

Punctuated Equilibrium Theory

EVSS/PUBA 602 Public Policy

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Theoretical Antecedents

- Incrementalism (Lindblom)
 - Time constraints and/or political limitations prevent full (rational) consideration of policy issues
 - Policymakers rely on past decisions resulting in a policy process of small, incremental adjustments
 - Policymakers start from existing baseline and make adjustments based on pressures from the current environment
- Expansion of conflict (Schattschneider 1960)
 - Loser appeal: losers in policy conflicts attempt to expand conflict
 - Concerned outsiders
 - Jurisdictional expansion
- Serial and parallel processing
- Policy Subsystems

Punctuated Equilibrium

- Macropolitics is the politics of punctuation
 - Large-scale change, competing policy images, political manipulation, and positive feedback
- Subsystem politics is the politics of equilibrium
 - Policy monopoly, incrementalism, widely accepted and positive image, and negative feedback
- Boundedly rational foundations
 - Punctuations occur as a result of change in preferences or change in attention

Punctuated Equilibrium

- Incrementalism does not allow for rapid policy change, which often occurs
- PET proposes a single process that explains both stability and bursts of rapid change
 - The interaction of a policy image with political institutions (i.e., policy venues)
 - These processes alter existing policy subsystems
- Policy image
 - The ways an issue is defined; positive or negative
 - Mixture of empirical information and emotive appeals
- Policy venues
 - Political institutions that have jurisdiction over certain policy issues (or aspects of policy issues)

Punctuated Equilibrium

- Policy subsystem dynamics
- Negative feedback
 - Pressure exerted by strategies of those that favor the status quo to maintain the current policy image and venue authority (i.e., institutional arraignment)
 - Contain conflict
- Positive feedback:
 - Pressure exerted by those that favor policy change. These include policy entrepreneurs attempting to re-frame an issue and other policy venues attempting to claim jurisdiction
 - Expand conflict

Government Budgets

- A function of exogenous and endogenous pressure
- “Earthquake” budget
 - Many minuscule real changes, a few moderate changes, and many large changes
- Leptokurtic distribution
 - Large slender central peak (representing stability)
 - Weak shoulders (moderate changes)
 - Big tails (punctuations)

Government Budgets

