

# Setting the Agenda

## Setting the Agenda

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

POSC 315 - Dr. David P. Adams

## 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:

- (a) causes
  - (b) symbols
  - (c) solutions
  - (d) and other matters that are the focus of attention.
3. A concrete list of bills before a legislature.

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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 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**