**A Theory of Policy Representation (Assignment 4)**

*Robbie Richards*

Existing theories of the policy process provide important insights into how policy is made, but such models are generally based on limited sets of cases. Punctuated equilibrium theory (PET; see Jones and Baumgartner 2005, True et al. 1999), for example, is based mainly on budgeting, and has not really been tested on other policies. Kingdon's (1995) work mainly examines a few years' worth of observations on health and transportation policies. Incrementalism (Lindblom 1965) explains enduring policy regimes well, but is unable to explain the significant policy shocks that have occurred many times.

Policy models also disagree in important ways, including in their predictions of who is leading in the policy process. Kingdon suggests that elites are the ones advocating changes, while the public imposes more of a constraining, negative influence. Conversely, both the incremental and advocacy coalition (Sabatier 1988) models posit an activist public, frustrated in its wishes by the conservative actions of policy networks. We are thus left with competing theoretical predictions about who provokes policy change and who prevents it, with completely different cases backing up each model.

Without devaluing these existing theories, I argue that our understanding of and ability to shape the policy process could be enhanced by a model that is more generalizable. By building on previous policy models, I believe we can construct such a model, and I aim to lay the beginnings of such a model in my dissertation research.

Policy models suggest that while elites often lead, there is some room for the public to exert independent influence rather than to merely constrain. In theory, we might therefore expect both elites and public opinion to have effects on policy makers. This influence, including the relative strength of the two actors, will vary based on characteristics of the two, the temporal and issue contexts prevailing in a given case, and the institutions and structures shaping the debate.

Based on past research on public opinion and political institutions, we might expect public opinion to exert more consistent influence on representatives' behavior under the following conditions:

* When public opinion clearly favors a change from the status quo
* When public opinion has a low variance
* When there is more publicly available information about an issue
* When an issue is more salient overall
* When the legislators are not “experts” on an issue (operationalized as members of the legislative committee hearing the policy)
* When political parties are weak, based on the theory of conditional party government (Aldrich 2011)
* When policies that limit the ability of certain groups to amplify their influence, such as campaign finance restrictions, are in place.

**References**

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