The garbage can model and the study of the policy-making process

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Origins and description of the GCM

Kingdon imported the garbage can model (GCM) into political science and adapted it to study public policy-making from the seminal work of Cohen *et al.* (1972) who used the "garbage can" metaphor to describe decision-making in universities and other complex organizations. As Nikolaos Zahariadis (2007: 66) points out, the GCM "theorizes at the systemic level, and it incorporates an entire system or separate decision as the unit of analysis." Kingdon applied the GCM to the study of the federal government and conducted panel interviews with more than 240 participants in the policy-making process, primarily in the areas of transportation and health policies. Borrowing from Cohen *et al.*, Kingdon described the federal agenda-setting process as a mix of order and chaos, or "organized anarchy." The "can" is the set of more permanent and predictable features of the policy-making process, such as institutional arrangements and procedures that shape and structure behavior.

The main focus of the GCM, however, is on the "garbage" in the can because the items that reach the agenda at any given time arise out of the mix of contents in the can. The can's contents consist of three "streams"—"problems," "solutions" and "politics", which operate largely independent of one another. According to Kingdon (1984: 93), an issue reaches the agenda when "a problem is recognized, a solution is available, and the political climate makes the time right for change." Policy-makers and others recognize problems when social indicators, such as crime or unemployment rates, indicate that an undesirable condition is worsening or reaching a critical threshold, or, when a "focusing event"—a salient and usually dramatic episode or crisis—draws attention to the problem and lends it a sense of urgency. Solutions include "the gradual accumulation of knowledge and perspectives among specialists in any given area." Specialists generate and disseminate solutions, provide evidence and arguments in support of them that are intelligible to non-specialists, and help to package them into concrete proposals. "Politics" refers to the wide variety of actors and forces that constitute the political environment, including the "national mood," the organization and mobilization of interest groups and social movements, the partisan and ideological composition of Congress and the executive branch, and other aspects of the political context in which agendas are set.

The streams operate largely independently because different groups of people or forces control each of them. Problems come and go given changing conditions in the world, without regard

for either the status of solutions that might address the problems or the state of the political context. Groups of experts and advocates conceive, develop and disseminate solutions over the long-term, without necessarily reacting to the immediacy of problems or the tenor of the political environment. And political change is governed by processes, like elections, budgeting, and the mobilization of interests that operate on their own schedules and trajectories.

An item (problem or solution) reaches the agenda (or is adopted) only when the three streams are aligned properly. Problem X or solution Y will not get on the agenda (or be chosen) unless the problem is recognized, a solution is considered to be available, and political conditions are conducive for giving the problem and solution serious attention. If any of these three elements is missing, the item will not get on the agenda (or the policy adopted). Problem recognition, solution availability and political opportunity, thus, each constitute necessary conditions for an item to reach the agenda (or a policy adoption).

At particular junctures, a policy entrepreneur with a commitment to a particular issue and the ability to draw attention to it, will couple a problem with a solution. Entrepreneurs wait for an auspicious time, such as after a dramatic focusing event and when Congress and the president are controlled by officials who are interested in addressing the issue. These "policy windows" often open unpredictably and only for a short while. Thus, entrepreneurs must act expeditiously and efficiently to get their pet item on the agenda (or get it adopted) before the window closes, when the political environment changes and attention shifts to other issues.

Criticisms and limitations of the GCM

Scholars have pointed to a number of important problems and deficiencies with the GCM. In this section, we review several of these criticisms.

Falsifiability. The model, at least as a whole, is not falsifiable. Can we imagine a set of circumstances in which some condition in society was *not* considered a problem receiving serious consideration in government? Or, a situation in which an item got on the agenda (or a policy adopted) even though the political environment was *not* favorable to getting it on? Since the agenda, by definition, is composed of conditions that some key group of decision-makers considers "problems," it would be impossible for non-problematic conditions to get on the agenda. Since the political environment refers to those actors who are in power or who have influence over those in power, a problem or solution could not receive serious attention unless they permitted it. Non-falsifiability arises, as in most cases, because the model is formulated very broadly and ambiguously. One strategy for making the model more falsifiable would be to develop categories of problems, solutions and political contexts from which we could derive testable hypotheses about how *particular* kinds of problems and solutions reach the agenda given the existence of *particular* political conditions (Mucciaroni 1992: 463–5).

Bendor *et al.* (2001) have critiqued the original GCM developed by Cohen *et al.* (1972), arguing that the model is more like a metaphor than a model. As a result, many applications of the GCM "do little more than describe some parts of an organization as garbage cans … but it is not at all clear that they provide real … explanations." According to them, the GCM merely provides a scheme for describing and labeling phenomena without explaining them.

Situational versus structural levels of analysis. Before we can model agenda-setting, we need to be clear about what we are trying to explain related to agendas. It makes a great deal of difference whether we are asking why certain items reach the agenda at particular moments in time versus why certain items reach the agenda ever. The GCM is better at explaining *when* the agenda changes than explaining *how and why* the agenda changes. Much of the reason that the GCM is better at explaining the timing of agenda (or policy) change rather than give a full accounting of

it, arises because the model conceptualizes constraints on agenda-setting (or decision-making) mainly at what I call the "situational" level of analysis—aspects of the policy-making environment that are relatively temporary and changeable. Problems (e.g. crime, airline safety) "get hot" and then cool off as attention drifts to other problems and new crises. Solutions (e.g. the "flat tax," "deregulation") snowball into fads but eventually turn stale and their popularity fades. Congressional majorities and presidential administrations come and go every two, four, or eight years; the "public mood" varies with the vagaries of the economy and other conditions. But political actors and forces that are more *permanent*, that *change slowly or hardly at all* from decade to decade, also shape agendas and decisions. It would be as much of a mistake to overlook the impact of these forces on agendas and policy decisions as it would be to ignore the impact of old age or genetics on human health.

One of kind of structural constraint is culture, political traditions and dominant ideologies. For example, the problems of anti-gay discrimination and poverty were off the agenda for many decades before they appeared in the 1960s in the case of poverty, and after 1970 in the case of gay rights. They were kept off the agenda by deeply ingrained, taken-for-granted beliefs that either nothing could be done about poverty or that it was the result of personal failings and that discrimination against gays was justified because they were "sick," "predators," or "sinners." Similarly, institutional arrangements hinder and facilitate problems and solutions from reaching the agenda. For example, during the Great Depression of the 1930s, policy-makers in some countries considered Keynesianism a plausible solution to the crisis while those in other nations did not. But whether Keynesian ideas became accepted partly depended upon which institutions had responsibility for making economic policy and whether institutions provided Keynesian economists with access to decision-makers (Hall 1989; Skocpol and Weir 1985). And some solutions have a bad "fit" with particular institutions. For example, regardless of the backgrounds of particular judges, or other relatively fluid conditions, solutions that do not fit into the logic of legal reasoning and the language of "rights" may not get a hearing or may be rejected.

Kingdon was aware of the importance of structural features of the policy-making process. He mentions, for example, that the budget process has particular procedures and timetables that constrain agenda-setting, and that American political culture filters out solutions that are incompatible with it before they can reach the agenda. The problem is that the GCM does not theorize structural constraints, leaving them largely outside its parameters. Because they are not incorporated in the model, the GCM is significantly incomplete. Admittedly, all models are incomplete, but these are large omissions in light of the GCM's theoretical ambitions.

Lack of historical causality. Much of what happens in the policy-making process, how it happens, and to whom, is in some fashion rooted in the past. The GCM neglects much of history because it focuses solely upon immediate or near-term changes in problems, solutions, and politics. Kingdon justifies overlooking historical explanations for agenda and policy change on the grounds that historical investigation would simply lead us down a fruitless path of "infinite regress": in searching for the relevant antecedent events and conditions that shaped the agenda, we would be compelled to search for the antecedents to the more proximate antecedents, and so forth, endlessly. Tracing historically relevant antecedents to explain later choices and conditions need not, of course, end up being a slippery slope into an unceasing quest for initial causes. If that were the case, historical studies would be impossible.

The lack of historical perspective contributes to the overall randomness of the GCM. Without examining antecedent choices and conditions that might have given rise to, or facilitated, a problem or solution from getting on the agenda, many items seem to appear and disappear unpredictably and suddenly. Problems may indeed "suddenly get hot" but the problems themselves and the reasons they come to be perceived as problems are rooted historically. For

example, under the GCM, we might observe that unemployment rises sharply within a few months and that the public and policy-makers take notice. But whether we regard unemployment as a problem suitable for government attention, how high unemployment must be to be considered "unacceptably high," and why the rate went up, we can only understand adequately in historical perspective. Similarly, to understand why "supply-side tax cuts" became perceived as a plausible solution to unemployment or sluggish economic growth, one has to have some historical understanding of the evolution of economists' theories and opinions, in what sense American economists came to understand "Keynesianism," its rise and fall as a theory and policy prescription, and the lessons that economists and others drew from experiences with previous efforts to cut taxes. It is not enough to know that at a particular point in time Keynesianism came to be seen as a solution to a particular economic problem. We want to know *why and how* it became a viable solution.

Items often reach the agenda and come up for decision because past efforts to put them there have failed or never materialized. Or, a problem reached the agenda and a policy was adopted to address it, which in turn, gave rise to new problems that eventually gained agenda status. Scholars working from a historical perspective have developed a number of concepts to help us to understand history as a causal process. The development and dissemination of solutions, for example, is often done through learning and lesson-drawing, which occur over time (Heclo 1975; Rose 1991). Public policies are also often the product of "critical junctures," which produce distinct "legacies" that would not have occurred if the critical juncture had not occurred (Collier and Collier 1991). Alternatively, the legacies may be the result of "antecedent conditions" and "constant causes" that predated the hypothesized critical juncture and account for the legacy. Policymaking is also subject to path dependency. Political events and policy choices at one point in time often put nations and organizations on particular trajectories that close out or reduce the probability of making other choices in the future because the original events and choices create dominant frames, institutions and interests that become entrenched long after the conditions that established the path have ended (Pierson 2000).

The criticism that the GCM is insufficiently grounded in historical analysis would be less problematic if the model was considered exclusively a model of agenda-setting. Since an "agenda" is conventionally defined as consisting of those items that a government (or set of decision-makers in any complex organization) gives serious attention at a point in time, paying attention only to contemporary, immediate, situational factors is understandable. An organization's attention to particular problems is usually short-term and often intermittent. But if we extend the GCM beyond agenda-setting to policy *formulation and adoption,* as many scholars have done, we have a harder time justifying the lack of historical analysis and appreciation of structural constraints. Policy-making is more than attention-getting and a deeper understanding must go beyond situational factors.

Randomness and the separation of the streams: Probably the most frequent criticism of the GCM is that it portrays decision-making as overly chaotic and random. Even defenders and users of the GCM admit that the model "shares common ground with chaos theories in being attentive to complexity, in assuming a considerable amount of residual randomness, and in viewing systems as constantly evolving and not necessarily settling into equilibrium" (Zahariadis 2007: 66). The feature of the GCM that contributes most to the model's randomness is the assumption the loose and independent relationship exists among the three separate streams. While changes within each stream reflect purposive behavior and patterns, the core of the model—the simultaneous occurrence of a salient problem, available solution and favorable political conditions—gives rise to outcomes that are largely fortuitous and unpredictable. The coupling of the three streams is a purposive, non-random process, but it occurs *after* the alignment of the three streams. Kingdon

(1984: 93) stipulated that only "hints of connection" existed among the streams. But is the lack of connectedness among the streams justified? An alternative model would stress the importance of changes in one stream contributing to changes in the others and would trace out the inter-actions and interdependencies among the streams. Pursuing an approach in which the streams were more interconnected would reduce the currently high level of indeterminacy and ran-domness in the GCM and uncover a greater degree of behavior that is collaborative, purposive, and strategic. Indeed, those items that reach the agenda may be precisely those that exhibit stronger linkages and congruence among the streams, where advocates and their allies do not leave congruence to chance, but actively promote it. In this model, changes in one stream give rise to and reinforce changes in the others, increasing the probability that entrepreneurs will attempt to couple the streams and that their efforts will succeed.

Perhaps the closest links are those between solutions and politics. Solutions that reach the agenda are those that have a good fit with policy-makers' goals, such as reelection, influence, and promoting the adoption of "good" policy (Fenno 1973). Obviously, policy-makers choose solutions that have the best chance of promoting their goals. At the same time, experts and advocates craft and promote their favorite solutions with at least some attention to policy-makers' goals. The type of policy or program promoted, its specific provisions, the evidence and arguments mustered for it, how it is packaged and framed—all are geared toward building support, muting opposition, and persuading the undecided and ambivalent that the proposed course of action is desirable, or at least plausible. Since policy-makers' goals are usually often broad, and their views on how to achieve them are malleable, those who advocate on behalf of particular solutions have some room to persuade them.

Politics and problems are also closely connected. Perhaps the best-known example of this phenomenon is when incumbent politicians are ousted from office, or threatened with being outsted, when economic indicators, particularly the unemployment rate, worsen or fail to improve during a recession. Many less salient examples also exist. For example, when fuel prices rose sharply in the mid-1970s, businesses that shipped their goods by truck, including farmers, manufacturers and many other businesses, formed a coalition with liberal consumer groups to push for trucking deregulation (Robyn 1987: 96–7, 234–5). In other cases, previous policy choices create new problems or exacerbate existing ones that, in turn, create political opportu-nities for elected officials. For example, the creation of very generous tax loopholes in 1981 resulted in large revenue losses. By the mid-1980s, a bipartisan coalition emerged in favor of closing the loopholes and converting them into across-the-board rate cuts for taxpayers gen-erally (Conlan *et al.* 1990). Republicans regained control of the House and made gains in the Senate in the 2010 elections because the combination of a devastating recession, war spending and growing entitlement spending created a "debt crisis" that allowed Republicans to push debt reduction as the central issue on the agenda after the election. In both cases, the perceived wor-sening of problems contributed to conditions that were conducive to getting the problems on the agenda.

Finally, problems and solutions are linked. The GCM rightly uncovered instances when, counterintuitively, experts developed solutions before they found the problems to which they were eventually applied. At the same time, experts often develop solutions with very clear pro-blems in mind at the outset and their linkage of a solution to that particular problem often carries through the policy-making process. Both patterns are at work, perhaps often in the same proposal. For example, the original rationale that tax experts in the Treasury Department put forward the argument for reforming the tax code (by reducing the number of special provisions in the code reducing taxpayers' liability) was to increase the fairness of the income tax. Eventually, policy-makers and others took up reform to address other problems (the complexity of the code

and economic inefficiency created by distorted market incentives), but the original problem that the experts were trying to address endured as a principal rationale for reform.

Problems and solutions are linked in more subtle ways as well. As problems get worse, plausible solutions become attractive and are more likely to gain agenda status. Solutions that might have a harder time getting political support (for any number of reasons) when a problem is perceived to be under control or imposing only modest costs, will have an easier time as the problem worsens and the expected windfall from applying the solution grows. In the tax reform example again, as the problems of unfairness, revenue loss, complexity and inefficiency grew, so did the attractiveness of closing the loopholes because the costs of the existing policy rose at the same time that the expected benefit from closing the loopholes also rose (in the form of lower tax rates, for example).

Studies that have employed the GCM after Kingdon

As of June 25, 2011, Google Scholar registered 6,650 citations for Kingdon's *Agendas* book.[1] Many of the citations are from political science and policy studies as well as other disciplines, fields and professions. At the same time, according to Bendor *et al.* (2001), the GCM is not used extensively in political science research or in related disciplines. Indeed, the number of studies in public policy that actually use the GCM or test hypotheses derived from it is surprisingly small given the attention that Kingdon's book received and its status as a staple on public policy syllabi. Zahariadis (2007: 79) acknowledges that the GCM, or "multiple streams model," as he prefers to call it, "does appear to be an argument that many scholars quote but few explicitly use." Bendor *et al.* attribute the GCM's relative lack of use in empirical studies to weaknesses in the model that render it a poor theoretical guide for research. Zahariadis counters that the problem has more to do with "paradigmatic problems" that have plagued the model. Following Sabatier (1999), he suggests a number of reasons for why the GCM does not guide empirical research in policy studies more frequently: the model's principal proponent and popularizer—Kingdon—did not vigorously promote its usage; many people consider the GCM only relevant for understanding agenda-setting rather than policy formulation and adoption; and, researchers working on subnational levels of government identify the GCM with agenda-setting at the national level. These reasons are plausible. Kingdon retired from academe not that long after he published the second edition of his book. And, in confining the application of the GCM to the agenda-setting stage, Kingdon may have limited its perceived relevance given that conceptualizing the policy process as a set of distinct stages may be a useful heuristic device, but not very realistic.

The GCM has appeared prominently in a modest number of public policy studies that came after Kingdon's book was published. Most of these works have sought to broaden the applicability of the GCM (or elements of it), refine its central concepts, and use it to interpret case study findings. Zahariadis, for example, has sought to show how the GCM (or "multiple streams" model, as he prefers to call it) is useful for understanding policy-making outside the United States, specifically the privatization of public enterprises in Britain and France (1995) and Greek foreign policy (2005). An important aim of Zahariadis's (1995, 9) study of privatization was to extend the GCM beyond agenda-setting, to the entire process of policy formulation and decision-making. Zahariadis argues that Cohen, March and Olsen formulated the GCM originally to explain decision-making, not just agendas, and that agenda-setting, policy formulation and decision-making are integrally related. These arguments are sensible, but extending the GCM to the policy-making process as a whole makes it even harder to maintain the notion that problems, solution, and politics are largely separate until a final coupling. Once an item reaches the agenda, it is implausible to believe that the independence of streams remains relevant during policy formulation and

decision-making. Unless we are trying to answer the narrow question of "why did policy-makers make any decision rather than none at all?" the GCM would find it difficult to explain why policy-makers decided on one specific policy and rejected others. Second, extending the GCM beyond agenda-setting does nothing to ameliorate other problems with the model, such as its failure to ground its explanations sufficiently in the historical and structural aspects of policy-making.

Framing his explanation in terms of the coming together of the three streams of the GCM, Zahariadis (1995) argues that Britain and France adopted privatization when the following conditions converged: (1) policy-makers perceived the solution—selling off state-owned enterprises—as technically feasible and compatible with their values; (2) social indicators revealed a problem—that government budgets were under stress and the public was resistant to new taxes; and (3) the occurrence of a key change in the political environment—the rise to power of political parties that were not identified with public enterprise and that possessed the ideological commitment and political capacity to work to end it. In some of cases, as Kingdon had found earlier, specialists developed the solution (privatization) before the specific problem for which it eventually was adopted had emerged.

In trying to account for Greek foreign policy-making over the span of five years on the issue of Macedonia, Zahariadis (2005) argues that the GCM is more useful than two other explanatory frameworks ("rational internationalism" and "two-level games"). The substance of Zahariadis's explanation focuses on the importance of policy elites' manipulation of emotive symbols and domestic politics on foreign policy decisions. If the manipulation of emotion and considerations of domestic politics are what matter in his explanation of Greed policy, then the need for the GCM in Zahariadis's account is not readily apparent. According to Zahariadis (2005: 172), "as multiple streams [i.e. GCM] hypotheses, domestic agendas make a big difference in the making of foreign policy." But what rationale exists for equating the GCM (or "multiple streams") with "domestic politics"? And again, how does the GCM contribute to an explanation that the variables "emotion" and "domestic politics" do not already contribute on their own? A compelling case that the GCM helps to explain Greek foreign policy would require showing how elements of the GCM are essential causal mechanisms that facilitate or shape the influence of emotion and domestic politics on foreign policy.

McLendon (2003) employed the GCM in his study of how the issue of higher education decentralization reached the agenda in the US states in the 1980s and 1990s. He compared the GCM with incremental and rational-comprehensive theories of policy-making to assess their usefulness for explaining how the issue reached the agenda and for elucidating which actors in the policy-making process exerted the most influence. Analyzing an eclectic mix of data, including 61 semi-structured interviews, from in-depth case studies of three states, McLendon found that agenda setting on this issue resembled the GCM far more than the other two models. Like Kingdon, McLendon found "clarity, order and pattern" within the structure of each stream, and at the same time, "elements of ambiguity, anarchy and unpredictability … in the specific coupling of problems, solutions and politics." He also found support for several of the features of the GCM as Kingdon formulated them: different streams of activity that exhibited a "surprising degree of independence" (though they were "not entirely unrelated"); "conflict over autonomy and control within the education policy domain" was weakly connected to the reasons that decentralization reached the agenda; the development of the decentralization solution occurred before, not in response to, the problem policy-makers eventually addressed; the rapid, non-incremental movement of the issue to the top of the agenda; and the significant role of policy entrepreneurs in helping to push the item on to the agenda.

Instead of employing the entire GCM, other studies have explored and elaborated upon particular elements of it. Birkland (1997: 2004) has clarified and developed the concept of

"focusing events" and investigated under what empirical conditions focusing events help to push issues on to the agenda and lead to the adoption of new policies. In his study of natural disasters, oil spills, and nuclear accidents, Birkland (1997) stipulates that focusing events are harmful, unexpected, relatively rare, and affect large numbers of people who learn about them simultaneously. Focusing events favor groups (particularly relatively weak ones) that seek changes in public policy because the events provide valuable opportunities for the groups to point out problems with the status quo and relieve them of the task of convincing the mass media to pay attention to their issue. Not all focusing events lead to changes in the agenda or in policy. Birkland argues that certain characteristics of focusing events and of the political environment in which they occur help or hinder them from having an impact on policy. How much "focal power" an event has depends, first, upon the media attention that it receives. The level of media attention, in turn, depends upon the scope of the event (or, how many people it affects), its rarity, the size of the media market in which it occurs, and the visibility and tangibility of the damages that it produces. Focusing events also have greater impact if the policy domain is characterized by a high level of organization, whether the community of experts support change, and in domains with less opposition and polarization among advocacy coalitions. In a follow-up study, Birkland (2004) examined the impact of the September 11 attacks on the United States He hypothesized that highly significant focusing events like 9/11—in which the level of damage, potential future damage, and media attention were greater than typical focusing events—would lead to windows of opportunity that were kept open much longer and would influence a broader set of policy areas, initiatives, and agencies.

Finally, a few studies have tried to test hypotheses derived from the GCM. Even though the GCM as a whole is not falsifiable, parts of it generate testable hypotheses. Robinson and Eller (2010) tested hypotheses related to one of the model's central and most contested features: the independence of the three streams. Robinson and Eller collected data from surveys of Texas school district superintendents related to participation in local, school district policy-making concerning violence prevention programs. They hypothesized that if the GCM is correct, we should observe different sets of participants involved in the problem and solution streams. Observing a participant in one stream should reduce the probability of finding the same participant in the other stream. Since Kingdon also suggested that special groups of experts dominate the solution stream, Robinson and Eller also tested the hypothesis that the solution stream would be dominated by elite participants rather than ordinary citizens and non-specialists. Contrary to the GCM, they found that participation in one stream *dramatically increased* the likelihood that a participant would participate in the other stream and that elite participation did not "crowd out" participation by "mass" participants (e.g. teachers and parents). One difference between Robinson and Eller's study and Kingdon's, of course, is that one focused at the local and the other at the federal level. Perhaps differences in policy-making at the two levels accounts for the different results. Obviously, much more research needs to be done to see if Robinson and Eller's results hold up at the local and state levels, in other policy areas and on other issues, and if they do, what might account for the differences found when we compare degree of independence of streams across levels of government.

Conclusion

The GCM has been, and will continue to be, among a handful of approaches to the study of policy-making that all students in policy studies will learn about, discuss and use in their empirical work. Undoubtedly, the debate over its strengths and weaknesses, its promise and limitations for elucidating the real world of policy-making, will persist as well.

Note

1 http://scholar.google.com/scholar?q=kingdon&hl=en&btnG=Search&as_sdt=1%2C39&as_sdtp=on

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