being quite unconstrained, although, even in democracies, the expression of some ideas is officially or unofficially constrained. For example, in the United States, aggressively racist and sexist language is usually not tolerated socially in public discourse, while Canada has laws prohibiting hate speech and expression. Canada's laws are unlikely to be copied and enacted in the United States because they would likely conflict with the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. But laws may not be the most effective way of denying ideas access to the agenda. Social pressure and cultural norms are probably more important. Thus, ideas associated with communism or fascism are so far out of bounds of politically appropriate discourse in the United States that they rarely are expressed beyond a fringe group of adherents. Indeed, sometimes people paint policy ideas with terms intended to place these ideas outside the realm of acceptable discussion. For example, health care reforms that would involve an increase in government activity are often dismissed as socialized medicine, with the threat of "socialism" invoked to derail the idea. In a democracy that prizes freedom of speech, however, many ideas are available for debate on the systemic agenda, even if those ideas are never acted upon by governments.

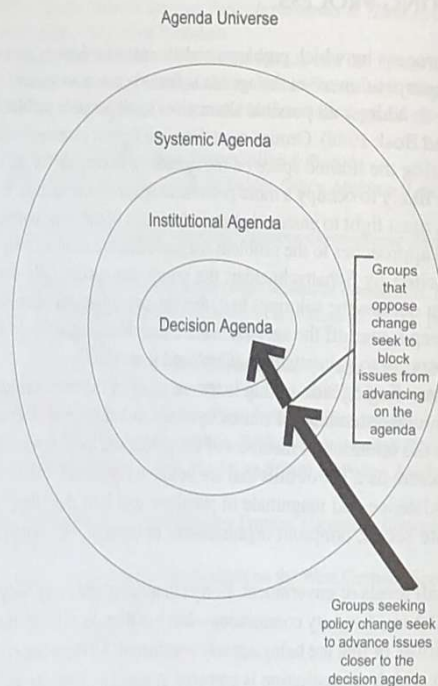


FIGURE 5.1 Levels of the Agenda.

Cobb and Elder say that "the systemic agenda consists 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." The boundary between the systemic agenda and the agenda universe represents the limit of "legitimate jurisdiction of existing governmental authority" (Cobb and Elder 1983, 85). That boundary can move in or out to accommodate more or fewer ideas over time. For example, ideas to establish programs to alleviate economic suffering have waxed and waned on the agenda when the national mood is more expansive toward the poor, as it was during the 1960s, or less compassionate, as during the 1990s.

If a problem or idea is successfully elevated from the systemic agenda, it moves to the institutional agenda, a subset of the broader systemic agenda. The institutional agenda is "that list of items explicitly up for the active and serious consideration of authoritative decision makers" (Cobb and Elder 1983, 85–86). The limited amount of time or resources available to any institution or society means that only a limited number of issues is likely to reach the institutional agenda (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988; O'Toole 1989). However, institutions can increase their carrying capacity and can address more issues simultaneously (Baumgartner and Jones 2004; Talbert and Potoski 2002), either when there are many pressing issues, or when resources or technology are available to manage this increased load.

Even with this increased carrying capacity, however, relatively few issues will reach the decision agenda, which contains items that are about to be acted upon by a governmental body. Bills, once they are introduced and heard in committee, are relatively low on the decision agenda until they are reported to the whole body for a vote. Notices of proposed rule making in the *Federal Register* are evidence of an issue or problem's elevation to the decision agenda in the executive branch. Conflict may be greatest at this stage, because when a decision is reached at a particular level of government, it may trigger conflict that expands to another or higher level of government. Conflict continues and may expand; this expansion of conflict is often a key goal of many interest groups. The goal of most contending parties in the policy process is to move policies from the systemic agenda to the institutional agenda, or to prevent issues from reaching the institutional agenda. Figure 5.1 implies that, except for the agenda universe, the agenda and each level within it are finite, and no society or political system can address all possible alternatives to all possible problems that arise at any time. While the carrying capacity of the agenda may change, the agenda carrying capacity of any institution ultimately has a maximum bound, which means that interests must compete with each other to get their issues and their preferred interpretations of these issues on the agenda.

Even when a problem is on the agenda, there may be a considerable amount of controversy and competition over how to define the problem, including the causes of the problem and the policies that would most likely solve the problem. For example, after the 1999 Columbine High school shootings, the issue of school violence quickly rose to national prominence, to a much greater extent than had existed after other incidents of school violence. So school violence was on the agenda: the real competition then became between depictions of school violence as a result of, among other things, lax parenting, easy access to guns, lack of parental supervision, or the influence of popular culture (TV, movies, video games) on high school students. This competition over *why* Columbine happened and *what* could be done to prevent it was quite fierce, more so than the competition between school violence and the other issues vying for attention at the time (Lawrence and Birkland 2004).

POLITICAL POWER IN AGENDA SETTING

The ability of groups—acting singly or, more often, in coalition with other groups—to influence policy is not simply a function of who makes the most persuasive argument, either from a rhetorical or empirical perspective. We know intuitively that some groups are more powerful than others, in the sense that they are better able to influence the outcomes of policy debates. When we think of

power, we might initially think about how people, governments, and powerful groups in society can compel people to do things, often against their will. In a classic article in the *American Political Science Review*, Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz argue that this sort of power—the ability of actor A to cause actor B to do things—is one of two faces of power. The other face is the ability to keep a person from doing what he or she wants to do; instead of a coercive power, the second face is a blocking power.

Of course power is exercised when A participates in the making of decisions that affect B. But power is also exercised when A devotes his energies to creating or reinforcing social and political values and institutional practices that limit the scope of the political process to public consideration of only those issues which are comparatively innocuous to A. To the extent that A succeeds in doing this, B is prevented, for all practical purposes, from bringing to the fore any issues that might in their resolution be seriously detrimental to A's set of preferences. (Bachrach and Baratz 1962, 952)

In the first face of power, A participates in the making of decisions that affect B, even if B does not like the decisions or their consequences. This is the classic sort of power that we see in authoritarian or totalitarian regimes, but we can also see this sort of power in the United States and other democracies, because there are many groups that have very little power to influence decisions made on their behalf or even against their interests. Prisoners, for example, have little power to influence the conditions of their sentencing and incarceration, while minors have little say in policies made on their behalf or in their interests, such as policies influencing education or juvenile justice. This is not to say that other people and groups do not speak for prisoners or minors. But these spokespeople are working on behalf of groups that are either constructed as "helpless" or "deviant" (Schneider and Ingram 1993).

In the second face of power, A prevents B's issues and interests from getting on the agenda or becoming policy, even when actor B really wants these issues raised. Environmentalism, for example, was, until the late 1960s and early 1970s, not a particularly powerful interest, and groups that promote environmental protection found that their issues rarely made the agenda because these issues in no way were those of the major economic and political forces that dominated decision making. Not until the emergence of high-profile environmental crises, such as the revelation of the problems with the pesticide DDT or the Santa Barbara oil spill of 1969, were these problems coupled with broad-based group mobilization, thereby elevating these issues to where mainstream actors paid attention to it. Even then, one can argue that actor A, representing the business and industrial sector, bent but did not break on environmental issues and is still able to prevent B, the environmental movement, from advancing broader (or radical, depending on one's perspective) ideas that could have a profound effect on the environment.

The blocking moves of the more powerful interests are not simply a function of A having superior resources to B, although this does play a substantial role. In essence, we should not think of the competition between actor A and actor B as a sporting event on a field, with even rules, between two teams, one vastly more powerful than the other. Rather, the power imbalance is as much a function of the nature and rules of the policy process as it is a function of the particular attributes of the groups or interests themselves. As Schattschneider explains:

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. (Schattschneider 1960/1975, 71)

In other words, some issues are more likely to reach the agenda because the bias of the political system allows them to be raised, while others are, according to the bias of the system, unfit for political consideration. Housing, education, a job, or health care are not provided as a matter of right in America because the bias of the American political system rests on cultural values of self-reliance, which means that the United States lags behind other nations in the state provision of these services. This bias is not static or God-given, but changes rather slowly as some interests oppose the provision of these things as a matter of right.

Other scholars of political power have conceived of a third face of power, which differs substantially from the second face of power in that large groups of people who objectively have a claim that they are disadvantaged remain quiescent—that is, passive—and fail to attempt to exert their influence, however small, on policy making and politics. This is the story John Gaventa tells in his book *Power and Powerlessness* (1980, 168). Gaventa explains why a community of Appalachian coal miners remained under the repressive power of a British coal mining company and the local business and social elite. As Harry G. Reid (1981) notes, Gaventa takes on the traditional idea that political participation in Appalachia is low because of the people's own shortcomings, such as low educational attainment and poverty. Rather, in the third face of power, social relationships and political ideology are structured over the long term in such a way that the mining company, remains dominant and the miners cannot conceive of a situation in which they can begin to participate in the decisions that directly affect their lives. When the miners show some signs of rebelling against the unfair system, the dominant interests are able to ignore pressure for change. In the long run, people may stop fighting as they become and remain alienated from politics; quiescence is the result.

This necessarily brief discussion of the idea of power is merely an overview of what is a very complex and important field of study in political science in general. It is important to us here because an understanding of power helps us understand how groups compete to gain access to the agenda and to deny access to groups and interests that would damage their interests.

GROUPS AND POWER IN AGENDA SETTING

E. E. Schattschneider's theories of group mobilization and participation in agenda setting rest on his oft-cited contention that issues are more likely to be elevated to agenda status if the scope of conflict is broadened. There are two key ways in which traditionally disadvantaged (losing) groups expand the scope of conflict. First, groups go public with a problem by using symbols and images to induce greater media and public sympathy for their cause. Environmental groups dramatize their causes by pointing to symbols and images of allegedly willful or negligent humanly caused environmental damage.

Second, groups that lose in the first stage of a political conflict can appeal to a higher decision-making level, such as when losing parties appeal to state and then federal institutions for an opportunity to be heard, hoping that in the process they will attract others who agree with them and their cause. Conversely, dominant groups work to contain conflict to ensure that it does not spread out of control. The underlying theory of these tendencies dates to Madison's defense, in *Federalist* 10, of the federal system as a mechanism to contain political conflict.

Schattschneider's theories of issue expansion explain how in-groups retain control over problem definition and the way such problems are suppressed by dominant actors in policy making. These actors form what Baumgartner and Jones (1993, 142) call policy monopolies, which attempt to keep problems and underlying policy issues low on the agenda. Policy communities use agreed-upon symbols to construct their visions of problems, causes, and solutions. As long as these images and symbols are maintained throughout society, or remain largely invisible and unquestioned, agenda

access for groups that do not share these images is likely to be difficult; change is less likely until the less powerful group's construction of the problem becomes more prevalent. If alternative selection is central to the projection of political power, an important corollary is that powerful groups retain power by working to keep the public and out-groups unaware of underlying problems, alternative constructions of problems, or alternatives to their resolution. This argument reflects those made by elite theorists such as C. Wright Mills (1956) and E. E. Schattschneider himself, who famously noted that "the flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent" (1960/1975, 35). This does not deny the possibility of change, but acknowledges that change is sometimes slow in coming and difficult to achieve.

OVERCOMING POWER DEFICITS TO ACCESS THE AGENDA

Baumgartner and Jones argue that when powerful groups lose their control of the agenda, less powerful groups can enter policy debates and gain attention to their issues. This greater attention to the problem area tends to increase negative public attitudes toward the status quo, which can then produce lasting institutional and agenda changes that break up policy monopolies.

There are several ways in which groups can pursue strategies to gain attention to issues, thereby advancing issues on the agenda. The first set of ways for less advantaged interest groups to influence policy making relates to Kingdon's streams metaphor of agenda change (Kingdon 1995). "Windows of opportunity" for change open when two or more streams—the political, problem, or policy streams—are coupled. In the political stream, electoral change can lead to reform movements that give previously less powerful groups an opportunity to air their concerns. An example is policy making during the Lyndon Johnson administration's Great Society program, which contained a package of policies that sought to attack poverty, poor health, racial discrimination, and urban decline, among other problems. This package of programs was made possible by an aggressively activist president and a large Democratic majority in the Congress, the result of the Democratic landslide of 1964.

Second, changes in our perception of problems will also influence the opening of a "window of opportunity" for policy change. In the 1930s, people began to perceive unemployment and economic privation not simply as a failure of individual initiative, but as a collective economic problem that required governmental solutions under the rubric of the New Deal. In the 1960s and 1970s, people began to perceive environmental problems, such as dirty air and water and the destruction of wildlife, not as the function of natural processes but as the result of negative human influences on the ecosystem. And, third, changes in the policy stream can influence the opening of the window of opportunity. In the 1960s, poverty and racism were seen as problems, but were also coupled with what were suggested as new and more effective policies to solve these problems, such as the Civil Rights Acts, the Voting Rights Act, and the War on Poverty.

Lest we think that all this change is in the liberal direction, it is worth noting that other periods of change, notably the Reagan administration, were also characterized by the joining of these streams. These include changes in the political stream (more conservative legislators, growing Republican strength in the South, the advent of the Christian right as a political force), the problem stream (government regulation as cause, not the solution, of economic problems, American weakness in foreign affairs), and the policy stream (ideas for deregulation and smaller government, increased military spending and readiness) that came together during the first two years of the Reagan administration. These factors help explain policies favoring increased military spending, an increase in attention to moral issues, and a decrease in spending on social programs.

In each of these instances, it took group action to press for change. Groups worked to shine the spotlight on issues because, as Baumgartner and Jones argue, increased attention is usually negative

attention to a problem, leading to calls for policy change to address the problems being highlighted. But the simple desire to mobilize is not enough. Groups sometimes need a little help to push issues on the agenda; this help can come from changes in indicators of a problem or focusing events that create rapid attention. And groups often need to join forces to create a more powerful movement than they could create if they all acted as individuals.

GROUP COALESCENCE AND STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE

A major shortcoming of elite theory and of power theories is that some interests simply accept their fate and give elite groups relatively little trouble. Related to this is the assumption that the elite is somehow a monolith, single-mindedly marching toward the same class-related goals. Neither of these assumptions is true. Less advantaged interests in the United States can enter policy disputes without inviting the wrath of the state; their major risk is irrelevance or impotence. And powerful social and economic interests often conflict with each other, such as when producers of raw materials, such as oil and steel, want to raise prices and producers of goods that use these inputs, such as automobile makers, seek to keep raw material costs low, or when broadcasters battle powerful values interests over the content of music, movies, or television. Within industries, vicious battles over markets and public policy can result, as in the ongoing legal and economic battles between Microsoft and its rivals, or between major airlines and discount carriers (Birkland and Nath 2000). And many movements that seek policy change are led by people whose socioeconomic condition and background are not vastly different from that of their political opponents. In this section, we will review how less advantaged interests, led by bright and persistent leaders, can and sometimes do overcome some of their power deficits.

The first thing to recognize about pro-change groups is that they, like more powerful interests, will often coalesce into advocacy coalitions. An advocacy coalition is a coalition of groups that come together based on a shared set of beliefs about a particular issue or problem (see Hank Jenkins Smith's chapter in this volume). These are not necessarily these groups' core belief systems; rather, groups will often coalesce on their more peripheral beliefs, provided that the coalition will advance all groups' goals in the debate at hand.

This is one way in which the dynamics of groups and coalitions can work to break down the power of dominant interests. This strength in numbers results in greater attention from policy makers and greater access to the policy-making process, thereby forming what social scientists call *countervailing power* against the most powerful elites. But where should a group begin to seek to influence policy once it has formed a coalition and mobilized its allies and members? This question is addressed by Baumgartner and Jones in their discussion of "venue shopping" (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 31).

Venue shopping describes the efforts groups undertake to gain a hearing for their ideas and grievances against existing policy (e.g., Pralle 2003). A *venue* is a level of government or institution in which the group is likely to gain the most favorable hearing. We can think of venues in institutional terms—legislative, executive, or judicial—or in vertical terms—federal, state, local government. The news media are also a venue, and even within a branch of government, there are multiple venues.

Groups can seek to be witnesses before congressional committees and subcommittees where the chair is known to be sympathetic to their position or at least open-minded enough to hear their case. This strategy requires the cooperation of the leadership of the committee or subcommittee, and unsympathetic leaders will often block efforts to include some interests on witness lists. But the many and largely autonomous committees and subcommittees in Congress allow groups to venue shop within Congress itself, thereby increasing the likelihood that an issue can be heard.

After a major focusing event (discussed below), it is particularly hard to exclude aggrieved parties from a congressional hearing, and members whose support was formerly lukewarm may be more enthusiastic supporters when the magnitude of a problem becomes clearer.

Groups that cannot gain a hearing in the legislative branch can appeal to executive branch officials. For example, environmentalists who cannot get a hearing in the House Resources Committee may turn to the Environmental Protection Agency, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the various agencies that compose the Department of the Interior, and other agencies that may be more sympathetic and might be able to use existing legal and regulatory means to advance environmental goals. Or the environmentalists may choose to raise their issues at the state level. While an appeal to these agencies may raise some conflict with the legislative branch, this tactic can at least open doors for participation by otherwise excluded groups. Groups often engage in litigation as a way to get their issues on the agenda, particularly when other access points are closed to the group.

Groups may seek to change policies at the local or state level before taking an issue to the federal government, because the issue may be easier to advance at the local level or because a grass-roots group may find it can fight on an equal footing with a more powerful group. This often happens in NIMBY (not in my back yard) cases, such as decisions on where to put group homes, cell phone towers, expanded shopping centers, power plants, and the like. And, of course, groups sometimes must address issues at the state and local level because these governments have the constitutional responsibility for many functions not undertaken by the federal government, such as education or, as became clear in the same-sex marriage issue in 2003 and 2004, the laws governing marriage. In this example, it's clear that gay rights groups have adopted a state by state or even more local strategy because it makes no sense to seek change at the federal level.

On the other hand, groups may expand conflict to a broader level—from the local level to the state level, or from the state to federal level—when they lose at the local level. E. E. Schattschneider calls this “expanding the scope of conflict.” This strategy sometimes works because expanding the scope of conflict often engages the attention of other actors who may step in on the side of the less powerful group. An example of the expanding scope of conflict is the civil rights movement, which in many ways was largely confined to the South until images of violent crackdowns on civil rights protesters became more prominent on the evening news, thereby expanding the issue to a broader and somewhat more sympathetic public. Indeed, groups often seek media coverage as a way of expanding the scope of conflict. Media activities can range from holding news conferences to mobilizing thousands of people in protest rallies. Sometimes an issue is elevated to greater attention by the inherent newsworthiness of the event, without preplanning by the protest groups, such as the just-cited example of media coverage of civil rights protests.

Finally, gaining a place on the agenda often relies on coalescing with other groups, as was discussed earlier. Many of the great social movements of our time required that less powerful interests coalesce. Even the civil rights movement involved a coalition, at various times, with antiwar protesters, labor unions, women's groups, antipoverty workers, and other groups who shared an interest in racial equality. By coalescing in this way, the voices of all these interests were multiplied. Indeed, the proliferation of interest groups since the 1950s has resulted in greater opportunities for coalition building and has created far greater resources for countervailing power.

Before concluding this discussion, we must recognize that elevating issues on the agenda in hopes of gaining policy change is not always resisted by political elites. Cobb and Elder (1983) argue that, when political elites seek change, they also try to mobilize publics to generate mass support for an issue, which supports elite efforts to move issues further up the agenda. Such efforts can constitute either attempts to broaden the influence of existing policy monopolies or attempts by some political elites (such as the president and his staff) to circumvent the policy monopoly established by interest groups, the bureaucracy, and subcommittees (the classic iron triangle model). The president or other key political actors may be able to enhance the focusing power of an event by visiting a disaster or accident scene, thereby affording the event even greater symbolic weight.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF PROBLEMS AND ISSUES

Problems can be defined and depicted in many different ways, depending on the goals of the proponent of the particular depiction of a problem and the nature of the problem and the political debate. The process of defining problems and of selling a broad population on this definition, is called social construction. Social construction refers to the ways in which we as a society and the various contending interests within it structure and tell the stories about how problems come to be the way they are. A group that can create and promote the most effective depiction of an issue has an advantage in the battle over what, if anything, will be done about a problem.

At the same time, there remain many social problems that people believe should be solved or, at least, made better. Poverty, illiteracy, racism, immorality, disease, disaster, crime, and any number of other ills will lead people and groups to press for solutions. Often, these social problems require that governmental action be taken because services required to alleviate public problems that are not or cannot be addressed by private actors are *public goods* that can primarily be provided by government actors. While in the popular mind, and often in reality, economic and social conservatives believe in limited government activity, these conservatives also believe there are public goods, such as regulation of securities markets, road building, national defense, and public safety, that are most properly addressed by government. In the end, though, it is probably best to think about problems by thinking first about a clear definition of the problem itself, before concerning ourselves with whether public or private actors must remedy the problem. Beyond this, whether a problem really is a problem at all is an important part of political and policy debate: merely stating a problem is not enough, one must persuade others that the problem exists or that the problem being cited is the *real* problem.

The way a problem is defined is an important part of this persuasive process and is important in the choice of solutions. The social construction of a problem is linked to the existing social, political, and ideological structures at the time. Americans still value individual initiative and responsibility, and therefore make drinking and driving at least as much a matter of personal responsibility as social responsibility. The same values of self-reliance and individual initiative are behind many of our public policies, dealing with free enterprise, welfare, and other economic policies. These values differentiate our culture from other nations' cultures, where the community or the state takes a more important role. In those countries, problems are likely to be constructed differently, and different policies are the result.

CONDITIONS AND PROBLEMS

Conditions—that is, things that exist that are bothersome but about which people and governments cannot do anything—can develop over time into problems as people develop ways to address these conditions. A classic example is polio: until Dr. Jonas Salk developed the polio vaccine, millions of children and their parents lived in fear of this crippling disease. Without the polio vaccine, this disease was simply a dreaded condition that could perhaps be avoided (people kept their kids away from swimming pools, for example, to avoid contracting polio) but certainly not treated or prevented without very high social costs. With the vaccine, polio became a *problem* about which something effective could be done.

When people become dependent on solutions to previously addressed problems, then the interruption of the solution will often constitute a major problem, resulting in efforts to prevent any such interruptions. One hundred and fifty years ago, electricity as public utility did not exist; today, an interruption in the supply of electricity and other utilities is a problem that we believe can be ameliorated—indeed, we believe it should never happen at all! An extreme example is the power

outage that struck Auckland, New Zealand, in February 1998. The outage lasted for over ten days, closing businesses, forcing evacuations of apartments due to water and sewer failures, and ending up costing New Zealanders millions of dollars. The cause of the outage was the failure of overtaxed power cables; regardless of its cause, people do not expect, nor lightly tolerate, the loss of something taken for granted for so long. Indeed, while the blackouts that struck eight eastern states and two Canadian provinces in August 2003 lasted hours, not days, for most locations, but led to significant social and economic disruption as elevators failed, subways ceased to work, computer systems shut down, and all the modern features on which urban societies rely were unavailable.

Many problems are not as obvious and dramatic as these. After all, it did not take a lot of argument to persuade those evacuated from their apartments or those who spent the night in their offices because subways and trains didn't work that there was some sort of problem. But other problems are more subtle, and people have to be persuaded that something needs to be done; still more persuasion may be necessary to induce a belief that *government* needs to do something about a problem.

SYMBOLS

Because a hallmark of successful policy advocacy is the ability to tell a good story, groups will use time-tested rhetorical devices, such as the use of symbols, to advance their arguments. A symbol is "anything that stands for something else. Its meaning depends on how people interpret it, use it, or respond to it" (Stone 2002, 137). Politics is full of symbols—some perceived as good, others as bad, and still others as controversial. Some symbols are fairly obvious: the American flag, for example, is generally respected in the United States, while flying a flag bearing the Nazi swastika just about anywhere in the world is considered, at a minimum, to be in poor taste, and, indeed, is illegal in many countries.

Deborah Stone outlines four elements of the use of symbols. First, she discusses *narrative stories*, which are stories told about how things happen, good or bad. They are usually highly simplified and offer the hope that complex problems can be solved with relatively easy solutions. Such stories are staples of the political circuit, where candidates tell stories about wasteful bureaucrats or evil businessmen or lazy welfare cheats to rouse the electorate to elect the candidate, who will impose a straightforward solution to these problems. Stories are told about how things are getting worse or *declining*, in Stone's term, or how things were getting better until something bad happened to stop progress, or how "change-is-only-an-illusion" (142). An example of this last is the stories told on the campaign trail and on the floor of the legislature in which positive economic indicators are acknowledged but are said not to reflect the real problems that real people are having.

Helplessness and control is another common story of how something once could not be done but now something can be done about an issue or problem. This story is closely related to the condition/problem tension.

Often used in these stories is a rhetorical device called *synecdoche* (sin-ECK'-do-key), "a figure of speech in which the whole is represented by one of its parts" (Stone 2002, 145). Phrases such as "a million eyes are on the Capitol today" represent great attention to Congress's actions on a particular issue. In other cases, people telling stories about policy use *anecdotes* or *prototypical cases* to explain an entire phenomenon. Thus, as Stone notes, the idea of the cheating "welfare queen" took hold in the 1980s, even though such people represented a small and atypical portion of the welfare population. Related to such stories are horror stories of government regulation run amok. Such stories are usually distorted: Stone cites the example of how those opposed to industry regulation claimed that the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) "abolished the tooth fairy" by requiring that dentists discard any baby teeth they pulled; the actual regulation merely required that appropriate steps be taken to protect health workers from any diseases that may be transmitted in handling the teeth.

TABLE 5.1
Types of Causal Theories with Examples

Actions	Consequences	
	Intended	Unintended
Unguided	Mechanical cause intervening agents brainwashed people machines that perform as designed, but cause harm	Accidental cause nature weather earthquakes machines that run amok
Purposeful	Intentional cause oppression conspiracies that work programs that work as intended, but cause harm	Inadvertent cause intervening conditions unforeseen side effects avoidable ignorance carelessness omission

Source: Stone 2002

CAUSAL STORIES

An important part of story telling in public policy is the telling of *causal stories*.³¹ These stories attempt to explain what caused a problem or an outcome. These stories are particularly important in public policy making, because the depiction of the cause of a problem strongly suggests a solution to the problem. In general, Stone divides causal stories into four categories: mechanical causes, accidental causes, intentional causes, and inadvertent causes. These examples are shown in Table 5.1.

INDICATORS, FOCUSING EVENTS, AND AGENDA CHANGE

John Kingdon discusses changes in indicators and focusing events as two ways in which groups and society as a whole learn of problems in the world. Changes in indicators are usually changes in statistics about a problem; if the data various agencies and interests collect indicate that things are getting worse, the issue will gain considerable attention. Examples include changes in unemployment rates, inflation rates, the gross domestic product, wage levels and their growth, pollution levels, crime, student achievement on standardized tests, birth and death rates, and myriad other things that sophisticated societies count every year.

These numbers by themselves do not have an influence over which issues gain greater attention and which fall by the wayside. Rather, the changes in indicators need to be publicized by interest groups, government agencies, and policy entrepreneurs, who use these numbers to advance their preferred policy ideas. This is not to say that people willfully distort statistics; rather, it means that groups will often selectively use official statistics to suggest that problems exist, while ignoring other indicators that may suggest that no such problem exists. The most familiar indicators, such as those reflecting the health of the economy, almost need no interpretation by interest groups or policy entrepreneurs—when unemployment is up and wages lag behind inflation, the argument is less about whether there is an economic problem but, rather, what to do about it. But even then, the choice of which indicator to use is crucial: in the 2004 presidential campaign, the Bush administration focused on the relatively low national unemployment rate, while the Kerry campaign focused on the numbers of jobs that had allegedly been lost between 2001 and 2004. There are two rather different ways of measuring a similar problem.

An example of indicators used by less advantaged groups to advance claims for greater equity is the growing gap between rich and poor in the United States. According to the *Statistical Abstract of the United States* (United States Department of Commerce, 1999 #3110, table 742), in 1970, those households making \$75,000 or more per year, in constant (1997) dollars, comprised 9 percent of all American households; by 1997, this group had doubled its share to 18.4 percent of all households. Where did the other groups shrink to make up this difference? The middle categories, those earning between \$25,000 and \$49,999, saw their share decrease from 37.2 percent of households in 1970 to 29.6 percent. This kind of evidence is used to argue that the rich are getting richer, while the middle class and, to some extent, the lowest economic classes are worse off in terms of their share of the wealth (see, for example, Phillips, 1990). While these numbers are not in great dispute, the *meaning* of the numbers is in dispute, and the numbers have not had much of an impact on public policy. Indeed, these trends were accelerated with the tax cuts implemented under the Bush administration, which tended to benefit the wealthy more than middle-class and lower-class workers. On the other hand, indicators of educational attainment do have an impact on the agenda, causing periodic reform movements in public education. This is due, in large part, to the activism of the very influential teachers' unions, parent-teacher associations, and other groups that use these indicators to press for greater resources for schools. In the end, the numbers have to be interpreted by groups and advanced on the agenda in order to induce mass and policy maker attention.

Focusing events are somewhat different. Focusing events are sudden, relatively rare events that spark intense media and public attention because of their sheer magnitude or, sometimes, because of the harm they reveal (Birkland 1997). Focusing events thus attract attention to issues that may have been relatively dormant. Examples of focusing events include terrorist attacks (September 11, 2001 was, certainly, a focusing event), airplane accidents, industrial accidents such as factory fires or oil spills, large protest rallies or marches, scandals in government, and everyday events that gain attention because of some special feature of the event. Two examples of the latter are the alleged beating of motorist Rodney King by the Los Angeles Police Department in the early 1990s and O. J. Simpson's murder trial in 1995; the Rodney King incident was noteworthy because, unlike most such incidents, the event was caught on videotape, while the Simpson trial was noteworthy because of the fame of the defendant.

Focusing events can lead groups, government leaders, policy entrepreneurs, the news media, or members of the public to pay attention to new problems or pay greater attention to existing but dormant (in terms of their standing on the agenda) problems, and, potentially, can lead to a search for solutions in the wake of perceived policy failure.

The fact that focusing events occur with little or no warning makes such events important opportunities for mobilization for groups that find their issues hard to advance on the agenda during normal times. Problems characterized by indicators of a problem will more gradually wax and wane on the agenda, and their movement on or off the agenda may be promoted or resisted by constant group competition. Sudden events, on the other hand, are associated with spikes of intense interest and agenda activity. Interest groups—often relatively powerful groups that seek to keep issues off the agenda—often find it difficult to keep major events off the news and institutional agendas. Groups that seek to advance an issue on the agenda can take advantage of such events to attract greater attention to the problem.

In many cases, the public and the most informed members of the policy community learn of a potential focusing event virtually simultaneously. These events can very rapidly alter mass and elite consciousness of a social problem. I say "virtually" because the most active members of a policy community may learn of an event some hours before the general public, because they have a more direct stake in the event, the response to it, and its outcome.

MEASURING AGENDA STATUS OF ISSUES

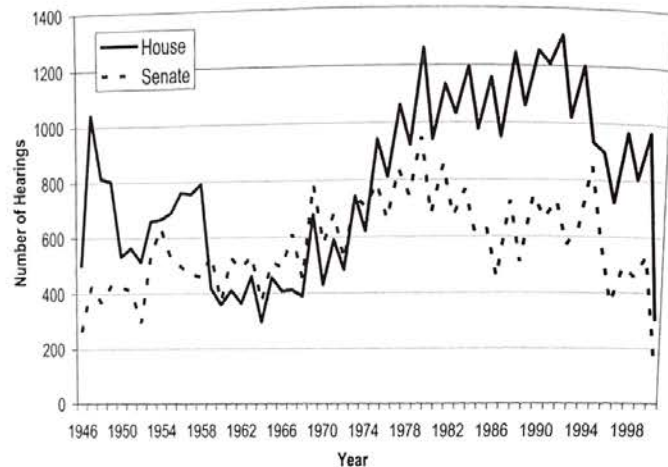
In a volume on policy analysis it is important to understand how we analyze the status of issues on the agenda. We can do so both qualitatively and quantitatively, and the way we approach this analysis is clearly influenced by the nature of the questions we ask. The two basic categories of questions are What is on the agenda? and What is the agenda status? of any particular issue.

It is probably easiest to measure issues on the national institutional agenda, because the Congress and executive branch have historically kept remarkably good records, and because these records have been put into databases that are reasonably easily searched. Thus, a researcher can use the Congressional Information Service (CIS) index to track the substance of Congressional hearings, the Library of Congress's THOMAS database to track legislation or debate in the *Congressional Record* and various legal research tools to review and track rulemaking in the *Federal Register*. The *Congressional Quarterly* also provides a good source of information about the important issues on the federal agenda. While information on the federal agenda is relatively easy to obtain, there is so much of it that one can easily become lost in a sea of potential data. It is important that the researcher have a well thought out coding scheme for placing data into appropriate subject matter categories while avoiding the temptation to split the difference by putting items—congressional testimony, for example, or entries in the *Congressional Record*—into several categories.

Fortunately, a great deal of the work of involved in gathering and categorizing important agenda information has been achieved under the auspices of the Policy Agendas Project at the Center for American Politics and Public Policy at the University of Washington (<http://www.policyagendas.org/>) (see also Baumgartner, Jones, and Wilkerson 2002). This project is the outgrowth of Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones's efforts to understand the dynamics of agenda setting over many years. The project has collected data on the federal budget, *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* (herein after *CQ Almanac*) stories, congressional hearings from 1946 to 2000, executive orders from 1945 to 2001, front page stories in the *New York Times*, the Gallup Poll's "most important problem" question (which reflects public opinion on the agenda status of key issues), and public laws from 1948–1998. The goal of this project is to provide a base of agenda data, using a comparable coding scheme over time and between the different agendas or "arenas," that researchers can use to study agenda setting. The founders of this effort intended for these databases to be extended, supplemented, and studied in greater depth by researchers. At least two workshops on the use of these data have been held at the annual meeting of the American Political Science association, and the data set was the foundation of the studies published in Baumgartner and Jones's volume *Policy Dynamics* (2002).

The key value of the Agendas Project data is the ability to show the change in the composition of the United States national agenda over time. Because the data set is comprehensive and because it uses a consistent coding scheme, we can see the ebb and flow of issues, and we can understand the expansion and contraction of the agenda as a whole, suggesting that the carrying capacity of the agenda can change with changes in the nature of the institution, including, as Talbert and Potoski note, when "legislative institutions are adapted to improve information processing" (2002, 190). Such improvements can include increases in the numbers of committee, increases in staff support to the members of the legislature, improvements in information processing and retrieval systems, devoting more time to legislative business, among other things.

We can see the results of this increase in carrying capacity, as well as the individual will of the legislative branch to attack more issues, if we plot the number of congressional hearings held each year, a figure easily calculated from the Agenda Project's data, and plotted in Figure 5. Clearly, the House and Senate's agendas grew during the 1960s; I will leave it to other analysts to decide whether this increase in the agenda was a response to executive initiative, perceived public demand for legislation, legislators' motivations to hold more hearings, or some combination of these elements.



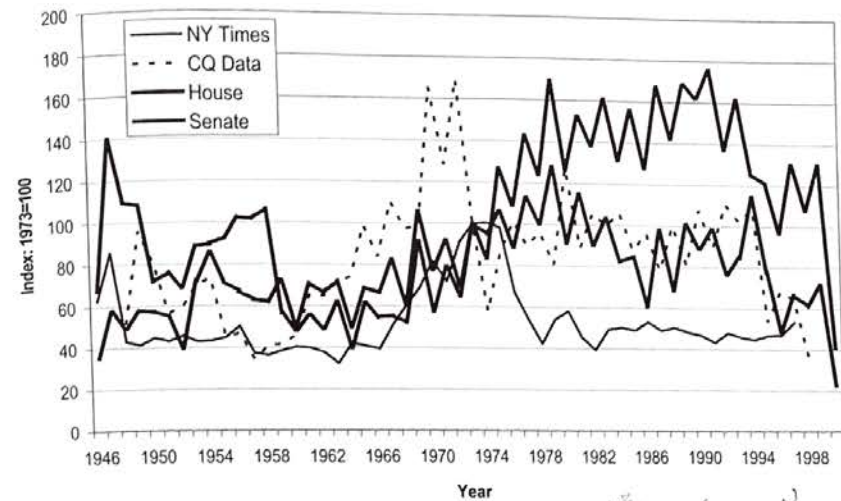
Source: Agendas Project, www.policyagendas.org

FIGURE 5.2 House and Senate Agendas, 1947–2000.

What is interesting about the data is the degree to which both agendas show a saw tooth pattern, reflecting the much greater volume of hearings in odd-numbered, non-election years. Interestingly, the Senate and House held roughly the same number of hearings in 1973, but the growth in the House's hearing agenda continued and then remained much larger than the Senate's agenda well into the early 1990s, while the size of the Senate's agenda remained relatively static. This growth in the House's agenda is likely the result of the proliferation of House subcommittees that followed the post-1974 legislative reforms, coupled with rules changes that allowed subcommittees to act independently of the committee chairs. Many of these newly empowered subcommittees were chaired by activist members who used the rules changes to react to the suppression of the agenda by House leadership and by the executive branch until the early 1990s. The agenda then shrinks in both the House and Senate as the Republican Party becomes ascendant and as party discipline restricts the size of the agenda. While it is clear that the size and composition of the agenda is in many ways out of the control of legislators (Walker 1977), these data suggest that legislators can control the overall size of the agenda through the promotion and management of institutional structures, as Talbert and Potoski note.

Much as the legislative agenda is elastic, so is the news media agenda, and the agenda as measured by the volume of stories in the *CQ Almanac*. The raw number of news stories in the *New York Times* might be somewhat related to the size of the congressional agenda, in large part because the *Times* is considered (and considers itself) the national newspaper of record; presumably, weighty matters of state handled in the Congress would be reflected in the *Times*. The *CQ Almanac*, on the other hand, occupies an intermediate position between the news media and the Congress; the *CQ Almanac* is very closely tied to congressional activity. The relative size of the *Times*, *CQ Almanac*, and the House and Senate agendas are shown in Figure 5.3. Because we want to compare relative sizes, the agendas are indexed so that all four agendas in 1973 equal 100; 1973 was chosen because it is the middle year in the data and because it is the year in which the Senate and House hearings volumes were nearly equal.

Clearly, the agenda, as represented by the *CQ Almanac* and the *Times*, is reasonably elastic. The major growth period for the *Times* came in the late 1960s, likely a result of the political turmoil



Source: Agendas Project, www.policyagendas.org

FIGURE 5.3 Relative Size of Key Agendas, 1947–2000.

USE IN THE NEW EDITION

surrounding the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement, and peaked in 1974 with the Watergate scandal. The *CQ Almanac* shows the saw tooth trend evident in the hearings data, but tends to peak during election years; its peaks in the early 1970s appear to be related to the institutional changes in the Congress, coupled with the growing confrontation between the executive and legislative that preceded the Watergate period.

This discussion is merely suggestive, and the reasons for the dynamics of the agenda are deserving of further analysis. But we do know that the agenda is fluid, and that the data available to the analyst are rich, varied, and lead to immensely useful insights. Indeed, a deeper analysis of the relative position of issues on the agenda is beyond the scope of this chapter, but one can, for example, use the agendas data to show the relative decline of defense as an agenda item in the 1970s as other issues gained prominence. The relative position of issues on the agenda is an important feature of the policy history and of the political development of the United States, and is of interest to policy analysts and historians alike.

CONCLUSION

The study of agenda setting is a particularly fruitful way to begin to understand how groups, power, and the agenda interact to set the boundaries of political policy debate. Agenda setting, like all other stages of the policy process, does not occur in a vacuum. The likelihood that an issue will rise on the agenda is a function of the issue itself, the actors that get involved, institutional relationships, and, often, random social and political factors that can be explained but cannot be replicated or predicted. But theories of agenda setting, coupled with better and more readily available data, are enabling researchers to understand why and under what circumstances policy change is likely to occur.

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6 Policy Formulation: Design and Tools

Mara S. Sidney

In a traditional stages model of the public policy process, policy formulation is part of the pre-decision phase of policy making. It involves identifying and/or crafting a set of policy alternatives to address a problem, and narrowing that set of solutions in preparation for the final policy decision. According to Cochran and Malone, policy formulation takes up the "what" questions: "What is the plan for dealing with the problem? What are the goals and priorities? What options are available to achieve those goals? What are the costs and benefits of each of the options? What externalities, positive or negative, are associated with each alternative?" (1999, 46). This approach to policy formulation, embedded in a stages model of the policy process, assumes that participants in the policy process already have recognized and defined a policy problem, and moved it onto the policy agenda. Formulating the set of alternatives thus involves identifying a range of broad approaches to a problem, and then identifying and designing the specific sets of policy tools that constitute each approach. It involves drafting the legislative or regulatory language for each alternative—that is, describing the tools (e.g., sanctions, grants, prohibitions, rights, and the like) and articulating to whom or to what they will apply, and when they will take effect. Selecting from among these a smaller set of possible solutions from which decision makers actually will choose involves applying some set of criteria to the alternatives, for example judging their feasibility, political acceptability, costs, benefits, and such.

In general, we expect fewer participants to be involved in policy formulation than were involved in the agenda-setting process, and we expect more of the work to take place out of the public eye. Standard policy texts describe formulation as a back-room function. As Dye puts it, policy formulation takes place in government bureaucracies, in interest group offices, in legislative committee rooms, in meetings of special commissions, in think tanks—with details often formulated by staff (2002, 40-41). In other words, policy formulation often is the realm of the experts, the "hidden participants" of Kingdon's policy stream (1995), the technocrats or knowledge elites of Fischer's democracy at risk (2000).

Policy formulation clearly is a critical phase of the policy process. Carefully designing the alternatives that decision makers will consider directly influences the ultimate policy choice. This process also both expresses and allocates power among social, political and economic interests. As Schattschneider reminds us, "... the definition of the alternatives is the choice of conflicts, and the choice of conflicts allocates power" (1960, 68). Contemporary interest in policy formulation can be traced to Dahl and Lindblom who urged scholars in 1953 to tune up the study of public policies rather than to continue to focus on ideologies as the critical aspects of political systems. They argued that broad debates about the merits of capitalism versus socialism were less important to the well being of society than was careful consideration of the myriad "techniques" that might be used to regulate the economy and to advance particular social values. In part they suggest that the details matter—that is, capitalism or socialism may be advanced through any number of specific public policies, and the selection among them will have important consequences that scholars should consider.