

Power, Groups, and Policy Change

Who wins? Who loses? Why?

POSC 315 • Dr. David P. Adams

Political Power: The Engine Behind the Agenda

- **Political power:** The ability to get things done in a political system.
- Some groups win, others lose—no one wins all the time.

Losing Groups: Outmaneuvered or Outgunned

- **Losing groups** are unable to get their issues on the agenda or their solutions adopted.
- They have two main tools to expand the conflict:
 - i. Use symbols to change the debate and induce sympathy.
 - ii. Appeal to a higher level or another branch of government.

Winning Groups: The Policy Monopoly

- **Winning groups** get their issues on the agenda and adopt their preferred solutions.
- They have a **policy monopoly** over an issue.
- They reinforce their own narratives, keep others off the agenda, and work to keep attention away from competing policies.

Three Types of Political Power

1. **Coercive Power** – Forcing others to do what they wouldn't otherwise do.
2. **Blocking Power** – Preventing action or decisions (the power of "no").
3. **Quiescence/Powerlessness** – Being unable to get issues or solutions considered at all.

Coercive Power

- Most obvious form: military, police, regulatory enforcement.
- Rare in democratic policy fights—easier in authoritarian regimes.
- “Do it or else.”

Blocking Power

- The power to say “no”: filibusters, vetoes, bureaucratic stonewalling.
- Most common in democracy—much easier to block than to act.
- Keeps issues *off* the agenda, or keeps action from happening.

Quiescence / Powerlessness

- Most groups experience this: no traction, no hearing, no seat at the table.
- E.g., the poor, unhoused, politically marginalized.
- **Powerlessness is self-reinforcing**—fail often enough, and groups give up trying.

Conflict Expansion: How Issues Move

- **Conflict expansion** is the core strategy for moving issues up the agenda.
- Groups expand conflict to draw in allies, gain attention, or force action.
- Major policy decisions at one level or branch can spark new fights at others.

How Does Attention Expand?

- **Indicators:** Bad numbers (unemployment, inflation) push issues to the fore.
- **Focusing events:** Major incidents (9/11, natural disasters, scandals) can instantly move issues to the front of the line.
- **Strategic use of symbols and stories**—turning a local issue into a national movement.

The Battle for Attention

- **Attention sets the policy agenda.**
- Priorities shift as events happen, narratives change, or new voices break through.
- If you can't get attention, you can't get action.

Recap: The Agenda as a Battlefield

- Problems are socially constructed.
- Groups compete to define problems and solutions.
- Political power determines who wins, who loses, and what gets done (or blocked).
- Coercive, blocking, and quiescent power shape the outcomes.
- Conflict expansion is the catalyst for policy change.

Up Next: Policy Types

Next time—what kinds of policy are out there, and how do they play out in the real world?

