4 Theories of the Policy Cycle

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From its origins in the 1950s, the field of policy analysis has been tightly connected with a perspective that considers the policy process as evolving through a sequence of discrete stages or phases. The policy cycle framework or perspective has served as a basic template that allows to systematize and compare the diverse debates, approaches, and models in the field and to assess the individual contribution of the respective approaches to the discipline. At the same time, the framework has regularly been criticized in terms of its theoretical construction as well as in terms of its empirical validity. We are therefore confronted with an almost paradoxical situation: on the one hand of the policy research continues to rely on the stages or cycle perspective or is linked to one of its stages and research questions. On the other hand, the very concept of the stages perspective has become discredited by a variety of criticisms, including attacks on the theoretical status of the policy cycle as a *framework*, *model* or *heuristic* (we use the terms *framework* and *perspective* interchangeably, but return to a discussion of this issue in this chapter's conclusion).

This chapter seeks to assess the limitations and utility of the policy cycle perspective by surveying the literature that analyses particular stages or phases of the policy cycle. Following an initial account of the development of the policy cycle framework, the chapter offers an overview of the different stages or phases of the policy process, highlighting analytical perspectives and major research results. Then we turn to the burgeoning critique of the policy cycle framework in the wider policy research literature. The chapter concludes with a brief overall assessment of the framework, considering, in particular, its status as an analytical tool for public policy research.

THE POLICY CYCLE—A SIMPLIFIED MODEL OF THE POLICY PROCESS

The idea of modeling the policy process in terms of stages was first put forward by Lasswell. As part of his attempt to establish a multidisciplinary and prescriptive policy science, Lasswell introduced (in 1956) a model of the policy process comprised of seven stages: intelligence, promotion, prescription, invocation, application, termination, and appraisal. While this sequence of stages has been contested (in particular that termination comes before appraisal), the model itself has been highly successful as a basic framework for the field of policy studies and became the starting point of a variety of typologies of the policy process. Based on the growth of the field of policy studies during the 1960s and 1970s, the stages models served the basic need to organize and systemize a growing body of literature and research. Subsequently, a number of different variations of the stages typology have been put forward, usually offering further differentiations of (sub-)stages. The versions developed by Brewer and deLeon (1983), May and Wildavsky (1978), Anderson (1975), and Jenkins (1978) are among the most widely adopted ones. Today, the differentiation between *agenda-setting*, *policy formulation*, *decision making*, *implementation*, and *evaluation* (eventually leading to termination) has become the conventional way to describe the chronology of a policy process.

Arguably, Lasswell's understanding of the model of the policy process was more prescriptive and normative rather than descriptive and analytical. His linear sequence of the different stages had been designed like a problem-solving model and accords with other prescriptive rational models of

planning and decision-making developed in organization theory and public administration. While empirical studies of decision-making and planning in organizations, known as the behavioral theory of decision making (Simon 1947), have repeatedly pointed out that real world decision-making usually does not follow this sequence of discrete stages, the stages perspective still counts as an ideal-type of rational planning and decision-making. According to such a rational model, any decision-making should be based on a comprehensive analysis of problems and goals, followed by an inclusive collection and analysis of information and a search for the best alternative to achieve these goals. This includes the analysis of costs and benefits of the different options and the final selection of the course of action. Measures have to be carried out (implemented) and results appraised against the objectives and adjusted if needed. One of the major reasons of the success and durability of the stages typology is therefore its appeal as a normative model for ideal-type, rational, evidence-based policy making. In addition, the notion is congruent with a basic democratic understanding of elected politicians taking decisions which are then carried out by a neutral public service. The rational model therefore also shows some tacit concurrence with the traditional dichotomy of politics and administration, which was so powerful in public administration theory until after World War II.

Lasswell was, of course, highly critical of this politics/administration dichotomy, so his stages perspective moves beyond the formal analysis of single institutions that dominated the field of traditional public administration research by focusing on the contributions and interaction of different actors and institutions in the policy process. Furthermore, the stages perspective helped to overcome the bias of political science on the input-side (political behavior, attitudes, interest organizations) of the political system. Framing the political process as a continuous process of policy-making allowed to assess the cumulative effects of the various actors, forces, and institutions that interact in the policy process and therefore shape its outcome(s). In particular, the contribution of administrative and bureaucratic factors across the various stages of the policy process provided an innovative analytical perspective compared to the traditional analysis of formal structures (Scharpf 1973).

Still, the stages of policy-making were originally conceived as evolving in a (chrono)logical order—first, problems are defined and put on the agenda, next. policies are developed, adopted and implemented; and, finally these policies will be assessed against their effectiveness and efficiency and either terminated or restarted. Combined with Easton's input-output model this stages perspective was then transformed into a cyclical model, the so-called policy cycle. The cyclical perspective emphasizes feed-back (loop) processes between outputs and inputs of policy-making, leading to the continual perpetuation of the policy process. Outputs of policy processes at t_1 have an impact on the wider society and will be transformed into an input (demands and support) to a succeeding policy process at t_2. The integration of Easton's input-output model also contributed to the further differentiation of the policy process. Instead of ending with the decision to adopt a particular course of action, the focus was extended to cover the implementation of policies and, in particular, the reaction of the affected target group (impact) and the wider effects of the policy within the respective social sector (outcome). Also, the tendency of policies to create unintended consequences or side-effects became apparent through this policy process perspective.

While the policy cycle framework takes into account the feedback between different elements of the policy process (and therefore draws a more realistic picture of the policy process than earlier stages models), it still presents a simplified and ideal-type model of the policy process, as most of its proponents will readily admit. Under real-world conditions, policies are, e.g., more frequently *not* the subject of comprehensive evaluations that lead to either termination or reformulation of a policy. Policy processes rarely feature clear-cut beginnings and endings. At the same time, policies have always been constantly reviewed, controlled, modified, and sometimes even terminated; policies are perpetually reformulated, implemented, evaluated, and adapted. But these processes do not evolve in a pattern of clear-cut sequences; instead, the stages are constantly meshed and entangled in an ongoing process. Moreover, policies do not develop in a vacuum, but are adopted in a crowded policy space that leaves little space for policy innovation (Hogwood and Peters 1983). Instead, new

policies (only) modify, change, or supplement older policies, or—more likely—compete with them or contradict each other.

Hogwood and Peters (1983) suggested the notion of policy succession to highlight that new policies develop in a dense environment of already existing policies. Therefore, earlier policies form a central part of the systemic environment of policy-making; frequently other policies act as key obstacles for the adoption and implementation of a particular measure. At the same time, policies create side-effects and become the causes of later policy problems—across sectors (e.g., road construction leading to environmental problems) as well as within sectors (e.g., subsidies for agricultural products leading to overproduction)—and, hence, new policies themselves ("policy as its own cause," Wildavsky 1979, 83–85).

Despite its limitations, the policy cycle has developed into the most widely applied framework to organize and systemize the research on public policy. The policy cycle focuses attention on generic features of the policy process rather than on specific actors or institutions or particular substantial problems and respective programs. Thereby, the policy cycle highlighted the significance of the policy domain (Burstein 1991) or subsystem (Sabatier 1993; Howlett, Ramesh 2003) as the key level of analysis. However, policy studies seldom apply the whole policy cycle framework as an analytical model that guides the selection of questions and variables. While a number of textbooks and some edited volumes are based on the cycle framework, academic debates in the field of policy studies have emerged from research related to particular stages of the policy process rather than on the whole cycle. Starting at different times in the development of the discipline, these different lines of research developed into more or less separate research communities following a distinct set of questions, analytical perspectives and methods. In other words, the policy cycle framework has guided policy analysis to generic themes of policy-making and has offered a device to structure empirical material; the framework has, however, not developed into a major theoretical or analytical program itself.

With these limitations of the policy cycle perspective in mind, the following briefly sketches theoretical perspectives developed to analyze particular stages of the cycle framework and highlights main research findings. While this overview does only offer a very limited and selective review of the literature, the account stresses how research related to particular stages has shaped the general understanding of the policy process and the policy cycle framework.

THE STAGES OF THE POLICY CYCLE

Agenda-Setting: Problem Recognition and Issue Selection

Policy-making presupposes the recognition of a policy problem. Problem recognition itself requires that a social problem has been defined as such and that the necessity of state intervention has been expressed. The second step would be that the recognized problem is actually put on the agenda for serious consideration of public action (agenda-setting). The agenda is nothing more than "the list of subjects or problems to which governmental officials, and people outside the government closely associated with those officials, are paying some serious attention at any given time" (Kingdon 1995, 3). The government's (or institutional) agenda has been distinguished from the wider media and the overall public (or systemic) agenda (Cobb and Elder 1972). While the government's (formal and informal) agenda presents the center of attention of studies on agenda-setting, the means and mechanisms of problem recognition and issue selection are tightly connected with the way a social problem is recognized and perceived on the public/media agenda.

As numerous studies since the 1960s have shown, problem recognition and agenda-setting are inherently political processes in which political attention is attached to a subset of all possibly relevant policy problems. Actors within and outside government constantly seek to influence and

collectively shape the agenda (e.g., by taking advantage of rising attention to a particular issue, dramatizing a problem, or advancing a particular problem definition). The involvement of particular actors (e.g., experts), the choice of institutional venues in which problems are debated and the strategic use of media coverage have been identified as tactical means to define issues (cf. Kingdon 1995; Baumgartner and Jones 1993). While a number of actors are involved in these activities of agenda control or shaping, most of the variables and mechanisms affecting agenda-setting lie outside the direct control of any single actor.

Agenda-setting results in a *selection* between diverse problems and issues. It is a process of structuring the policy issue regarding potential strategies and instruments that shape the development of a policy in the subsequent stages of a policy cycle. If the assumption is accepted that not all existing problems could receive the same level of attention (and some are not recognized at all; see Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 10), the questions of the mechanisms of agenda-setting arise. What is perceived as a policy problem? How and when does a policy problem get on the government's agenda? And why are other problems excluded from the agenda? Moreover, issue attention cycles and tides of solutions connected to specific problems are relevant aspects of policy-studies concerned with agenda-setting.

Systematic research on agenda-setting first emerged as part of the critique of pluralism in the United States. One classic approach suggested that political debates and, hence, agenda-setting, emerge from conflict between two actors, with the less politically powerful actor seeking to raise attention to the issue (conflict expansion) (Schattschneider 1960). Others suggested that agenda-setting results from a process of filtering of issues and problems, resulting in non-decisions (issues and problems that are deliberately excluded from the formal agenda). Building on the seminal community-power literature, policy-studies pointed out that non-decisions result from asymmetrical distribution of influence through institutional structures that exclude some issues from serious consideration of action (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962; see also Crenson, 1971; Cobb, Ross, and Ross, 1976).

The crucial step in this process of agenda-setting is the move of an issue from its recognition—frequently expressed by interested groups or affected actors—up to the formal political agenda. This move encompasses several substages, in which succeeding selections of issues under conditions of scarce capacities of problem-recognition and problem-solving are made. Several studies of environmental policy development, for example, showed that it is not the objective problem load (e.g., the degree of air pollution) which explains the intensity of problem recognition and solving activities on the side of governments (Prittwitz 1993; Jaenicke 1996). Instead, a plausible definition of a problem (see Stone 2001) and the creation of a particular policy image (Baumgartner and Jones 1993) allowing to attach a particular solution to the problem, have been identified as key variables affecting agenda-setting.

While problem recognition and problem definition in liberal democracies are said to be largely conducted in public, in the media or at least among domain-specific professional (public) communities, the actual agenda-setting is characterized by different patterns in terms of actor composition and the role of the public (cf. May 1991, Howlett and Ramesh, 2003). The *outside-initiation* pattern, where social actors force governments to place an issue on the systemic agenda by way of gaining public support, presents but one of different types of agenda-setting. Equally significant are processes of policies without public input such as when interest groups have direct access to government agencies and are capable of putting topics on the agenda without major interference or even recognition of the public (cf. May, 1991). The agriculture policy in certain European countries would be a classic example for such *inside-initiation* patterns of agenda-setting. Another pattern has been described as the *mobilization* of support within the public by the government after the initial agenda-setting has been accomplished without a relevant role for non-state actors (e.g., the introduction of the Euro or, rather, the campaign prior the implementation of the new currency).

Finally, Howlett and Ramesh (2003, 141) distinguish *consolidation* as a fourth type whereby state actors initiate an issue where public support is already high (e.g., German unification).

Despite the existence of different patterns of agenda-setting, modern societies are characterized by a distinctive role of the public/media for agenda-setting and policy-making, especially when novel types of problems (like risks) emerge (see Hood, Rothstein, and Baldwin 2001). Frequently, governments are confronted with forced choice situations (Lodge and Hood, 2002) where they simply cannot ignore public sentiment without risking the loss of legitimacy or credibility, and must give the issue some priority on the agenda. Examples range from incidents involving aggressive dogs, and Mad Cow Disease to the regulation of chemical substances (see Lodge and Hood 2002; Hood, Rothstein, and Baldwin 2001). While the mechanisms of agenda-setting do not determine the way the related policy is designed and implemented, policies following so-called knee-jerk responses of governments in forced choice situations tend to be combined with rather intrusive or coercive forms of state interventions. However, these policies frequently have a short life cycle or are recurrently object of major amendments in the later stages of the policy cycle after public attention has shifted towards other issues (Lodge and Hood, 2002).

The confluence of a number of interacting factors and variables determines whether a policy issue becomes a major topic on the policy agenda. These factors include both the material conditions of the policy environment (like the level of economic development), and the flow and cycle of ideas and ideologies, which are important in evaluating problems and connecting them with solutions (policy proposals). Within that context, the constellation of interest between the relevant actors, the capacity of the institutions in charge to act effectively, and the cycle of public problem perception as well as the solutions that are connected to the different problems are of central importance.

While earlier models of agenda-setting have concentrated on the economic and social aspects as explanatory variables, more recent approaches stress the role of ideas, expressed in public and professional discourses (e.g., epistemic communities; Haas 1992), in shaping the perception of a particular problems. Baumgartner and Jones (1993, 6) introduced the notion of policy monopoly as the "monopoly on political understandings" of a particular policy problem and institutional arrangements reinforcing the particular "policy image"; they suggested that agenda-setting and policy change occurs when "policy monopolies" become increasingly contested and previously disinterested (or at least "non-active") actors are mobilized. Changing policy images are frequently linked to changing institutional "venues" within which issues are debated (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993, 15; 2002, 19–23).

How the different variables—actors, institutions, ideas, and material conditions—interact is highly contingent, depending on the specific situation. That also implies that agenda-setting is far from a rational selection of issues in terms of their relevance as a problem for the wider society. Instead, the shifting of attention and agendas (Jones 2001, 145–47) could eventually lead governments to adopt policies that contradict measures introduced earlier. The most influential model that tries to conceptualize the contingency of agenda-setting is Kingdon's multiple streams model that builds on the garbage can model of organizational choice (Cohen, March, and Olsen 1972). Kingdon introduced the notion of windows of opportunity that open up at a specific time for a specific policy (Kingdon, 1995). The policy window opens when three usually separate and independent streams—the policy stream (solutions), the politics stream (public sentiments, change in governments, and the like), and the problem stream (problem perception)—intersect. (The classical garbage can model distinguishes solutions, problems, actors, and decision opportunities.)

In a long-term perspective, attention cycles and the volatility of problem perception and reform moods for particular issues can be revealed (see the classic article by Downs 1972, his "issue-attention cycle" has been criticized for omitting the impact of agenda-setting on future policies by shaping institutional structures; Peters and Hogwood, 1985; Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 87). Within such cyclical processes, single issues appear on the agenda, will be removed later on, and

may reappear on that agenda as part of a longer wave. Examples include the cyclical perception of environmental, consumer protection and criminal issues, in which (combined with economic and political conditions) single events (like accidents, disasters, and the like) could trigger agenda-setting. A longitudinal perspective also points at changes in perceptions of a single issue, with some prior solutions later becoming problems (e.g., nuclear power). Baumgartner and Jones (1993; 2002) highlight the existence of both periods of stable policy agendas and periods of rapid change and take these findings as a starting point for the development of a policy process model (punctuated equilibrium) that challenges conventional notions of incrementalism.

Policy Formulation and Decision-Making

During this stage of the policy cycle, expressed problems, proposals, and demands are transformed into government programs. Policy formulation and adoption includes the definition of objectives—what should be achieved with the policy—and the consideration of different action alternatives. Some authors differentiate between formulation (of alternatives for action) and the final adoption (the formal decision to take on the policy). Because policies will not always be formalized into separate programs and a clear-cut separation between formulation and decision-making is very often impossible, we treat them as substages in a single stage of the policy cycle.

In trying to account for different styles, patterns, and outcomes of policy formulation and decision-making, studies on this stage of the cycle framework have been particularly theory-oriented. Over the last two decades or so, a fruitful connection with organizational decision theories has evolved (see Olsen 1991). A multiplicity of approaches and explanations has been utilized, ranging from pluralistic and corporatist interest intermediation to perspectives of incrementalism and the garbage can approach. Others are public choice approaches and the widely utilized neo-institutionalist perspectives (both in its economical and historical-institutionalist variant; for an overview see Parsons 1995, 134).

At the same time, studies of policy formulation have long been strongly influenced by efforts to improve practices within governments by introducing techniques and tools of more rational decision-making. This became most evident during the heyday of political planning and reform policy in the 1960s and 1970s. Policy analysis was part of a reform coalition engaged in developing tools and methods for identifying effective and cost-efficient policies (see Wittrock, Wagner, and Wollmann 1991, 43–51; Wollmann 1984). Western governments were strongly receptive to these ideas given the widespread confidence in the necessity and feasibility of long-term planning. Pioneered by attempts of the U.S. government to introduce Planning Programming Budgeting Systems (PPBS), European governments engaged in similar efforts of long-term planning.

Among parts of the policy research community and government actors, PPBS was perceived as a basis for rational planning and, hence, decision-making. The establishment of clearly defined goals, output targets within the budget statement, and the application of cost-benefit analysis to political programs were regarded as tools facilitating the definition of long-term political priorities. From this perspective an ex-ante, rather rationalistic branch of policy analysis as analysis for policy developed, inspired by micro-economics and operational research (Stokey and Zeckhauser 1978). Right from the beginning, these concepts of decision-making and political planning were heavily criticized from a political science background for being over-ambitious and technocratic ('rescuing policy analysis from PPBS', Wildavsky 1969). The role of economics and political science-based policy analysis in the wider reform debate of political planning provided a fertile ground for the prosperous development of the discipline. As policy advice (analysis for policy-making) became a major aspect of the planning euphoria during the 1970s, empirical research on decision-making practices (analysis of policy-making) was initiated for the first time (e.g., through the project group of governmental and administrative reform in Germany; Mayntz and Scharpf 1975).

Especially political scientists argued from the beginning (Lindblom 1968; Wildavsky 1979) that decision-making comprises not only information gathering and processing (analysis), but foremost consists of conflict resolution within and between public and private actors and government departments (interaction). In terms of patterns of interdepartmental interaction, Mayntz and Scharpf (1975) argued that these usually follow the type of negative coordination (based on sequential participation of different departments after the initial policy program has been drafted) rather than ambitious and complex attempts of positive coordination (pooling suggested policy solutions as part of the drafting), thus leading to the typical process of reactive policy-making. The aim of political science based policy analysis was, therefore, to suggest institutional arrangements which would support more active policy-making.

While these (earlier) studies pointed to the crucial role of the ministerial bureaucracy and top civil servants in policy formulation (Dogan 1975; Heclo and Wildavsky 1974), governments and higher civil servants are not strictly separated from the wider society when formulating policies; instead, they are constantly interacting with social actors and form rather stable patterns of relationships (policy networks). Whereas the final decision on a specific policy remains in the realm of the responsible institutions (mainly cabinet, ministers, Parliament), this decision is preceded by a more or less informal process of negotiated policy formation, with ministerial departments (and the units within the departments), organized interest groups and, depending on the political system, elected members of parliaments and their associates as major players. Numerous policy studies have convincingly argued that the processes in the preliminary stages of decision-making strongly influence the final outcome and very often shape the policy to a larger extend than the final processes within the parliamentary arena (Kenis and Schneider 1991). Moreover, these studies made a strong case against the rational model of decision-making. Instead of a rational selection among alternative policies, decision-making results from bargaining between diverse actors within a policy subsystem—the result being determined by the constellation and power resources of (substantial and institutional) interest of the involved actors and processes of partisan mutual adjustment. Incrementalism, thus, forms the typical style (Lindblom 1959, 1979) of this kind of policy formation, especially in allocation of budgets (Wildavsky 1964, 1988).

During the 70s and 80s, traditional theories of pluralism in policy-making (many, competing interests without privileged access) were, at least in Western Europe, substituted by theories of corporatist policy-making (few, privileged associations with strong influence, cf. Schmitter and Lehmbruch, 1979). At the same time, more elaborate theories of policy networks became prominent (Heclo 1978; Marin and Mayntz, 1991). Policy networks are, generally, characterized by nonhierarchical, horizontal relationships between actors inside the network. Generalized political exchange (Marin 1990) represents the characteristic mode of interaction and diffuse reciprocity (opposed to market-type direct reciprocity) is the corresponding social orientation of actors in the inner circle of networks. In contrast, a higher degree of conflict is to be expected as far as the access to these policy networks is concerned. However, as Sabatier (1991, cf. Sabatier, Jenkins-Smith 1993, 1999) stressed, a policy subsystem frequently consists of more than one network. The different networks (or advocacy coalitions) then compete for the dominance in the respective policy domain.

Despite the considerable level of self-governance within policy networks, governments still play a crucial role in influencing the actor constellation within these networks, for example by altering the portfolio of ministries, creating new ones or establishing/abolishing agencies. (The renaming of the German federal Ministry of Agriculture to the Ministry of Consumer Protection, Food, and Agriculture during the BSE [Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy] crisis serves as an example of a deliberate attempt to break up long-established policy networks in the agriculture sector as a prerequisite for policy change. Similar changes occurred also in the UK.) One major reason for the strong inclination of ministerial bureaucracies to defend their turf lies in the linkage between the allocation of responsibilities within government and the venues provided for social actors to the policy-making system (Wilson 1989). While these access points are of crucial importance for social

actors seeking to influence policy formulation, established relationships with interest groups at the same time provide the power-basis of departments in interdepartmental relationships and conflicts. Any redistribution of organizational structures and institutional arrangements will favor some and discriminate against others and will, therefore, become a contested issue.

While patterns of interaction between governments and society in policy networks are regarded as an omnipresent phenomenon, the particular constellation of actors within policy networks vary between policy domains, as well as between nation states with different political/administrative cultures, traditions of law (cf. Feick and Jann 1988) and differences regarding the wider constitutional setting. As the historical-institutional approach in policy research has pointed out, countries have developed particular types of policy networks resulting from the interaction of the pre-existing state structure and the organization of society at critical junctures in history (Lehmbruch 1991). These differences are said to foster national styles of policy-making in terms of preferred policy instruments and patterns of interaction between state and society (Richardson, Gustafsson, and Jordan 1982; Feick and Jann 1988). It remains, however, a debated issue in comparative policy research if policy networks are to a larger degree shaped by the (different) basic national institutional patterns or if the policies within specific policy subsystems are, to a larger extent, shaped by sectoral, domain-specific governance structures (with the implication of more variety between sectors within one country than between countries regarding one sector) (see e.g., Bovens, t'Hart, and Peters 2001). Some have argued that the emphasis on the pervasive nature of policy networks obscured national variations of patters of policy-making that are in fact related to (different) underlying institutional arrangements and state architectures (Döhler and Manow 1995).

In order to allow for the analysis of different structural patterns of state-society interaction, policy research has developed taxonomies of policy networks. While considerable variation (and maybe even confusion, cf. Dowding 2001) prevails, one major distinction has been made between *iron triangles*, *sub-governments*, or *policy communities* on the one hand and *issue networks* centered around a particular policy issues (e.g., abortion, fuel taxes, speed limits) on the other hand. These two basic types are differentiated along the dimensions of actor composition and the insulation of the network from the wider environment. Iron triangles typically consist of state bureaucracies, parliamentary (sub-) committees, and organized interests generally sharing policy objectives and ideas. Others suggested the notion of policy communities to emphasize the latter aspect of coherent world-views and shared policy objectives (however, the term has been defined in many ways, including a meaning that resembles the notion of issue networks). Heclo (1978) has contrasted iron triangles with issue networks consisting of a multitude of actors, and with comparatively open boundaries and a looser coupling between the actors involved.

When it comes to the final adoption of a particular policy option, the formal institutions of the governmental system move into the center. But even during this substage, modes of self-regulation, sometimes in the shadow of hierarchy, have increasingly been regarded as a widespread pattern of policy-making (Mayntz and Scharpf 1995). Which of the proposed policy options will be finally adopted depends on a number of factors; two of them should be highlighted. First, the feasible set of policy options is reduced by basic substantial parameters. Some policies are excluded because of scarcity of resources—not only in terms of economic resources, but also because political support presents a critical resource in the policy-making process. Second, the allocation of competencies between different actors (e.g., government) plays a crucial role in decision-making. For example, tax policy in Germany is one of the domains in which the federal government is not only dependent on the support of the Federal Parliament (Bundestag, which is most of the time assured in parliamentary systems), but also on the consent of the Federal Council (Bundesrat, the representation of the Länder governments). The scope for substantial policy changes is, all others things being equal, more restricted in federal systems, where second chambers of parliaments and also (more frequently) constitutional courts are in a position of the potential veto player (Tsebelis 2002). At the same time, subnational levels of government possess more leeway to initiate policies in countries with a federal or a decentralized structure than in centralized countries.

Another crucial aspect of policy formulation represents the role of (scientific) policy advice. While earlier models differentiated between technocratic (policy decisions depending on superior knowledge provided by experts) and decisionist (primacy of politics over science) models of the science/policy nexus (see Wittrock 1991), the dominant normative understanding favored a pragmatic and cooperative interaction at eye level (pragmatic model, see Habermas, 1968). Empirically, policy advice was recognized as a 'diffuse process of enlightenment', in which politicians and bureaucrats (contrary to conventional wisdom, especially in the academic world) are not influenced by single studies or reports. Instead, policy advice has an impact on the middle- and long-term changes of general problem perceptions and world views (Weiss 1977). Moreover, scientific research is only one of diverse sources of information and knowledge that is being brought into the policy-making process (Lindblom and Cohen 1979, 10–29).

Over the last years, the role of think tanks in these processes has formed a focal point in debates on changing ways of policy-making, for example in the formulation of neoliberal policies in the 1980s (Weiss 1992). Think tanks and international organizations are regarded as catalysts fostering the exchange and transfer of policy ideas, solutions, and problem perceptions between governments and beyond (Stone 2004). Some have argued that policy transfer has become a regular, though distinctive, part of contemporary policy formulation (Dolowitz and Marsh 2000). However, while the practice and existence of processes of transfer and learning are hardly deniable, the literature has difficulties in drawing clear boundaries between policy transfer and other aspects of policy-making, especially as the notion of lesson drawing (as one pattern of policy transfer) resembles the rational model of decision-making (cf. James and Lodge 2003). The study of policy transfer and learning has been advanced by insights drawn from organizational theory, in particular the notion of institutional isomorphism that differentiates between coercive, mimetic and professional mechanisms of emulation (DiMaggio and Powell 1991; for applications see, among others, Lodge and Wegrich, 2005b; Jann 2004; Lodge 2003).

Most studies dealing with the role of knowledge in policy formulation agree that, in the contemporary age, knowledge is more widely spread beyond the boundaries of (central) governments than some decades ago. Experts and international institutions (like the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD]) are said to play an increasingly visible role in communicating knowledge within the public debate on political issues (Albaek, Christiansen, and Togeby 2003). Therefore, the perception of a monopoly of information on the side of the bureaucracy (Max Weber's *Dienst- and Herrschaftswissen*) is obsolete. Policy formulation, at least in western democracies, proceeds as a complex social process, in which state actors play an important but not necessarily decisive role.

Implementation

The decision on a specific course of action and the adoption of a program does not guarantee that the action on the ground will strictly follow policy makers' aims and objectives. The stage of execution or enforcement of a policy by the responsible institutions and organizations that are often, but not always, part of the public sector, is referred to as implementation. Policy implementation is broadly defined as "what happens between the establishment of an apparent intention on the part of the government to do something, or to stop doing something, and the ultimate impact in the world of action" (O'Toole 2000, 266). This stage is critical as political and administrative action at the frontline are hardly ever perfectly controllable by objectives, programs, laws, and the like (cf. Hogwood and Gunn 1984). Therefore, policies and their intentions will very often be changed or even distorted; its execution delayed or even blocked altogether.

An ideal process of policy implementation would include the following core elements:

- Specification of program details (i.e., how and by which agencies/organizations should the program be executed? How should the law/program be interpreted?);
- Allocation of resources (i.e., how are budgets distributed? Which personnel will execute the program? Which units of an organization will be in charge for the execution?);
- Decisions (i.e., how will decisions of single cases be carried out?).

The detection of the implementation stage as a missing link (Hargrove 1975) in the study of policy-making can be regarded as one of the most important conceptual innovations of policy research in the 1970s. Earlier, implementation of policies was not recognized as a separate stage within or element of the policy-making process. What happens after a bill becomes a law (Bardach 1977) was not perceived as a central problem—not for the decision makers and, therefore, also not for policy analysis. The underlying assumption was that governments pass laws, and this is where the core business of policy-making ends.

This perception has fundamentally changed since the seminal study by Pressman and Wildavsky (1984 [1973]) on the implementation of a program targeting unemployment among members of minority groups in Oakland, California. Subsequently, the study of implementation as a core and often critical stage of the policy-making process became widespread currency. The starting point of Pressman and Wildavsky's analysis of the substeps involved in the implementation of the federal program, that was part of the ambitious social policy reform agenda put forth by President Johnson, was the unexpected failure of the program. Based on the analysis of the multitude of decision and clearing points at which involved actors were able to influence the policy along the lines of their particular interests, any successful policy implementation seemed to be more surprising than implementation failure (note the subtitle, *How Great Expectations in Washington Are Dashed in Oakland, or Why It's Amazing that Federal Programs Work at All*).

Following the path-breaking study, implementation research developed into *the* central field of policy research in the 1970s and early 1980s. Initially, implementation was regarded from a perspective that was later called the top-down approach. Implementation studies followed the hierarchical and chronological path of a particular policy and sought to assess how far the centrally defined goals and objectives are achieved when it comes to implementation. Most studies centered on those factors leading to deviations from these objectives. Intra- and inter-organizational coordination problems and the interaction of field agencies with the target group ranked as the most prominent variables accounting for implementation failures. Another explanation focused the policy itself, acknowledging that unsuccessful policy implementation could not only be the result of bad implementation, but also bad policy design, based on wrong assumptions about cause-effect relationships (cf. Pressman and Wildavsky 1984 [1973]; Hogwood and Gunn 1984).

Implementation studies of the first generation thus shared a hierarchical, top-down understanding of governance, at least as a normative yardstick for the assessment of outcomes of implementation. Implementation research was interested in developing theories about what works. One way to do this has been to assess the effectiveness of different types of policy instruments based on particular theories about cause and effect relations. Policy instruments have been classified into regulatory, financial, informational, and organizational policy tools (cf. Hood 1983; Mayntz 1979; Vedung 1998, see Salomon, 2002, for a more differentiated classification). One of the most prominent outcomes of the policy instruments perspective in implementation research has been the importance of the relationship between tool selection and policy implementation: Different policy instruments are vulnerable to specific types of implementation problems, with regulatory policies being aligned with control problems and subsidies with windfall gains on the side of the target group (see Mayntz 1979). Another result of this line of research has been that the reliance on wrong theories about

cause and effect relations frequently leads to negative side-effects or even reverse effects of state interventions (see Sieber 1981).

Since the mid 1970s, implementation studies based on the top-down perspective have been increasingly challenged on analytical grounds, as well as in terms of their normative implications (see Hill and Hupe 2002, 51–57). Empirical evidence, showing that implementation was not appropriately described as a hierarchical chain of action leading directly from a decision at the center to the implementation in some field agency, provided the ground for a competing concept of implementation. The so-called bottom-up perspective suggested a number of analytical reorientations that subsequently became accepted in the wider implementation and policy literature. First, the central role of implementation agencies and their personnel in shaping the actual policy outcome has been acknowledged (street level bureaucracy, Lipsky 1980); in particular the pattern of coping with diverse and often contradictory demands associated with policies is a recurring theme in this line of research (see also Lin 2000; Hill 2003; deLeon and deLeon 2002). Second, the focus on single policies regarded as inputs into the implementation process was supplemented, if not replaced, by a perspective that regarded policy as the outcome of implementation resulting from the interaction of different actors *and* different programs. Elmore (1979/80) suggested the notion of backward mapping for a corresponding research strategy that begins at the last possible stage, when "administrative actions intersects with private choices" (Elmore 1979/80, 604). Third, the increasingly widespread recognition of linkages and networks between a number of (governmental and social) actors within a particular policy domain, cutting across the implementation/policy formulation borderline, provided the ground for the eventual abandonment of the hierarchical understanding of state/society interaction.

In sum, implementation research played a major role in triggering the move of policy research away from a state-centered endeavor, which was primarily interested in enhancing the internal administrative and governmental capacities and in fine-tuning program design and implementation. Since the late 1980s, policy research is primarily interested in patterns of state-society interaction and has shifted its attention toward the institutional set-up of organizational fields in the wider society (e.g., the health, education, or science section). Based on the multiplicity of empirical studies in numerous policy areas, the classic leitmotiv of hierarchical governance has been abandoned. Policy networks and negotiated modes of coordination between public and private actors are not only (analytically) regarded as a pervasive pattern underlying contemporary policy-making, but also (normatively) perceived as an effective mode of governance that reflects conditions of modern societies. Studies of policy-making were decreasingly following the traditional stages model, but encompassed all kinds of actors in the organizational and regulatory field, thereby undermining the policy cycle framework.

Evaluation and Termination

Policy-making is supposed to contribute to problem solving or at least to the reduction of the problem load. During the evaluation stage of the policy cycle, these intended outcomes of policies move into the center of attention. The plausible normative rationale that, finally, policy-making should be appraised against intended objectives and impacts forms the starting point of policy evaluation. But, evaluation is not only associated with the final stage in the policy cycle that either ends with the termination of the policy or its redesign based on modified problem perception and agenda-setting. At the same time, evaluation research forms a separate subdiscipline in the policy sciences that focuses on the intended results and unintended consequences of policies. Evaluation studies are not restricted to a particular stage in the policy cycle; instead, the perspective is applied to the whole policy-making process and from different perspectives in terms of timing (ex ante, ex post).

Evaluation research emerged in the United States in the context of political controversies centered on the social reform programs of the Great Society of the 1960s. This early debate was concerned with methodological issues and sought to demonstrate its own relevance (cf. Weiss 1972; Levine et al. 1981; Wholey 1983). Evaluation research subsequently spread across OECD countries and was concerned with the activities of the interventionist welfare state (Albaek 1998) and reform policies in general. Evaluation was, for example, perceived as a way to systematically apply the idea of experimental testing of (new) policy options in a controlled setting (Hellstern and Wollmann 1983). Despite the inclination of evaluation research toward a rigorous application of quantitative research tools and quasi-experimental research designs, the general problem of isolating the influence and impact of a specific policy measure on policy outcomes has not been solved (given the variety of variables shaping policy outcomes). Moreover, attempts to establish evaluation exercises as part of politics-free policy-making have been widely regarded as failures. Their results were contested as being largely dependent on the inherent and often implicit values on which the evaluation was based (see, e.g., Fischer 1990).

Moreover, the role of evaluation in the policy process goes far beyond the scope of scientific evaluation studies. Policy evaluation takes place as a regular and embedded part of the political process and debate. Therefore, scientific evaluation has been distinguished from administrative evaluations conducted or initiated by the public administration and political evaluation carried out by diverse actors in the political arena, including the wider public and the media (cf. Howlett and Ramesh 2003, 210–16). Not only scientific studies, but also government reports, the public debate and activities of respective opposition parties embrace substantial elements of evaluation. Also the classical forms of overseeing government and public services in liberal democracies by law courts and legislators as well as audit offices can be grouped as evaluations.

While evaluation research sought to establish evaluation as a central part of rational evidence-based policy-making, activities of evaluation are particularly exposed to the specific logic and incentives of political processes in at least two major ways, both of them related to blame games (Hood 2002). First, the assessment of policy outputs and outcomes is biased according to the position and substantial interest, as well as the values, of a particular actor. In particular, the shifting of blame for poor performance is a regular part of politics. Second, flawed definition of policy aims and objectives presents a major obstacle for evaluations. Given the strong incentive of blame-avoidance, governments are encouraged to avoid the precise definition of goals because otherwise politicians would risk taking the blame for obvious failure. Even outside constellations that may be seen as shaped by partisan politics, the possibility of a self-evaluating organization has been strongly contested, because it conflicts with some of the fundamental values and interests of organizations (e.g., stability; Wildavsky 1972).

Evaluations can lead to diverse patterns of policy-learning, with different implications in terms of feed-back mechanisms and a potential restart of the policy process. One pattern would be that successful policies will be reinforced; a pattern that forms the core idea of so-called pilot projects (or model experiment), in which a particular measure is first introduced within a (territorial, substantive, or temporal) limited context and only extended if the evaluation is supporting. Prominent examples range from school reforms, the introduction of speed limits (and related measures in the field of transport policy), to the whole field of genetic engineering. However, instead of enhancing evidence-based policy-making, pilot projects may represent tools that are utilized for purposes of conflict avoidance; contested measures are not finally adopted but taken up as a pilot projects and thereby postponed until the political mood is ripe for a more enduring course of action.

Evaluations could also lead to the termination of a policy. Reform concepts and management instruments like Sunset Legislation and Zero-Based-Budgeting (ZBB) have been suggested as key tools that encourage terminating prior policies in order to allow for new political priorities to materialize. ZBB is supposed to replace traditional incremental budgeting (the annual continuation of budget items with minor cuts and increases reflecting political moods and distribution of power).

Instead, a new budget should be developed for single policy areas (and the responsible agencies) that expires at a predetermined date (sunset). All programs have to be periodically reassessed, designed, and budgeted. While ZBB proved to be overtly rationalistic and technocratic and, therefore, remained a short-lived reform idea, the notion of sunset legislation has regained more widespread currency (at least on the level of reform debates) since the mid-1990s in connection with the so-called regulatory policy agenda (OECD 2002).

The primary idea of policy termination—a policy problem has been solved or the adopted policy measures have been recognized to be ineffective in dealing with the set policy goals—seems rather difficult to enforce under real-world conditions of policy-making (see Bardach 1976; Behn 1978; deLeon 1978; Kaufman 1976). Rather large-scale budget cuts (e.g., related to subsidies) or windows of opportunity (e.g., changing governments, public sentiments) could trigger policy termination (Geva-May 2004). These processes are frequently connected with partisan motivations, like the implementation of election promises (see the change in energy policy introduced at the beginning of President George W. Bush's first term, or the first Schröder government's withdrawal of pension reforms introduced by the Kohl-Government in Germany).

However, the literature on policy termination suggests that attempts of policy termination are neither widespread nor successful in overcoming resistance of influential actors, allowing for the growth of a "Jurassic Park of programs" (Pollitt 2003, 113). Studies of policy termination, therefore, are frequently concerned with why policies and programs "live on" although they have "outlived their usefulness" (Geva-May 2004, 309). Counter-strategies against termination efforts range from window-dressing activities (instead of substantial changes) to the formation of cross-cutting anti-termination coalitions formed by beneficiaries of programs (e.g., delivery agencies, affected interest groups, local politicians; Bardach 1976). These coalitions can rely on a comparative advantage, because they are easier able to overcome collective action problems than any pro-termination coalition (given the threat of a potential loss of resources provided by the policy). In addition, politicians face greater incentives towards the declaration of new programs rather than the termination of old ones that include the admission of failures. The short-term political, as well as financial, costs of termination may outweigh the long-term benefits (cf. Bardach 1979; deLeon 1978; Geva-May 2004).

Apart from cases of unsuccessful termination, dynamic developments of policy booms (Dunleavy, 1986) as well as phenomena of extinction and reversal (Hood 1994) are alternative patterns of policy development. Among the most important variables accounting for policy reversals (the most important ones being economic policy changes since the late 1970s) are changing ideas and political coalitions supporting a new packaging of policy problems and solutions.

Overall, the analysis of the final stage of the policy cycle has witnessed a substantial departure from its initial focus on evaluation towards wider issues of policy change and inertia and the variables affecting these patterns.

CRITIQUE

While the numerous empirical studies and theoretical debates concerned with *single* stages of the policy cycle have substantially contributed to a better understanding of the prerequisites, elements, and consequences of policy-making, they also have triggered a rising critique challenging the underlying policy cycle framework. This critique is primarily questioning the analytical differentiation of the policy process into separate and discrete stages and sequences. As mentioned above, implementation research has played a crucial role in preparing the ground for that critique; implementation studies revealed that a clear-cut separation between policy formation and implementation is hardly reflecting real-world policy-making, neither in terms of any hierarchical or chronological sequence (first formation, then implementation), nor in terms of the involved actors.

Starting from empirical observations referring to single aspects of the cycle model an increasingly fundamentalist critique evolved, challenging the whole cycle framework. The approach was named, rather polemically, the textbook approach (Nakamura 1987). While the role of the stages heuristic in transforming political research and allowing the analysis of different stages of the policy process involving various institutional actors has been acknowledged even by its fiercest critics, it is said that the model has outlived its usefulness and should be replaced by more advanced models (Sabatier 1999). According to Sabatier, the uncritical application of the stages model prevents scientific progress rather than promotes it. Calls for the utilization of alternative frameworks and theories have criticized the stage heuristic in particular on these grounds (cf. Sabatier 1999; Sabatier, Jenkins-Smith, 1993):

- With regard to description, the stages model is said to suffer from descriptive inaccuracy because empirical reality does not fit with the classification of the policy process into discrete and sequential stages. Implementation, for example, affects agenda-setting; or a policy will be reformulated while some field agencies try to enforce ambiguous programs; or policy termination has to be implemented. In a number of cases it is more or less impossible, or at least not useful, to differentiate between stages. In other cases, the sequence is reversed; some stages miss completely or fall together.
- In terms of its conceptual value, the policy cycle lacks defining elements of a theoretical framework. In particular, the stages model does not offer causal explanations for the transition between different stages. Hence, studies of particular stages draw on a number of different theoretical concepts that have not been derived from the cycle framework itself. The specific models developed to explain processes within single stages were not connected to other approaches referring to other stages of the policy cycle.

The policy cycle is based on an implicit top-down perspective, and as such, policy-making will be framed as a hierarchical steering by superior institutions. And the focus will always be on single programs and decisions and on the formal adoption and implementation of these programs. The interaction between diverse programs, laws, and norms and their parallel implementation and evaluation does not gain the primary attention of policy analysis.

Moreover, by adopting the policy cycle perspective, the elements of the policy process that are not related to problem-solving activities are systematically ignored. Symbolic or ritual activities and activities purely related to the maintenance of power (Edelman 1971) do not feature in the stages model. However, rather than being the main objective of political action, policy-making frequently results as a by-product of politics. While the political process could be analyzed in terms of its impact on problem-solving, this should not be confused with an interpretation that regards actors as primarily taking a problem-solving orientation. Finally, the policy cycle framework ignores the role of knowledge, ideas and learning in the policy process as influential independent variables affecting all stages of the policy process (and not only in the evaluation stage).

Overall, the cycle framework leads toward an oversimplified and unrealistic world-view. Policy-making appears to be too straightforward; the whole process is reduced to initiating and continuing programs. As mentioned earlier, the role of prior policies in shaping policy-making as well as the interaction between diverse cycles, stages and actors is not systematically taken into account. However, a central feature of the policy process in modern societies is the interaction between policy-related activities at different levels (local, regional, national, inter- and supranational) and arenas (governmental, parliamentary, administrative, scientific communities, and the like) of governance. Policies are constantly debated, implemented, enforced, and evaluated. For example, environmental policy-making in the United States and in the European Union is not appropriately understood without the acknowledgement of interaction between initiatives from the different levels of government and without taking the impact of activities in other policy areas (e.g., transport, energy, or the wider economic policy) into account. Even the assumption of clearly defined and separated policy subsystems seems to be unrealistic.

The fundamental critique of Sabatier and others has triggered the development of alternative approaches beside. The advocacy coalition framework developed by Sabatier, the multiple-stream framework, the institutional rational choice approach, policy diffusion models, and the punctuated equilibrium theory are regarded as particularly promising alternative frameworks (see Sabatier 1999).

LIMITATIONS AND UTILITY OF THE POLICY CYCLE PERSPECTIVE

With that fundamental critique in mind, what would be an overall assessment of the limitations and the utility of the policy cycle framework? First of all, most of the different single points of criticism are reasonable. Like any framework, the cycle framework draws an extremely simplified picture of reality, highlighting some aspects while disregarding others. Above all, the policy cycle does not offer a causal model of the policy process with clearly defined dependent and independent variables. Therefore, the policy cycle or stages perspective could, according to Sabatier, not act as a theoretical framework of the policy process.

However, as Renate Mayntz has already emphasized in 1983, policy research is not only, and frequently not primarily concerned with the application of the analytical scientific theory (*analytische Wissenschafts-therorie*) (testing hypothesis, causal relations between variables) (see the debate on different logics of research in Brady and Collier 2004). Instead, the detailed and differentiated understanding of the internal dynamic and peculiarities of complex processes of policy-making counts as distinctive and relevant objectives of policy research (Mayntz 1983, 14).

Against these objectives, the policy cycle perspective has proven to provide an excellent heuristic device. Studies following the policy cycle perspective have enhanced our understanding of the complex preconditions, central factors influencing, and diverse outcomes of the policy process. The diverse concepts developed in studies seeking to understand specific parts of the policy cycle have offered a number of useful tools to classify various elements of the whole process. Hence, the policy cycle perspective will continue to provide an important conceptual framework in policy research, as long as the heuristic purpose of the framework is considered and the departure from the hierarchical top-down perspective and the receptivity for other and new approaches in the wider political science literature is taken into account.

The cycle framework also fulfils a vital role in structuring the vast amount of literature, the abundance of theoretical concepts, analytical tools and empirical studies, and therefore is not only crucial for teaching purposes (Parsons 1995, 80). The framework is also essential as a basic (background) template for assessing and comparing the particular contributions (and omissions) of more recent theories of the policy process. Therefore, the critique of the policy cycle, which is centered on general criteria for frameworks, theories and models, neglects the crucial role of the perspective in providing a base-line for the 'communication' between the diverse approaches in the field. In that respect, we agree with Schlager (1999, 239, 258), who highlights the openness of the cycle perspective for different theoretical and empirical interests in the field of policy studies (and agree with the critique of any application of the cycle perspective as a theoretical framework or model in a strict sense), but would add and emphasize the vital role of the cycle perspective for the integration of the diverse literature.

Numerous empirical studies and theoretical considerations have been conducted along the lines of single stages; these studies made important contributions not only to the policy literature, but also to the wider political science literature. For example, the whole debate on (new forms of) governance and the development from government to governance builds on results of and debates within policy research (Jann 2003; Lodge and Wegrich 2005a, b). Research on implementation has

prepared the ground for the governance debate by detecting non-hierarchical modes of governance and patterns of co-governance between state and social actors, and through the recognition of the crucial role of civil society (organizations) for policy delivery.

Central research questions in the academic policy literature as well as in applied research are (more or less explicitly) still derived from the heuristic offered by the policy cycle framework. Questions concerning the actual impacts of particular interventions (evaluation) or concerned with the consequences following from the results of evaluations (termination, new problem perception and recognition) will remain important ones. The same applies to the other stages of the policy process; of course, it is still of central importance if and why a policy drifts away from the original design during implementation, or which actors are the most important ones in defining a policy problem or during the formal adoption of a particular policy.

In terms of democratic governance and from the perspective of public administration research, it remains of central relevance in which stage which actors are dominant and which are not. Which role do parties, parliaments, the media, interest groups, single agencies, or scientific communities play in defining which problems should be addressed or how laws should be applied and enforced? Could it be that, contrary to our normative models, crucial policies are formulated without major interference of elected politicians, which then are only capable to initiate minor adaptations during implementation? The risk exists that empirical findings concerning the complex policy process—pictured as a densely entangled space in which numerous parallel processes operate with frequent interactive feedback loops—leads to the negligence of these central research questions concerning actors' different roles in the different stages of the policy process. Elected officials and appointed bureaucrats, interest groups and corporations, and scientists and experts have different responsibilities in democratic processes—and these roles are linked to the different stages of the policy process, with the maturity of the respective policy.

Therefore, the policy cycle framework does not only offer a yardstick for the evaluation of the (comparative) success or failure of a policy; it also offers a perspective against which the democratic quality of these processes could be assessed (without following the assumption of a simple, discrete sequence and clear separation of stages). Additionally, the cycle framework allows the use of different analytical perspectives and corresponding research questions that will stay among the most important ones in policy research, although the stages heuristic of the policy cycle does not offer a comprehensive causal explanation for the whole policy process and even if the fundamental theoretical assumptions, on which initial versions of the framework were based, have long been left behind; of course, it is still of central importance if and why a policy drifts away from the original design during implementation. Similarly, it is still a relevant question, which actors are the most important in defining a policy problem or formally adopting a particular policy.

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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

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