

## Agenda Setting: General Perspectives

### Public Opinion and Policy Agendas

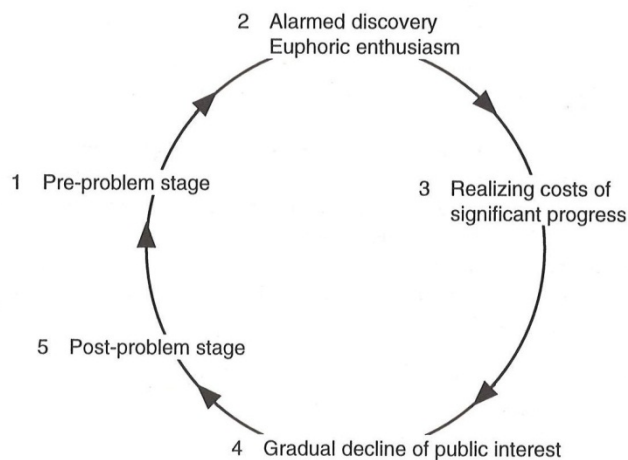
As we have seen in previous weeks, commentators, economists, philosophers and theorists of many kinds have endeavoured to develop frameworks and systems for understanding and explaining the policy process. One of the most important issues within this range of thought is to examine and explain the ways in which issues come to prominence and gain a foothold on the formal policy-making agenda. The focus here is on the role of the public, stakeholder groups and 'public opinion', and the ways in which they are influenced and activated. There are a number of models and arguments.

### Downs' Issue Attention Cycle

As Bridgman and Davis point out, government is susceptible to the media with its capacity to present some issues as 'problems', even 'crises', demanding urgent government attention. The present 'crisis in our health system', and the 'River Murray crisis' are cases in point.

Such topics travel through what Anthony Downs labelled an 'issue attention cycle'. In his view, pressure groups try to attract attention for some serious problem, but often must wait until a dramatic event and the subsequent media coverage carry it onto the policy agenda. This stage is generally followed by a period of alarmed discovery by officials, vocal promises for immediate action and a scramble by political, policy and administrative players to find solutions. This tends to lead to a less public process of assessment and a growing realisation of the real costs of achieving change. In many instances, by the time institutions and budgets have been established, the public has already lost interest and is chasing the next exciting problem. The issue may be forgotten, but at least there are now some programs, institutions and resources in place.

Figure 2.5 Downs's issue attention cycle



Source: Parsons, 1995, p. 115

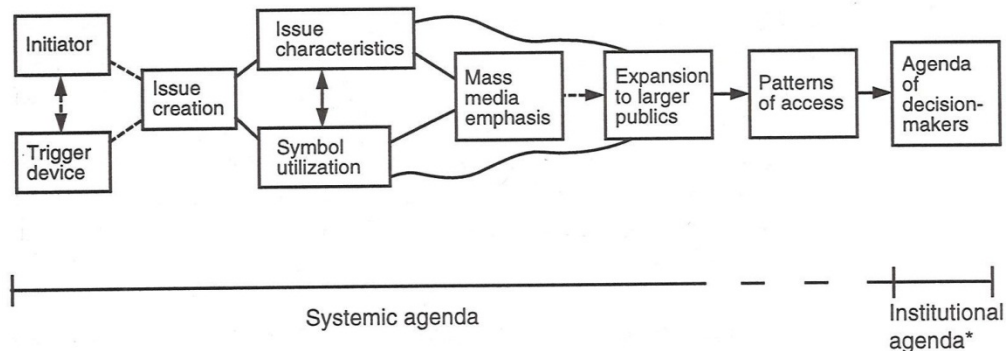
**Cook and Skogan's Model of Issue Saliency**

Cook and Skogan place less emphasis on the starring role of the media in bringing issues to prominence and suggest that the media is only one of three key factors involved in the rise and demise of saliency in an issue. Once riding high, an issue has three main supporting factors:

- Government and bureaucracy
- The media; and
- A policy community of persons and organisations involved in, or concerned about, a particular issue.

At a certain stage a credible counter argument about the issue will emerge. This will propose an alternative definition of the problem, its extent or its seriousness. The result is that the problem will undergo a reformulation which will give rise to a greater diversity of arguments, a disintegration of bureaucratic involvement, a decline in media attention and a looser relationship between members of the policy community. The next phase will involve a reformulation of the problem, further bureaucratic fragmentation, a weakening of the policy community and a low level of media interest. At this point the issue will no longer have a high position on the policy agenda.

Figure 2.10 The expansion and control of agendas



- All issues commonly perceived by members of a political community as meriting public attention of public authorities.
- To get access to systemic agenda an issue must have:  
widespread attention/awareness  
shared concern of a sizable portion of public  
shared perception that it is a matter of concern to a public authority

- Explicitly up for active and serious consideration by decision-makers.
- May be an old item which is up for regular review or is of periodic concern. Or it may be a 'new' item.

\*or governmental/formal

Source: Adapted from Cobb and Elder (1972)

Source: Parsons, 1995, p. 120.

### Hirschman's *Shifting Involvements*

One of the most significant issues surrounding the role of public opinion in explaining the formation of public policy has been the changing relationship between public and private commitments and interests in modern societies over recent times. The strong commitment to notions of the public interest which shaped opinions favouring strong government in the middle twentieth century have given way to greater acknowledgment in public policy of the role played by private, individual interests, views which have given weight to the agendas of public sector reform favouring markets and smaller government.

One of the most interesting explanations of why and how this balance has changed and continues to change is Albert Hirschman's argument in his book *Shifting Involvements*. Hirschman argues that the modern era has been shaped by a cycle between the dominance in society at different times of public and private interests. In his view, the motor driving this cycle is the interaction between 'disappointment' and 'participation fatigue', reflecting a complicated mix of changing personal opinion and commitment, and social conditions. Disappointment with the outcomes of the working of market capitalism in the early twentieth century underpinned the rise of public-spirited commitment and activity reflected in the strong commitment mid-century to government activity to shape and respond to the issues and problems left by an under-regulated capitalist economy and society. In turn, the growth in government and bureaucracy embodying that public response was increasingly questioned in the 1970s and 1980s as the disappointment with the outcomes and legacy of that government activity grew and fatigue grew over the high levels of public commitment and participation required to maintain robust public institutions. In this period, people retreated more and more into the realm of private life and public opinion took more individualised directions as people became disheartened with the growing levels of government intrusion and inefficiency, and the levels of public engagement and participation required to keep public issues in focus. The retreat to more private, individualised outlooks shaped the rise of the smaller and anti-government political and policy agendas of recent times.

The important point for Hirschman is that there is an ongoing process of change at work here. The dynamic reflected in the changing public/private balance in modern societies reflects changing public opinion and attitudes in which disaffection with current social directions - in either public or private directions - plays an important role. This dynamic plays an ongoing role in shaping the formation of public policy.

An interesting question to reflect on is where in Hirschman's cycle are we now - both domestically and internationally?

### Theories of Agenda Control

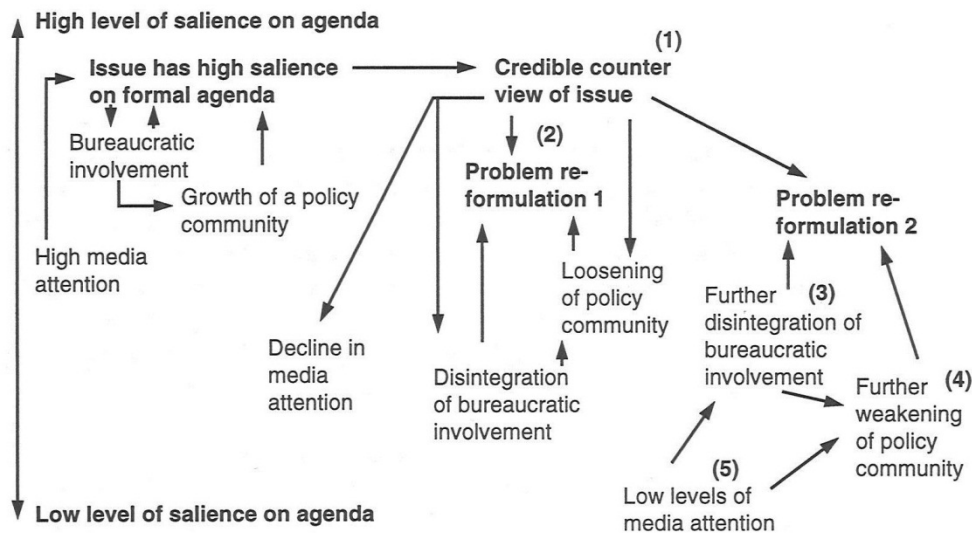
Alongside of the idea that the individuals in society influence the policy process and agenda setting, there is the idea that the power to influence what issues go up and down the attention cycle or are included in or are marginalised within policy agendas is biased in favour of some groups, ideas and interests against others.

## Cobb and Elder's Model of the *Expansion and Control of Public Policy Agendas*

According to Cobb and Elder, agenda-building occurs as a result of the expansion of an issue from a specifically concerned attention group to a wider interested or attentive public - that is, a public which is interested and informed about public affairs and which contains opinion leaders. They argue that the dynamics of this expansion depends in the first instance on the characteristic of the issue:

- the more ambiguously an issue is defined, the greater the likelihood that it will reach an expanded public (**degree of specificity**)
- the more socially significant an issue is defined to be, the greater the likelihood that it will be expanded to a larger public (**scope of social significance**)
- the more an issue is defined as having long-term relevance, the greater the chance it will be exposed to a larger audience (**temporal relevance**)
- the more non-technical an issue is defined to be, the greater the likelihood that it will be expanded to a larger public (**degree of complexity**)
- the more an issue is defined as lacking a clear precedent, the greater the chance that it will be expanded to a larger population (**categorical precedence**)

Figure 2.8 Cook and Skogan's model of issue saliency



Source: Adapted from Cook and Skogan (1991)

Source: Parsons, 1995, p. 128.

As well, issue expansion has to confront various strategies of issue containment. In Cobb and Elder's view, the strategies for containing conflict involve two aspects, dealing with groups and issues:

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- **group strategies** will focus on: discrediting the group and/or the leader of the group; appeal over the heads of the leadership; co-option of leaders;
- **issue strategies** will focus on: symbolic rewards or reassurance; showcasing or tokenism; creating new organisational units; symbol co-option; feigned constraint.

In the process of expansion and containment of an issue, the type of language which is used is an important dimension of agenda politics. Cobb and Elder also discuss the importance of the use of symbols in the expansion of an issue.

### Symbolism and Public Policy Agenda-Setting

Circumstance	Result
Historical precedence	groups may use symbols with a long historical background in a political community and which can provoke strong positive or negative reactions
Efficiency or credibility	groups may use symbols well or badly. Incorrect usage may do more harm than good to the expansion of an issue
Symbolic saturation	a symbol may be so overused that it ceases to have any impact
Symbolic reinforcement	symbols must be reinforced by other symbols
Urgency or portent of a symbol	symbols which imply action are more likely to have an expansionary effect

In the use of symbols, the role of the mass media is crucial in arousing concern, provoking action, dissuading the opposition, demonstrating strength of commitment and affirming support.

Finally, the access of an issue to the formal institutional decision-making process will depend on the extent to which conflict is made visible to the various publics. The wider the audience, Cobb and Elder argue, the greater the chance that it will get into the decision-making arena.

- when conflicts are confined to identification groups, formal agenda status is most likely to be obtained only when disputants threaten to disrupt the system;
- conflicts that are confined to attention publics are most likely to be brought to the agenda by threats of imminent sanctions; and
- conflicts that are confined to the attentive public are likely to reach the formal agenda through a brokerage channel (the issue is taken up by well-informed people and groups)

### *Wilson's Policy Regimes and Policy Change*

Wilson approaches the issue of agenda setting by examining the limits of mainstream arguments and approaches which have been used to describe and explore agenda setting.

- **Pluralism** - recognises the role of the variety of interests in shaping policy but ignores the positional advantage of business interests and the role of dominant classes within the interest framework.
- **State-centred theory** - ignores external factors on the state policy making process like inflation, demographic change and urbanisation.
- **Neo-marxism** - has an excessive focus on economic structures and class conflict at the expense of adequate consideration of institutional processes.
- **Policy ideology/culture/paradigm** - focuses on the narrative construction of policy problems and solutions but downplays the role of exogenous (external) factors that enable the emergence of new policy paradigms

Instead, Wilson posits a **regime model** as a synthesis and alternative to the mainstream arguments. In his view the dimensions of a regime need to include:

- the arrangement of power;
- existing policy paradigms;
- the ways in which government is organised; and
- policy itself.

Regime change is seen as the result of a sequence of events and influences.

Initially there needs to be action and activity through the role of what he terms **stressors and enablers** which facilitate the need for policy change.

Stressors could include:

- international events and precedents;
- natural or man-made disasters;
- sudden and dramatic social and economic changes;
- cumulative processes like demographic change;
- shifts in economic structures, urbanisation; and
- new discoveries or scandals

These stressors can lead to shifts of paradigm, for example groundswell movement in opinion on smoking or environmental issues. As the paradigm moves, power also shifts. This can lead to a legitimisation crisis for existing powerful interests, a crisis that might ultimately result in organisational and policy change.

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For Wilson, regime change is typically accompanied by institutional change which he also sees as following a sequential process:

1. dissolution & recreation
2. consolidation
3. internal reorganisation
4. new institutional creation

The role and operations of power are central to his argument:

‘The power, paradigm and organisational dimensions of the policy regime contribute to both stability and change. Stable power arrangements, dominant policy paradigms, organisational arrangements, and public officials and policy makers dependent on the regime all operate to maintain policy stability. Substantial policy change occurs when regimes are impacted by stressors. . . . Regime change occurs with the shifting of power alignments, the discrediting of dominant paradigms, the ascension of alternative paradigms, the formation of new organisational arrangements, and the setting of new policy goals.’

### References

Hirschman, A. 2002, *Shifting Involvements: Private Interest and Public Action*, Princeton University Press.

Parsons, W. 1995, *Public Policy: An introduction to the theory and practice of policy analysis*, Edward Elgar, London.

Wilson, C.A. 2000, 'Policy Regimes and Policy Change', *Journal of Public Policy*, 20, 4, pp. 247-74.