

Setting the Agenda

Problems, Group Theory, Agenda Setting, Political Power, and Strategies for Inducing Policy Change

POSC 315 • Dr. David P. Adams

What Counts as a Problem?

- Not every issue is a “problem.”
- **Condition:** Something for which very little can be done.
- **Problem:** Something that policy *can* address.
- Over time, conditions can become problems.

Example: Condition or Problem?

- Is drought a condition or a problem?
- Is traffic congestion a condition or a problem?
- When does something *become* a public problem?

Prompt: Think of an issue in your city or community—was it always seen as a problem?

The Social Construction of Problems

- **Social Construction:** The process by which people define reality, influenced by context and political actors.
- **Social Construction of Problems:** Defining problems and “selling” the definition to a broader population.

How Do We Construct Problems?

We use:

- **Symbols:** Words, phrases, or images that evoke meaning.
- **Numbers:** Statistics, data, and numerical information.
- **Stories:** Narratives that define problems (including conspiracy theories, horror stories, and causal stories).

Examples: Symbols, Numbers, Stories

- “War on Drugs” — the power of a metaphor
- Unemployment rate spikes — numbers spark debate
- Flint water crisis — a story that changed national attention

The way a problem is defined shapes how (and whether) it gets addressed.

Group Theory: Who Gets to Define Problems?

- The group that *successfully describes* a problem often gets to define its solutions.
- Competing groups promote their issues and try to keep others off the agenda.

Competing Theories: Pluralism vs. Elitism

- **Pluralism:** Many groups compete in a relatively open political system. Policy results from this competition.
- **Elitism:** Policymaking is dominated by the most educated, wealthiest, and most powerful. Policy reflects their preferences.

Why Does This Matter?

- Who defines the problem gets to frame solutions.
- Losers in one arena can try to expand conflict—take it to the public, the courts, or another level of government.
- The definition game is never neutral; it's about power.

Next: What Is the Agenda?

Up next—How issues move from “all possible things” to the shortlist for real action.

