4 Agendas, agenda-setting and framing

Before the public sector can act on a policy problem it must find a way to move it from a matter of general social concern into the public arena for consideration. There is no shortage of important issues that governments could, and should, act upon, but for governments to make those policies the issue must work its way from some concern in society, or perhaps a negative segment of society, into the institutions of government. That movement on to an active agenda of government requires political action, often by political parties or interest groups. That said, governments are by no means totally passive, waiting for issues to come over their proverbial transoms. Rather, many actors in government, perhaps especially the public bureaucracy, are active in creating their own agendas for collective action.

Issues that do make it to some collective agenda for action are not necessarily successful – they only have an opportunity for action. The absence of guarantees for success is in part a function of how quickly issues move on and off active agendas. This "issue attention cycle" reflects not only the fickle nature of public opinion but also the pressures of numerous issues on governments that have limited time and resources (Downs, 1972). There is always something else occurring in the economy and society that can excite the public, the media and government, and hence any one issue may have a relatively short appearance on the political stage.

This chapter will examine the process of agenda-setting in government. I will first discuss the nature of agendas themselves, and some means of shaping issues so that they have a greater probability of making it on to an agenda. This includes the basic issue of how to frame issues for action in the public sector. I will then conclude the chapter by discussing several theories about agenda-setting and the politics of forming agendas. This chapter will deal very much with the politics of issues and agendas, while the following chapter will discuss issues and policy problems more from the perspective of policy analysis.

Agendas and agenda-setting

I have already made the point that agendas are crucial for making policy, but just what is an agenda. In its simplest form an agenda is the set of all issues that governments (again, along with their allies) will act upon (see Cobb and Elder, 1972). To examine this aspect of the policy process in somewhat greater detail there are at least three forms of policy agendas. The most general version of agendas is the "systemic, or informal, agenda", meaning all those issues that have been accepted on to the agenda for consideration, whether they are actually being actively considered at any one time. The systemic agenda will include a large array of issues that have been accepted as legitimate objects of action by the public sector. Some may be considered settled for the time being, but can be reactivated when change is desired. For example, European governments have a well-developed interest in the welfare state but may not be legislating or adjudicating about it during any one period.

At a second level of generality there are "institutional agendas" that contain the issues that an institution is working on actively at any time. Different institutions may or may not be processing an issue at any one time, and issues may move back and forth among institutions. One important political challenge for agenda-setters, therefore, is to move issues along. The bureaucracy, of course, is almost always processing issues as they implement programs, and the individual administrators tend to develop ideas about how to improve the policies for which they are responsible. Their task, therefore, is to find ways to move those concerns into legislatures or the political executive in order to have the laws changed.

Politically, it is crucial to understand how an issue moves from the informal agenda to some formal institutional agenda. After the initial recognition of the underlying problem in the society, the second stage is that those perhaps vague worries about a social situation have to be specified in a manner suitable for being addressed through the policy

process. After that specification of the issues to be considered, concern with the issue must be expanded to include a wider range of political and social actors so that some coalition can be built to enact the desired reforms. After the issue has been made sufficiently broad it can then be moved on to an active agenda in some institution or another.

Different types of political systems provide more or fewer institutional agendas for the would-be agenda-setters. For example, federal and other decentralized systems provide another whole set of institutional opportunities for agenda-setters (Chappell, 2002). Likewise, systems such as the United States and Germany that have powerful and active court systems provide another option, and one that has proved significant in dealing with issues such as civil rights that were difficult to process through the more political institutions (Rose-Ackerman, 1996). That said, multiple points of access for agenda-setters may mean that although access is easier, moving issues around among the institutions and making definitive decisions may be more difficult than in simpler systems.

The availability of multiple points of entry into the policy process provides the participants opportunities for venue-shopping (Baumgartner and Jones, 2010). This search for the institution offering the best opportunities for any particular policy may be highly strategic, but often there is inadequate information to make such choices. Further, different venues may provide opportunities for advocacy groups that go beyond winning or losing on a single issue and open new opportunities for action, and for gaining new partners in their political struggles. In particular the increased internationalization of policies offers new venues with great potential for groups seeing policy change (Pralle, 2003).

Finally, some issues are on "recurrent agendas". The most obvious example is the public budget that in most political systems comes on to the agenda every year (see Walker, 1977). And given that all public programs require budgetary funds, this means that to some extent every program comes on to the agenda regularly, even if the substance of the program may not be debated to any great extent. In addition, many programs are authorized for only a limited period of time, requiring them to come on to the agenda regularly. This recurrence may be beneficial to

popular programs but is a threat to less popular programs that may be better served by having issues remaining settled and off the active agenda.

Shaping issues for the agenda

Getting an issue on to any one of these agendas is important for the advocates of a program, but these advocates are often at the mercy of other forces. That said, however, those advocates can attempt to shape issues so that they are more likely to place them on the agenda. Some aspects of issues may not be controllable by their supporters, but others can be. In either case, understanding characteristics of issues that enhance the ease with which they can be placed on to the agenda can inform the strategic choices of advocates, as well as their understanding of the likelihood of success in the process.

Issues are easier to place on to the agenda if their effects are, or are perceived to be, severe. It is easier to place AIDS, Ebola or a severe outbreak of influenza on the political agenda than the common cold, even though many more people are likely to catch colds. And influenza outbreaks may be even easier than AIDS because there is no stigma potentially associated with the disease. Similarly, governments – even the neo-liberal American government – were able to make much more extensive interventions in the economic crisis following 2008 than they might in minor downturns of the economy.

As well as having severe effects, it may be beneficial to the would-be agenda-setter if the effects cover a large number of people. Further, the possibilities of placing an issue on to the agenda are increased if the effects are concentrated, either geographically or socially. For example, higher levels of unemployment are always important politically, but may be more of an issue if that unemployment is concentrated in one area of the country, or in one social group. And that effect may be magnified if the group or region has been the subject of other deprivations, for example, immigrants in most European countries.

The previous two criteria can justify the use of terms such as "emergency" or "crisis" as a means of moving issues on to the agenda. For example, labeling long-term unemployment insurance in the United States as emergency was used as a means of bringing it back on to the

agenda for additional consideration and extension in 2014. As we will discuss below, the literature on "focusing events" as a means of explaining agenda-setting also utilizes crisis as a means of explaining how issues can be moved on to an agenda. Even though a policy problem may exist for some time, it will not be addressed until an event brings the problem into sharper focus.

Placing an issue on to the agenda is also facilitated by attaching important political symbols to the issue and to the programs used to address the issue. For example, children are commonly a powerful political symbol, so even programs that may go against the normal political grain of a country can be successful if they can be "sold" as creating benefits for younger citizens. Also, at least in the United States, defense and national security have been important symbols so it is no surprise that the interstate highway system is formally labeled the National Defense Highway System.

One particular version of symbols involved in setting agendas is the availability of analogies of policy situations and policy interventions. The use of analogies is more common in making foreign policy than in making domestic policy (Houghton, 1998), but being able to make a contemporary issue appear like an older issue can be useful politically. If policymakers can say, "We have done this before" or "When something like this happened previously it was a major problem" those policymakers have a better chance to persuade others that they should intervene. The analogies are often false, but they can still be persuasive. And analogies can also be used to prevent action, for example, if it can be argued that when this type of problem was addressed before it proved to be insuperable or that something that appeared to be an impending crisis was really quite minor.

The active political agenda-setter is capable of assisting in getting issues on to the agenda. While some aspects of issues are givens, others can be molded in ways that can make them more likely to be placed on to an active institutional agenda. This activity by interested individuals can be crucial, given the large number of issues that compete for attention by government. This advocacy and shaping of issues is a rather basic way of understanding agenda-setting, but the importance of this stage of policymaking has produced a range of

theoretical models of this process. And the possibilities of manipulating issues in ways that can make them more amenable to being placed on to the agenda leads on to a discussion of framing issues.

The politics of agendas

While all the above discussion is to some extent political, we should consider some specifically political models of how issues are developed and then placed on to agendas. The most fundamental issue in understanding the politics of this part of the policy process is the extent to which it is open to popular ideas, as opposed to being controlled by political elites or powerful interest groups. As is so often the case, there is some evidence supporting all these positions and the apparent strength of one or another of the perspectives on agendas may depend upon the policy area being considered or the political system within which the agenda-setting process is being conducted.

The elitist position on agenda-setting is perhaps the easiest to maintain. This argument is simply that political and economic elites dominate the process of setting agendas, as well as politics more generally. Even in political systems that are nominally democratic, or indeed truly democratic, the capacity of money for campaigns, party support or even direct bribery may give the more affluent greater influence. Even if money is not involved, the political and economic elites tend to move in the same social circles, and often come from common backgrounds, so that the elite will have greater opportunities for influence and control. And the elite also may control the media so that the information available for policymakers may also be skewed in certain directions (Carnes, 2013).

The pluralist or more egalitarian position is that democratic systems tend to be open to a variety of influences so that there is roughly equal opportunity for all to influence agendas (McFarland, 2004). In this view the public sector is an open arena within which various interests contend for influence, with no certain winners and no certain losers. Adherents to this position can point to a variety of successes for the interests of less affluent citizens and minority interests. This position appears particularly viable in countries such as Germany, Canada and the United States where multi-level governance and a reasonably activist judicial system provide more opportunities for access than in

more confined political systems.[1] Even in more centralized regimes there may be structures that facilitate the influence of non-elite actors.[2]

When we consider agenda-setting and the relative power of different actors to influence the agenda we usually consider the evidence concerning who is successful in getting their issues moved from some broad agenda on to an active institutional agenda, and then in winning once the issue is acted upon in government. We should, however, also examine the capacity of powerful actors to prevent issues from being considered at all. This "second face of power" (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962; see also Lukes, 2004) demonstrates that the most certain way of preventing any threat to the positions of entrenched interests would be to have the concerns of outsiders totally ignored by decision-makers in the public sector.

Another means of classifying the agenda-setting process is to consider whether the impetus for new policies, or for policy change, comes from outside government or from inside. We tend to think of the politics of agenda-setting as involving individuals and groups on the outside of the public sector attempting to press their views on the public sector. While that is certainly true for most policymaking, there are also numerous instances in which government organizations and actors are the prime movers. There is some tendency to consider the bureaucracy as faceless automata without policy ideas of their own, but that is rarely true, and public servants who have been working in a policy area for years will clearly have ideas about how to improve policy.

The agenda items coming from within the public sector may not be major transformations of public policy but there are numerous instances of change, especially reforms of existing programs. The role of actors within the public sector as agenda-setters – usually the public bureaucracy – may be especially relevant within the "multiple streams" approaches to policymaking such as that of Kingdon or the "garbage can" (see Chapter 3). That is, members of the bureaucracy, or organizations with clear policy ideas, may wait for an opening presented by a change in government to bring those ideas forward for action.

Summary

From the above it should be clear that the agenda for policymaking in most instances is made – it does not just happen. Political actors, both inside and outside government, are actively involved in moving issues on to the active agenda of political institutions. Other actors may be working as vigorously to prevent those issues from being considered. That said, however, these actors are to some extent at the mercy of external forces in society that heighten the attention of the public and political elites in certain issues and dampen concern about others. The role of the media in both reflecting and activating attention to policy issues has produced a significant strand of research in public policy, a subject to which we now turn.

The issue attention cycle

One of the more important models of agenda-setting within political science began with a rather simple observation that has been referred to as the "issue attention cycle". Anthony Downs (1972) observed that issues came on to the political agenda with "alarmed discovery" but once the real difficulties of actually doing anything significant and successful about the issue become apparent then the interest tends to wane. Further, concern about most issues is quickly replaced by interest in the next issue, and then concern about that first issue becomes quiescent. That first issue remains part of the systemic agenda, albeit not an active agenda, until it becomes activated again.

The second root of this strand of literature is E.E. Schattschneider's (1962) discussion of the expansion of political conflict. His argument was that the political system in the United States tended (and still tends) to segment policymaking and to prevent actors not usually involved in a particular policy domain from breaking through and influencing choices. This segmentation tends to maintain existing patterns of policy and permit only incremental forms of change. Once settled, the institutions and the powerful actors who work within them prevent an issue from being considered by a wider range of actors, or perhaps all. This is analogous to the arguments of the historical institutionalists (Robinson and Meier, 2006) that policies are path dependent, with change coming through major events – punctuated equilibrium. Although this rather pessimistic model of government was developed in reference to the United States, similar patterns can be observed in other political systems.

Following from this initial observation a more elaborated version of this approach has been developed as "punctuated equilibrium theory" (Baumgartner and Jones, 2010). This is one of several models in the social sciences that assumes the presence of an equilibrium that is disturbed by some external force. In terms of setting agendas the presence of an equilibrium means that the policy process can be extremely conservative. In this perspective issues and particular ways of conceptualizing issues will persist without some sort of exogenous shock, or perhaps without the presence of a policy entrepreneur.

Information processing plays a significant role in the punctuated equilibrium model of agenda-setting (Baumgartner et al., 2009; Jones and Baumgartner, 2012). In this perspective information concerning the exogenous shock (see focusing events below) is imported into the policymaking system and depending on how the information is understood and processed it will produce some action, and perhaps very high levels of action, from policymakers. Even then the system will tend to revert toward something approaching the status quo ante without reinforcement.

The conservatism of most decision-making in punctuated equilibrium models can be seen as having much the same root as incremental theories of policy (Dahl and Lindblom, 1953; Lindblom, 1965). Given the huge number of decisions with which policymakers must contend on a regular basis, and the complexity of each of those individual decisions, policymakers adopt simplifying rules of thumb that enable them to contend with policy. This means that most decisions being made are made incrementally, with small movements from the status quo, a style that preserves much of the existing policy frame. This tendency is heightened by the domination of policy areas by specific interests and the negative feedback that may result from attempts at change (McCool, 1998).

Given the tendency of negative feedback and incremental decisions to maintain particular patterns of policy, once attention is focused on the existing policy then the change that is triggered is likely to be extensive. That trigger may be from a focusing event (see below) or perhaps from greater general awareness of problems in the policy area. Once the interests and leaders who have been protecting the policy subsystem from external influences are incapable of maintaining that isolation, then the problems that may be pent up within the area become more widely apparent.

Somewhat analogously to Down's idea of "alarmed discovery", once the underlying policy problems do become salient they tend to result in what scholars working in this approach have called "disproportionate information processing" (Workman et al., 2009). That is, whether because of the accretion of problems or simply the opportunity to address issues that had been protected from broader consideration by members of the subsystem, there tends to be a large-scale response to the available information in the field, and perhaps non-incremental change. Again, however, that spate of change will tend to be shortlived, with a return to quiescence when other issues take center stage in the policy world.

The mass media and other sources of information are major players in the issue attention cycle. In some instances the media can be the source of the attention focused on the policy area. In other cases the media may merely reflect changes in attitudes and concerns among the public. At times the shift in attention may be the product of political entrepreneurs who press for opening the policy subsystem or the pressure may come from social movements. However the change is initiated, the shift away from incremental decision-making to more significant change represents an opening of agendas for change, albeit one likely to be followed by another period of incremental changes.

Focusing events and agenda-setting

The use of so-called focusing events is a special case of the agendasetting process. As already noted above, proclaiming a problem or an issue a crisis can be a useful technique for placing an item on to the agenda, but there are also genuine crises and other extraordinary events that require governments to move out of their well-established routines and add new items to the agenda for action. The analysis of these events began with their definition in John Kingdon's seminal work on agendas (Kingdon, 1985 [2003]), and were seen as providing a "little push" from events that can permit individuals who have ideas about policy the opportunity to move those items from some limbo populated

by good ideas into active consideration.

While Kingdon proposed this concept, it remained rather vague (see Birkland and de Young, 2013). To some extent it conflates sudden, major events with more gradual learning about policy opportunities and options (May, 1992). It also tends to conflate natural events and crises with opportunities for policy action created by intentional mobilization of interests, for example, the civil rights or anti-war movements. Finally, the idea has relatively little predictive capacity, although one can argue that such an event did occur after the fact. Why do some events produce major policy shifts and others do not? This concept, and Kingdon's analysis of it, do not provide a ready answer to that question.

Birkland (1998) discusses "potential focusing events" and considers why some events are effective in moving an issue on to an active agenda and others are not. The answer to this question is complex but somewhat like the punctuated equilibrium model discussed above. The cumulation of problems and their revelation, along with potential solutions tend to produce policy change (Birkland, 2006). Again, negative outcomes and failure tend to drive issues back on to the policy agenda to a greater extent than the opportunities to improve policies that are working reasonably well (Best, 2010). The familiar adage of "If it ain't broke don't fix it" appears to work in policy as well as other areas of human endeavor.

It is also important to note that focusing on policy problems may not just be a function of cataclysmic events. Sometimes it may be a simple act of civil disobedience such as Rosa Parks on the city bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Or it may be the publication of a book like Rachel Carson's Silent Spring or the decision of a vegetable seller in Tunisia that he could no longer accept repression by the government. It is almost impossible to predict when an event or any other action will produce a disproportionate policy response. What does seem clear, however, is that there are powerful forces maintaining the status quo that may require some spark – natural or human – to overcome.

Further, institutional structures may facilitate or reduce the impact of focusing events on policy change. The more organizations and institutions that are involved in the process of recognizing and then acting upon focusing events, the less likely there is to be quick, and perhaps disproportionate, response to the event (Maor, 2013). Similarly, focusing events that fall between the conventional "silos" of government may be less likely to provoke a strong response from the policymaking system.

Framing

Much of the above discussion of agenda-setting has taken as a given the nature of the issues being considered. While for many well-established policy problems that may not be a particular concern, for newer issues coming on to the agenda their definition cannot be assumed. And even for more established issues changing politics, and changes in the economy and society, may alter the manner in which the issues are regarded. Thus, in order to understand the process through which issues are placed on to an agenda, and the form in which these issues actually appear on those agendas, understanding how they are "framed" is important.

At the extreme, issues must be framed to appear on the policy agenda, or even to be recognized as a problem. For example, while spousal abuse is now widely recognized as a policy problem, in earlier times this behavior was largely assumed to be a normal part of family life (Baker, 2006). Therefore, for governments to be able to criminalize the actions, and to provide more supportive forms of intervention for the victims, this behavior had to be framed as a problem, and then as a public problem. The same pattern has been identified for child abuse (Nelson, 1984) and for abuse of the elderly, with these problems remaining widely accepted until political agitation identified them as major social problems.

Framing is important in the initial movement of an issue on to an active agenda of institutions in government, but it is also significant as a mechanism for understanding policy change and creating coordination among programs. One possible cause of an absence of coordination and cooperation among programs and organizations is that they represent different ideas and different frames of reference (see Bardach, 1998). For example, although social policies and labor market policies may have some common goals, and some common clients, they tend to have very different underlying ideas about the causes of unemployment,

inequality and poverty.

Even when policy issues have been accepted on to the agenda, and have been framed as an issue suitable for public sector intervention, the question of framing has not been answered entirely. It is not only a question that there is an issue, the real problem arises when there are multiple interpretations of the issue. The classic example of this framing problem is drug policy (see Payan, 2006). This issue is usually addressed as a problem of law enforcement. There are, however, several other possible frames for this issue. For example, drugs constitute a major health issue, and also may be a consequence of social problems such as family breakdown and abuse.

These several possible frames for drug issues, and indeed multiple frames for any policy problem, can engender political conflicts. Many of these conflicts are organizational, given that the frame selected as the definition of, and remedy for, the perceived problem will determine which organizations within government will receive the funds and the personnel allocations associated with the program. While that conflict may be driven by utilitarian goals, there are also genuine policy debates over the best way to address the problem. Policy organizations are not only committed to their self-preservation and growth, they are also committed to ideas and to means of addressing policy problems.

The differences in possible frames for policy pose problems for policymaking. Donald Schön and Martin Rein (1994) have argued that reframing is a viable means of addressing difficult policy problems, especially those such as drug policy involving fundamental conflict of values and conceptions of what the policy problem may be. While in principle developing a frame for policy that could be acceptable to all participants has the potential of producing an enduring solution to policy conflicts, it also can be difficult to produce. If the organizations and individuals working in the policy area had such basic disagreements about the policy then finding a frame that is agreeable to all is a major challenge.

Summary

Agenda-setting is a crucial activity for policymaking. Unless an issue actually makes it to an active agenda it is not capable of being
addressed through the policy process. Placing the issues on an agenda may appear rather simple, but actually may involve substantial political mobilization. There are numerous barriers to having any issue placed on the agenda, and those barriers may be even higher if the issue conflicts with the interests and values of economic and political elites.

But simply getting the issue on to an active agenda is only one aspect of the political process. Another question revolves around the nature of the issue when it actually arrives on that agenda. The process of framing the issue shapes the politics of the issue, both at the mass level and the organizational level. Political interests that want to prevail at the final adoption of the policy therefore must invest time and resources in the process of framing. Further, to produce policy change for existing programs reframing may be required, involving some of the same aspects of the initial process.

In terms of the design approach being used in this book, framing and agenda-setting more generally are the ways in which policy problems are interpreted so that they can be acted upon in the remaining parts of the policy process. Whereas the previous chapter has attempted to define these problems in more or less analytic and objective ways, what may ultimately matter is the way in which the issues are understood as they are processed through the political system. Understanding the technical nature of the issues can be important for policy analysts but in the end politics may be trumps and the political framing of an issue may matter most for the final policy emerging from the process.

NOTES

1. Despite that, critics such as E.E. Schattschneider (1962, p. 58) argue that "the flaw in pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent".

2. For example, corporatism and corporate pluralism in Northern Europe allow for a large range of actors to be involved in policymaking. In this case, in contrast to the usual critique of pluralism, this second pillar of democracy has tended to empower business and agricultural interests against the dominant role of labor and the political left in the electoral institutions.