The Public Policy Process

WEEK 8: AGENDA SETTING
Agenda setting is

- The process by which problems and alternative solutions gain or lose public and elite attention.
- A fierce competition because government and society cannot consider every issue at once--our *carrying capacity* for dealing with every issue is too small.
What do you think is on the agenda now?

- In Congress and the White House
- In the national media (CNN, Fox, *NY Times*)
- In the North Carolina state government
- In Wake county
- In the local news media (the N&O, News 14, TV news, *The Independent* etc.)
A Big Agenda Item: Health Care Reform

- Agendas contain problems, stories, and solutions
- What is the health care problem? (there’s more than one story about this). *Is* there a problem? How do we know?
- What would be a solution to the problem?
- *All these ideas are in what we might call the policy “primordial soup.”*
Levels of the agenda

Agenda Universe

Systemic Agenda

Groups seeking policy change seek to advance issues closer to the decision agenda

Institutional Agenda

Decision Agenda

Groups that oppose change seek to block issues from advancing on the agenda.
How do issues reach the agenda?

- Group reactions to other groups’ actions/success
- Leadership activity
- Crises and Focusing Events
- Protest movements
- Media coverage or activity
- Changes in indicators
- Political changes
Policy and media agendas

- Media coverage can lead to increased public concern
- But, Kingdon found that the media didn’t drive the agenda in some fields
- But, the media has considerable power to set the agenda after focusing events
The special role of focusing events

- “a rare, sudden, well-known, actually or potentially harmful event.”
- Tend to induce sudden attention to issues
- Keep in mind, however, that focusing events can fade fast
**Figure 6.3: Media and Congressional Attention to Terrorism, 1990-2002**

Index: Mean number of stories or items of testimony per year, 1990-2000=100
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Figure 6.2: News Coverage of Terrorism, by New York Times “Desk,” 1990-2002
Theories of Agendas and Change

- Kingdon’s streams metaphor
- Baumgartner and Jones’s “punctuated equilibrium”
Kingdon’s Streams Metaphor

- Is about agenda setting and alternative selection
- Overview
  - “The primordial soup”
  - Garbage Cans
  - Streams
A picture of the streams model

Streams come together. Why and when?
How do windows of opportunity open and close?

- Policy Entrepreneurs
  - *Who they are*
  - *Qualities*

- Policy entrepreneurs and “coupling”

- Seizing Opportunities
The idea: policies are stable for long periods of time, until something shakes up the *policy subsystem*. What might shake up the policy subsystem?

- Think of all the things that open *windows*
- Changes in policy image of an issue

Change can take years before it settles back down. Example: the breakdown of stable policies in nuclear power.
Venue Shopping

- Baumgartner and Jones: finding the appropriate *venue* for advocating policy change.
- This can be institutional: Congress, Executive, Courts
- This can also be within an institution
  - Congressional committee
  - Federal agencies
How would we venue shop in Congress?

- What kind of members would we find?
- What kind of committees would we find?
How would we venue shop in the Executive branch?

- Given: the president has his own agenda (which is what being president is largely about, says Kingdon)
The Courts as a Venue

- Why would you use courts to help set the agenda?
- The courts have *negative* agenda setting power.
- What are some good ways to get on the agenda?
- When do you *not* want to get on the courts’ agenda?
- Which courts (federal, state) would you turn to first? Why?
- How effective *are* the courts?