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Edited by

Frank Fischer
Gerald J. Miller
Mara S. Sidney

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5 Agenda Setting in Public Policy

Thomas A. Birkland

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 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 institutions have 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.

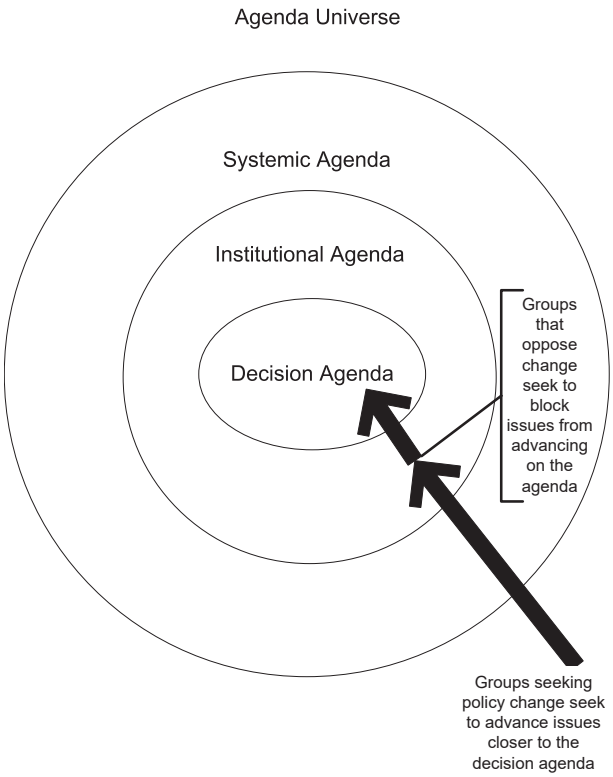


FIGURE 5.1 Levels of the Agenda.

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 protestors, 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

	Consequences	
Actions	**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. These 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

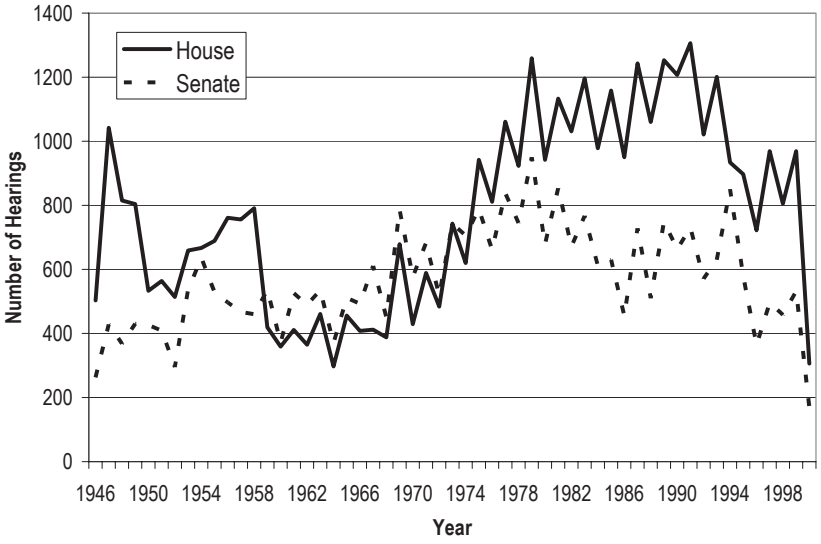
In a volume on policy analysis it is important to understand how we analyze the status of issues on the agenda. We can do so both qualitatively and quantitatively, and the way we approach this analysis is clearly influenced by the nature of the questions we ask. The two basic categories of questions 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 5.2. 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.



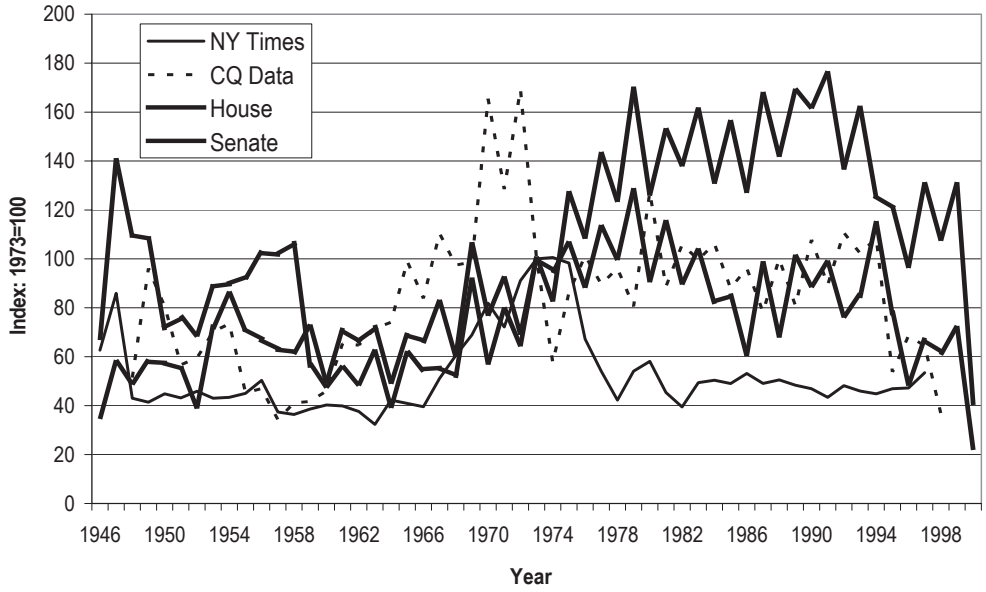
Source: Agendas Project, www.policyagendas.org

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.

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. Certainly 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 take 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.

Scholarship on policy formulation takes up a variety of issues. It examines the factors that influence how actors craft alternatives, it prescribes means for such crafting, it examines how and why particular policy alternatives remain on or fall off of the decision agenda. Research considers particular policy tools and trends in their use, as well as their underlying assumptions about problems and groups. As scholars answer such questions, they consider the array of interests involved and the balance of power held by participants, the dominant ideas and values of these participants, the institutional structure of the alternative-setting process, more broadly the historical, political, social, and economic context. The best work on policy formulation and policy tools brings together the empirical and normative. That is, it sets out trends and explains relationships while also proposing normative criteria for evaluating the processes and the tools, and considering their implications for a democratic society.

APPROACHES TO POLICY FORMULATION

The literature on policy design or formulation is somewhat disconnected. Policy formulation is an explicit object of inquiry in studies of policy design and policy tools. But attention to policy formulation also is embedded in work on subsystems, advocacy coalitions, networks, and policy communities (see Weible and Sabatier; Miller and Demir; Raab and Kenis, this volume). Even classic works on agenda-setting take up aspects of policy formulation (e.g., Kingdon 1995; Birkland, this volume). These various frameworks and theories of policy change consider the coalitions of actors taking part in (or being excluded from) the policy making process. Identifying these actors, and understanding their beliefs and motivations, their judgments of feasibility, and their perceptions of the political context, goes a long way toward explaining the public policies that take shape (Howlett and Ramesh 1995).

Policy Design

The most recent wave of literature explicitly focused on policy formulation uses the concept of policy design. Work on policy design emerged in response to implementation studies of the 1970s that held bureaucratic systems responsible for policy failure. Policy design theorists argued that scholars should look further back in the causal chain to understand why policies succeed or fail, because the original policy formulation processes, and the policy designs themselves, significantly contribute to implementation outcomes. Undergirding many of these works is an assumption of bounded rationality (Simon 1985). That is, limits to human cognition and attention, and limits to our knowledge about the social world inevitably lead policy makers to focus on some aspects of a problem at the expense of others, and to compare only a partial selection of possible solutions (see Andrews, this volume). Research on policy formulation thus seeks to understand the context in which the decision makers act and to identify the selectivity in attention that occurs. Often the aim is to bring awareness of the "boundaries" of rationality to the design process in order to expand the search for solutions, in hopes of improving the policies that result.

Under the rubric of policy design, some scholars have written from the perspective of professional policy analysts, exploring how notions of policy design can improve the practice of policy analysis and the recommendations that analysts make. Their purpose is an applied one—they hope to improve the process of designing policy alternatives. They propose that improving the search for, and generation of, policy alternatives will lead to more effective and successful policies. Essentially, these scholars seek to reduce the randomness of policy formulation (e.g., as portrayed in the garbage can model) by bringing awareness to, and then consciously structuring, the process.

For example, Alexander recommends a "deliberate design stage" in which policy makers search for policy alternatives (1982). Typically, designing policy involves some degree of creativity, or extra-rational element, in addition to rational processes of search and discovery, but Alexander argues that "a conscious concern with the systematic design of policy alternatives can undoubtedly effect a significant improvement in decisions and outcomes" (ibid., 289). Linder and Peters elaborate by proposing a framework that policy analysts can use to generate and compare alternative solutions, resulting in a less random process of policy design (1985). They echo a call made by many design theorists for analysts to suspend judgment on alternatives until they have generated the most comprehensive possible set. An effective framework to guide this process would enable analysis, comparison, and matching of the characteristics of problems, goals, and instruments.

Weimer agrees that consulting broad lists of policy instruments can systematize policy formulation, but warns that developing truly innovative solutions involves crafting designs that fit specific substantive, organizational, and political contexts (1992). He urges policy designers to think in terms of institution-building. That is, policies as institutions shape behavior and perceptions, so policies can be structured in such a way as to bring about desired changes in problematic conditions, but also the political coalitions to support them. Bobrow and Dryzek (1987) also advocate contextual designs that explicitly incorporate values, and urge policy analysts to draw from a range of perspectives on policy analysis, from welfare economics, public choice, and structural approaches to political philosophy when searching for alternatives. They suggest that analysts take care to include in a list of alternatives policy designs that offer no intervention, the status quo, and solutions vastly different from current practice. Fischer (2000) and Rixecker (1994) suggest that innovation and creativity will emerge from attention to the voices that contribute to the policy dialogue. Rixecker urges conscious inclusion of marginalized populations in the design process. Fischer examines the epistemology that leads citizens to defer to experts on policy matters, arguing that local contextual knowledge has an important role to play both in improving policy solutions and in advancing democracy.

Scholars who approach policy design from an academic research perspective typically seek to develop a framework that can improve our understanding, analysis, and evaluation of policy processes and their consequences. Many of these works aim to identify aspects of policy making contexts that shape policy design. They draw on institutional theories that suggest laws, constitutions, and the organization of the political process channel political behavior and choices. That is, institutions shape actors' preferences and strategies by recognizing the legitimacy of certain claims over others, and by offering particular sorts of opportunities for voicing complaints (Immergut 1998). Some focus on discourse and dominant ideas. Politics consists of competing efforts to make meaning as much as to win votes. Indeed, the pursuit and exercise of power includes constructing images and stories, and deploying symbols (Fischer and Forester 1993; Rochefort and Cobb 1994; Schneider and Ingram 1997, 2005; Stone 2001; Yanow 1995). Ideas about feasibility, dominant judicial interpretations, ideas about groups affected by the policy, all play a role in shaping the policy alternatives that emerge.

May proposes that political environments vary in terms of the level of public attention focused upon them, having important consequences for the policy design process. The degree to which organized interests have developed ideas about an issue will entail particular dynamics and challenges in the policy design process. For instance, on some issues, many interest groups will take an active part in defining the problem and proposing alternatives; they will offer an array of opposing ideas. The design challenge in such a scenario is to find solutions that will be acceptable to participants but also will achieve desired outcomes: "A dilemma arises when policy proposals that balance the competing interests do not necessarily lead to optimal outcomes" (1991,197). On the other hand, on some issues, few groups pay attention and discussions about solutions occur far from the public eye. The dilemmas here involve concerns about democratic process, but also policy designers may have trouble capturing the attention of decision makers. Here the challenge is sometimes to mobilize interest, to mobilize publics to care about, and eventually to comply with, policies.

Ingraham considers environment in terms of institutional setting, proposing that the level of design interacts with the locus of design to shape the policy prescription (1987). She contrasts the legislative setting with the bureaucratic setting to illustrate how different institutions carry particular kinds of expertise and decision processes to policy design. For example, legislative settings often require compromise among diverse opinions, which may lead to the broadening or blurring of a policy's purpose and content. On the other hand, bureaucratic settings enable technical and scientific expertise to be brought to bear on the design process, but at the expense of democratic legitimacy.

In addition to the distinction between applied and traditional scholarly work, researchers diverge in their conceptions of the activity of formulating or designing policy. Some see it as a technical endeavor, leading them to characterize policies as "more" or "less" designed, as "well" or "poorly" designed (e.g., Ingraham 1987; Linder and Peters 1985). For example, these authors would describe a policy as well-designed if a careful analysis of means-end relationships had been conducted prior to its adoption (Ingraham 1987). For others, designing policy does not by definition include certain kinds of analytic tasks. These scholars tend to understand policy design as a political process preceding every policy choice (Bobrow and Dryzek 1987; Kingdon 1995; Schneider and Ingram 1997; Stone 2001). Rather than hoping for a rational policy design to emerge, they expect designs to lack coherence or consistency as a result of the contested process that produces them.

APPROACHES TO POLICY TOOLS

Over time, a subset of policy literature has focused explicitly on policy tools. In part, these studies catalog the generic types of tools that might be used in a policy design. Additionally, this body of work charts the trends in usage of particular policy tools across time and space. This research seeks to discern the range of instruments, detached from their association with particular policy programs, both to broaden the alternatives that policy designers consider, and to look for patterns in the dynamics and politics of program operation that arise across policy areas where similar tools are used (Salamon 1989, 2002). It also often looks to theorize about the assumptions and implications of various policy tools.

Bardach offers the appendix "Things Governments Do" in his eight-step framework of policy analysis, describing taxes, regulation, grants, services, budgets, information, rights, and other policy tools (2005). For each tool, he suggests why and how it might be used, and what some of the possible pitfalls could be, aiming to stimulate creativity in crafting policy. Hood analyzes a range of government tools in significantly more detail (1986) with the ultimate aim of making sense of government complexity, generating ideas for policy design and enabling comparisons across governments (115). Recent literature on policy tools documents trends away from direct provision of government services and toward measures that embed government officials in complex collaborative relationships with other levels of government, private-sector actors, and non-government organizations. These arrangements grant government parties much greater discretion than the close supervision and regulation of the past (Salamon 2002). These indirect measures include contracting, grants, vouchers, tax expenditures, loan guarantees, government-sponsored enterprises and regulations, among others; many do not appear on government budgets, which Salamon suggests helps to explain their popularity (ibid., 5).

Like some of the work on policy design, research on policy tools highlights the political consequences of particular tools, as well as their underlying assumptions about problems, people, and behavior. Salamon characterizes the choice of tools as political as well as operational: "What is at stake in these battles is not simply the most efficient way to solve a particular public problem, but also the relative influence that various affected interests will have in shaping the program's

postenactment evolution" (11). Additionally, tools require distinctive sets of management skills and knowledge, thus the choice of tools ultimately influences the nature of public management. Literature on tools offers various dimensions according to which tools may be compared, such as directness, visibility, automaticity, and coerciveness, matching these with likely impacts (such as equity, efficiency, political support, manageability) (ibid.). Tools also carry with them particular assumptions about cause and about behavioral motivations. For example, inducements that offer payoffs to encourage behavior assume "that individuals respond to positive incentives and that most will choose higher-valued alternatives" (Schneider and Ingram 1990, 515). Capacity tools that provide information or training assume that barriers to desired behavior consist of lack of resources rather than incentives (ibid., 517).

POLICY DESIGN BEYOND THE STAGES MODEL

The most recent advance in the study of policy formulation and policy tools is Schneider and Ingram's policy design framework (1997). In their book, *Policy Design for Democracy,* the authors present a framework that pushes past a simple stages model by conceptualizing an iterative process. It brings the discrete stages of the policy process into a single model, and emphasizes the connections between problem definition, agenda setting, and policy design on the one hand, policy design, implementation and impact on society on the other. It offers some predictions about the types of policy designs that will emerge from different types of political processes, and it explicitly incorporates normative analysis by considering the impact of policy designs on target groups and on democratic practice.

Schneider and Ingram's framework answers calls for integrative approaches to policy research. Lasswell and other policy scientists consistently emphasized the importance of integrative approaches to policy scholarship, and political scientists also have begun to acknowledge the limitations of analysis that focuses exclusively on interests, ideas, or institutions. The policy design perspective offers a framework to guide empirical research that integrates these three dimensions: Ideas and interests interact within an institutional setting to produce a policy design. This policy design then becomes an institution in its own right, structuring the future interaction of ideas and interests. While complex, this model can be used to guide empirical analysis; and studies can test and refine Schneider and Ingram's predictions about policy designs and their impact.

With their framework, Schneider and Ingram also incorporate critical approaches to policy studies that explore how government and policy create and maintain "systems of privilege, domination, and quiescence among those who are the most oppressed" (1997, 53). They theorize that policy designs reflect efforts to advance certain values and interests, that they reflect dominant social constructions of knowledge and groups of people, and existing power relations. Moreover, policy designs influence not merely policy implementation, but also political mobilization and the nature of democracy. Schneider and Ingram elevate the status and importance of public policies beyond bundles of technical instruments that may or may not solve contemporary problems; they call public policies "the principal tools in securing the democratic promise for all people" (Ingram and Schneider 2005, 2). Viewing policies in this way calls for analysis that considers how effectively policies mitigate social problems, but also the degree to which they advance democratic citizenship—that is, inspire political participation and remedy social division.

Schneider and Ingram are particularly concerned about the impacts of policy designs that result from "degenerative" political processes (see also Schneider and Ingram, this volume). During such processes, political actors sort target populations into "deserving" and "undeserving" groups as justification for channeling benefits or punishments to them. While political gain can be achieved this way, they argue that policies formulated based upon such arguments undermine democracy and hinder problem solving. The language and the resource allocation tend to stigmatize disadvantaged

groups, reinforce stereotypes, and send the message—to group members and to the broader public—that government does not value them.

Policy Designs

Central to the policy design perspective is the notion that every public policy contains a design—a framework of ideas and instruments—to be identified and analyzed. Rather than a "random and chaotic product of a political process," policies have underlying patterns and logics (Schneider and Ingram 1997, chap. 3). This framework posits policy designs as institutional structures consisting of identifiable elements: goals, target groups, agents, an implementation structure, tools, rules, rationales, and assumptions. Policy designs thus include tools, but this approach also pushes scholars to look for the explicit or implicit goals and assumptions that constitute part of the package.

Policy Formulation: Context and Agency

To understand and explain why a policy has a particular design, one must examine the process leading to its selection. Schneider and Ingram's framework draws on institutional and ideational theories, the stages model, and theories of decision making, such as bounded rationality. Policy making is seen to occur in a specific context, marked by distinctive institutions and ideas. Institutional arenas, whether Congress, the courts, the executive branch, and the like, have rules, norms, and procedures that affect actors' choices and strategies. Additionally, policy making takes place at a particular moment in time, marked by particular dominant ideas related to the policy issue, to affected groups, to the proper role of government, etc. These ideas will influence actors' arguments in favor of particular solutions, and their perceptions and preferences when they take specific policy decisions.

Analysis of a particular context might lead to broad predictions about the policy design that will emerge from it. But because designs have so many "working parts" (goals, problem definitions, target groups, tools, agents, and such), such analysis cannot specify in advance the particular package of dimensions that actors will build at a particular point in time. Prediction also is complicated by the human dimension of policy making. Actors might reimagine a constraining context, reframe the structure of opportunities before them, as they attempt to create policy solutions to pressing problems. In considering agency—leadership, creativity, debate, and coalition-building—Schneider and Ingram essentially turn to the insights of agenda-setting and problem-definition literature, which characterize policy making as interested actors struggling over ideas (Edelman 1988; Fischer and Forester 1993; Rochefort and Cobb 1994; Stone 1989). Adding attention to the problem definitions that these actors hold offers a richer understanding of what political support and "interest" mean in a given policy process. Beyond examining who participates, we can consider whether actors succeed in expanding or restricting such participation, and how this mobilization affects the policy choice (Cobb and Elder 1972; Schattschneider 1960).

Consequences of Public Policy

Here, Schneider and Ingram take up the original impetus for policy design research—to better understand implementation. They suggest that policy designs act as institutional engines of change, and analysis can trace how their dimensions influence political action. Policy implementation distributes benefits to some groups, while imposing burdens on others. In doing so, designs establish incentives for some groups to participate in public life, and offer them resources for doing so. Other groups receive negative messages from policies. For example, if benefits are distributed in

a stigmatizing way, individuals may be intimidated by government, withdraw from public life, or feel alienated from it (Soss 1999).

Schneider and Ingram's framework builds on arguments about policy feedback. These suggest a number of ways through which policies shape the course of future politics. Groups receiving benefits from government programs are likely to organize to maintain and expand them. Mobilization is facilitated when policies provide resources to interest groups such as funding, access to decision makers, and information (Pierson 1994, 39–46). Consequently, target groups whose understanding of the problem differs or who lack the expertise needed to use a policy's administrative procedures, will not receive the same degree of support or legitimacy from the policy; they will have greater barriers to overcome in order to achieve their goals. The selection of a particular policy design also imposes lock-in effects. Once a choice is taken, the cost of adopting alternative solutions to the problem increase. The significance of the policy formulation process is that much greater because the barriers to change—such as investments in its programs and commitments to its ideas—cumulate over time.

Empirical applications of the policy design framework are beginning to accumulate, and to extend and refine the perspective itself (e.g., Schneider and Ingram 2005). Sidney tracks the development, designs, and impact of two policies intended to fight housing discrimination (2003). She shows how the social construction of target groups, and the causal stories that legislators told as they advocated for and revised policy alternatives, became embedded into the resulting policy choices, constraining the impact on the problem, and importantly shaping the trajectories of implementing agents. Her work situates the policy design perspective within the context of federalism and posits nonprofit organizations as important mediating agents between policy design and target group members.

Soss traces the impact of several means-tested welfare policy designs on recipients' attitudes toward government and disposition toward participation. Comparing Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with Social Security disability insurance (SSDI), he shows that programs designs have significant consequences for client perceptions, with AFDC clients likely to develop negative views of government and to avoid speaking up, while SSDI recipients think of government as helpful and interested in their views (2005). In the process, he raises questions about the causal claims that are possible in this framework, since individuals simultaneously belong to many target groups, thus receiving cues from multiple policy designs at once.

CRITIQUE AND NEW DIRECTIONS

Critiques of literature on policy formulation and policy tools may focus on the limitations of the stages model itself. That is, the specification of policy alternatives and the selection of policy tools does not follow neatly from the agenda setting process nor lead neatly into implementation. Rather, selection of alternatives might occur prior to or during the agenda setting process, and implementation often involves reformulation of policy design as well. Thus to the extent that studies offer recommendations for generating alternatives as if problem framing has already occurred, and as if the resulting design will simply be passed on to the implementers, they are flawed at their root. On the other hand, if researchers conceive of policy formulation as a function rather than as a stage that begins and ends in a certain sequence of stages, they are likely to search the empirical record of particular policy arenas more broadly. With their integrative framework that places policy designs at its center, Schneider and Ingram depart from the stages model and, with a growing community of scholars, offer a theory of public policy that directly addresses the question of who gets what, when, and how from government (Schneider and Ingram 2005). Critics charge that it lacks a clear mechanism of policy change that can be tested across cases (deLeon 2005).

The judiciary is the governmental sphere most absent from scholarship on public policy analysis.

Although many researchers study the court's role in public policy making and implementation, this body of work is largely disconnected from theoretical work on the policy process generally, and policy formulation in particular. In part, the traditional understanding of courts as interpreting rather than making law may serve as a barrier, although this conventional wisdom is increasingly challenged (e.g., Miller and Barnes 2004). Many scholars argue that the work of the courts by nature constitutes policy making (e.g., Van Horn, Baumer, and Gormley Jr., chap. 7). Certainly courts represent a distinctive institutional setting, whose actors, procedures, language, and processes of reasoning differ from those that prevail in legislatures and bureaucracies. Yet we can conceptualize court cases as processes of policy formulation, with plaintiffs, defendants, and amici as participants proposing alternatives, and judges as the decision makers. Courts thus offer a potentially fruitful comparative case for studies of the impact of institutions on policy formulation. In the U.S. context at least, many policy issues eventually reach the court system.

Attention to the nonprofit sector's role in policy formulation and tools has steadily increased. Recent work on policy instruments emphasizes that "non-profitization" constitutes a policy tool—and one that is more commonly used across policy arenas, from education (e.g., charter schools) to welfare to housing among others. But non-government organizations (NGOs) also are policy makers in their own right. Research about the kinds of policy designs that NGOs formulate is beginning to emerge, building on a longstanding research tradition about the third sector (e.g., Boris 1999; Smith and Lipsky 1993). Although most extant studies of policy formulation presume a legislative or executive-branch site of activity, recent work examines NGOs as policy designers.

Neighborhood organizations, for example, have quite different motivations and incentives when designing policy than do legislators, so theories of policy design that presume a legislative context may not be helpful in understanding policy making at this small, and extra-governmental, scale (Camou 2005). In Baltimore's poor neighborhoods, organizations targeted their policies to the most needy, framing individuals as redeemable, in contrast to Schneider and Ingram's expectations that policy makers eschew directing benefits to the most marginalized groups. In cities across the country, community-based organizations have designed numerous innovative policies and successfully implemented them (Swarts 2003). More attention to policy formulation outside the bureaucracy, and below the national level can broaden our theories and substantive knowledge of this important function. Such work would build on research about national policy that increasingly finds policy formulation to occur outside of government offices—that is, in think tanks and within the loose networks of advocacy and interest groups that together with government officials make up policy communities (see Miller and Demir, and Stone, this volume).

Research on policy formulation and policy tools draws on, overlaps with, and contributes to research on agenda setting, problem definition, implementation, and policy coalitions, among others. Its singularity emerges in its focus on the micro-level of public policies—that is the specific policy alternatives that are considered, how they differ in terms of policy tools, and how what may seem on the surface, or at a macro-level, to be small differences actually have significant consequences for problem-solving, and for the allocation and exercise of power. Attention to policy design essentially reminds us that democracy is in the details.

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