

Setting the Agenda

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

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Problems

Condition or Problem?

Condition: something for which very little can be done.

Problem: something that policy can address

- Over time, conditions can become problems.

Problems

The Social Construction of Problems

- **Social Construction:** the process by which people define reality, influenced by the political context and the actions of political actors.
- **Social Construction of Problems:** the process of defining problems and "selling" a broad population on the definition.

Problems

The Social Construction of Problems

We use symbols, numbers, and stories to define problems.

- **Symbols:** words, phrases, or images that evoke a particular meaning or set of meanings.
- **Numbers:** statistics, data, and other numerical information that can be used to define a problem.
- **Stories:** narratives that can be used to define a problem.
 - Conspiracy theories and horror stories usually lack evidence but are very powerful.
 - Causal stories: explain the causes of a problem.

Group Theory

The group that successfully describes a problem will also be the one that defines solutions to it.

Group Theory

Groups promote their issues and fight to keep others off the agenda.

Two Theories of Groups

Pluralism:

- Many groups compete in a relatively *open* political system.
- Policy is the outcome of this competition.

Elitism:

- Policymaking is dominated by the most educated, wealthiest, and most powerful groups.
- Policy is the outcome of the competition between these groups.

The Agenda

The agenda is the list of things being discussed and sometimes acted upon by a political body, the news media, or the public at large.

Other Agenda Definitions

1. An underlying ideological plan.
2. A collection of public problems that come to the *attention* of members of the public and their governmental officials. These include the related:
 1. causes
 2. symbols
 3. solutions
 4. and other matters that are the focus of attention.
3. A concrete list of bills before a legislature.

Other Agenda Definitions

1. A **series of beliefs** about the *existence* and *magnitude* of problems and how they should be addressed by the government, the private sector, nonprofit organizations, or through joint action by some or all of these actors.

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2. **Hidden agendas** reflect the American value of distrusting government and the belief that government officials and other actors are not always honest about their true intentions.
3. **Overt agendas** are the stated goals of government officials and other actors.

Agenda Setting

Agendas exist all levels of government: every community and government has a collection of issues that are available for discussion and action.

Agenda Setting

Agenda setting is the process by which problems and alternative solutions gain or lose public and elite attention.

Agenda Setting

The activities of various actors and groups that cause issues to gain or lose *attention* are called agenda-setting.

Political power is used to keep ideas and issues on or off the agenda.

Agenda Competition

- There are too many possible problems and possible solutions that no one society or government can address.
- The competition for attention is fierce.
- Substantial competition for a very limited agenda space.

Agenda Competition

Defining a problem involves considerable:

- difficulty,
- competition among groups vying for their preferred solutions, and
- possible controversy and conflict.

Levels of the Agenda

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3. **Institutional agenda:** the collection of issues that are up for active and serious consideration by a governmental body.
4. **Decision agenda:** the collection of issues that are actually acted upon by a governmental body.

Levels of the Agenda

- These levels exist in multiple phase spaces.
- We can think of multiple levels of the agenda for each of the following:
 - The public
 - The media
 - The government
 - The courts
 - The bureaucracy
 - The President
 - The Congress
 - The Supreme Court
 - The states
 - The local governments
- Each of these levels has its own agenda universe, systemic, institutional, and decision agendas.

Levels of the Agenda

Agenda Universe

- The **agenda universe** is the collection of all possible issues.
- Any possible idea that could every be considered by a government or society, at any time and in any place, is part of the agenda universe.

Levels of the Agenda

The Systemic Agenda

- The **systemic agenda** is the collection of issues perceived by the public, media, and government members as meriting public attention and governmental action.
- Any issue, problem, or idea that could possibly be considered by participants in each political system as long as it doesn't fall outside well-established norms and values.

Levels of the Agenda

- The boundary between the **systemic agenda** and the **agenda universe** is the **gatekeeping** function of the media, government, and other actors.
- This boundary is not static. From time to time, the boundaries can change regarding what is or is not considered acceptable for government action.

The Systemic Agenda

Levels of the Agenda

The Institutional Agenda

- The **institutional agenda** is the collection of issues that are up for active and serious consideration by a governmental body.
- These issues are receiving serious *attention* from the government and the public.

Levels of the Agenda

The Institutional Agenda

- Only a limited number of issues and problems reach the **institutional agenda**.
- The **institutional agenda** is a subset of the **systemic agenda**.
- Limited attention and resources mean that only a small number of issues can be considered at any one time.
- In legislative bodies, the committee structure helps to expand the carrying capacity of the agenda—the division of labor effect.

Levels of the Agenda

The Decision Agenda

- The **decision agenda** is the collection of issues that are actually acted upon by a governmental body.
- The **decision agenda** is a subset of the **institutional agenda**.
- These are items that are up for a vote or a decision by a governmental body.

Agenda Setting

Conflict Expansion

- **Conflict Expansion** is the key goal of many interest groups, and it can move items from the **systemic agenda** to the **institutional agenda** or from the **institutional agenda** to the **decision agenda** and vice versa.
- Conflict is greatest at the **decision agenda** level.

- A decision reached at one level or branch of government may trigger or expand the conflict at another level or branch of government.

Agenda Setting

Attention Matters!

- Attention sets the policy agenda
- Priorities often determine where attention is placed.
- Major events often shift priorities and attention allocation.

Agenda Setting

Attention Complications

- We live in a world of *imperfect* and *costly* information. Those who can persuade and use their power to get attention can shape the agenda.
- Attention bottlenecks occur when there is too much information, forcing us to focus on some things while ignoring others.

Agenda Setting

Attention Expansion

Indicators

- When the numbers or statistics look bad, the problem is more likely to get attention.
- e.g., unemployment, inflation, crime, etc.
- These indicators become *symbols* of the problem.

Agenda Setting

Attention Expansion

Focusing Events

- A major event that draws attention to a problem.
- Attention can spike in the agenda space when a major event occurs, forcing policymakers, the media, and the public to focus on the issue.
- e.g., 9/11, the Challenger explosion, the BP oil spill, etc.
- Some groups take advantage of these events to push their own agendas.

Political Power and Groups

Political power is the ability to get things done in a political system.

Political Power and Groups

Losing Groups

- **Losing Groups** are those who are unable to get their issues on the agenda or to get their preferred solutions adopted.
- They have two ways to expand the scope of the conflict:

1. Use symbols to change the nature of the policy debate, induce sympathy, and gain support.
2. Appeal to a higher level or another branch of government.

Political Power and Groups

Winning Groups

- **Winning Groups** are those that can get their issues on the agenda and adopt their preferred solutions.
- They have a **policy monopoly** over an issue.
- They reinforce their own symbols and narratives.
- They use their power to keep other groups off the agenda.
- They keep public attention directed away from their policy preferences.

Three Types of Political Power

1.

Coercive Power

2.

Blocking Power

3.

Quiescence or Powerlessness

Three Types of Political Power

Coercive Power

- **Coercive Power** is the ability to force someone to do something they would not otherwise do.
- e.g., the police, the military, etc.
- Coercive power is the most obvious form of power, but it is **not** the most common form of power in a democracy.
- Easy to use in a totalitarian regime, but not in a democracy.

Three Types of Political Power

Blocking Power

- **Blocking Power** is the ability to prevent someone from doing something they would otherwise do.
- e.g., the filibuster, the veto, etc.
- Blocking power is the most common form of power in a democracy.
- It is the power to
 - say "no" to someone else's agenda.
 - keep an issue off the agenda.
 - keep an issue from being decided.
 - keep an issue from being implemented.

Three Types of Political Power

Blocking Power

- **Blocking Power** is reflective of our biased system: it is easier to block than to act.
- Some issues are allowed to come to the fore while others are deemed unworthy of consideration.
- Even with an even playing field, there are vastly more powerful teams.

Three Types of Political Power

Quiescence or Powerlessness

- **Quiescence or Powerlessness** is the inability to get one's issues on the agenda or to adopt one's preferred solutions.
- e.g., the poor, the homeless, etc.
- Quiescence is the most common form of powerlessness in a democracy.
- People attempt but fail to influence the policy process, so they give up.
- Has lasting generational effects.

The Policy Agenda Recap

- Problems are socially constructed.
- Groups compete to define problems and solutions.
- The agenda is the list of things being discussed and sometimes acted upon by a political body, the news media, or the public at large.
- Agenda setting is the process by which problems and alternative solutions gain or lose public and elite attention.

The Policy Agenda Recap

- Political power is the ability to get things done in a political system.
- There are three types of political power: coercive power, blocking power, and quiescence or powerlessness.
- We discussed two models for inducing policy change: Kingdon's three streams and the window of opportunity model and Sabatier's advocacy coalition framework.

Next Time

Policy Types