

*Multiple streams analysis: A flexible metaphor presents an opportunity to operationalize
agenda setting processes*

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John Kingdon's multiple streams analysis (MSA) reminds us that the exciting world of short term, unstable, high profile agenda setting is tempered by long term, continuous processes going on behind the scenes. Shifts of public, media and policymaker attention to a new problem can be dramatic, but policy may only change dramatically when policymakers have the willingness and ability to solve it.

Kingdon uses the metaphor of three separate 'streams' to describe this gap between a policymaker's attention to a problem and their adoption of a meaningful solution. He rejects the idea of a linear process in which, in this order, a policymaker identifies a problem to solve, the bureaucracy produces a range of possible solutions, and the policymaker selects the best choice. Rather, these three acts should be treated as separate streams, and able to occur in any order. In particular, solutions may need to be produced in anticipation of policymaker attention to a problem, since attention often lurches to another problem before there is a chance to consider options from scratch.

Kingdon suggests that the three streams must come together at the same time, during a 'window of opportunity', in which people pay high attention to a problem, a viable solution exists, and policymakers have the motive and opportunity to select it. This outcome is not inevitable. Rather, attention may shift dramatically to a different problem before anyone has had the chance to solve the first one. Many 'windows of opportunity' for major policy change open, but most close before anyone has the chance to exploit them.

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In Kingdon's (1984) original analysis, this process described agenda setting and policymaking at the US federal level. The 'streams' were separated analytically, in part to describe a separation of responsibilities in the US political system in which, for example, the President raised problems and the bureaucracy produced a range of solutions. The streams metaphor also captured the idea that, in the US in particular, fast agenda setting contrasts with the slow process of solution production, in which ideas whirl around in the 'policy primeval soup', going through a process of 'softening' to make them more technically and political feasible to a large and diffuse policy community.

Yet, the MSA has also taken off in a large number of newer studies of subnational politics, international organizations such as the European Union (and its member states) and the UN, and many countries beyond the US. In part, this is because MSA contains a metaphorical language that is flexible enough to describe a wide range of agenda setting processes. It is also built on insights that we can describe as 'universal' because they are abstract enough to apply to agenda setting in any political system. For example, policymakers are limited by 'bounded rationality': they have to make choices in the face of *uncertainty*, which describes a lack of complete information, and *ambiguity*, which describes the many ways in which policymakers can understand and seek to solve a problem. This flexibility has allowed scholars to take MSA, or modify it, to explain agenda setting in new political settings.

In that context, we present four main sections. First, we describe MSA's main concepts. Second, we consider the extent to which its 'universal' insights apply to any study of agenda setting. Third, we compare its original application to the federal US with the many ways in which it has been applied in new arenas. This discussion demonstrates MSA's enduring appeal to the study of agenda setting in public policy. Finally, we consider the extent to which this flexibility comes at a cost: is it difficult to 'operationalize' MSA, to

move beyond a flexible metaphor and identify, precisely, the meaning and causal effect of its main elements? If not, it will be difficult to generate an overall sense of comparative agenda setting processes using MSA.

Multiple streams analysis: Main features

MSA can be seen as part of a wider body of work on agenda setting, a topic which ‘can be summed up with two key statements:

1. There is an almost unlimited amount of policy problems that could reach the top of the policy agenda. Yet, very few issues do, while most others do not.
2. There is an almost unlimited number of solutions to those policy problems. Yet, few policy solutions will be considered while most others will not’ (Cairney, 2012, p. 183).

The modern agenda setting literature developed from two key fields. First, classic studies of power and persuasion sought to explain how actors won highly visible and important disputes (Dahl, 1961) or kept important disputes off the policy agenda by, for example, ‘crowding out’ the debate with a focus on less important issues or persuading people that the problem is not the responsibility of government (Schattschneider, 1960; Bachrach and Baratz, 1970; Crenson, 1971).

Second, studies of ‘bounded rationality’ (Simon, 1976) show that policymakers have limited resources: time to devote to research, information to inform decisions, knowledge to understand the policy context, and ability to pay attention to issues. Consequently, they cannot process issues comprehensively. By necessity, they have to make decisions in the face of uncertainty (Zahariadis, 2007, p. 66). There is never enough available information to settle the matter. Rather, policymakers decide who to trust, and what information to use, to help them develop a sense of risk associated with any decision. They then decide what level of risk is acceptable, given the potential reward (Cairney et al, 2016).

Policymakers also make decisions in the face of ambiguity, which relates to the way in which a potential policy problem can be defined or ‘framed’ (Zahariadis, 2007, p.66). People can adopt a large number of ways to understand or think about an issue. Consequently, a large part of the agenda setting process regards the use of persuasion to encourage people to think about issues primarily in terms of their positive or negative aspects; or, the potential for events, media, and powerful actors to shift attention to one image at the expense of the others, to determine how governments *primarily* understand and seek to solve a problem at a particular time (Cairney et al, 2016; Dearing and Rogers, 1996, p.1; Baumgartner and Jones, 1993, p.11-2; Kingdon, 1984, pp.3–4; Cairney, 2012, p.183). For example, tobacco has been understood in several positive and negative ways in the last five decades: a popular product with economic benefits (the jobs involved in production, the revenue from international trade, a source of taxation revenue); a harmful substance to individuals but a legal product which people are free to use; a harmful product to the public which should be regulated; and part of a public health ‘epidemic’ (Cairney et al, 2012).

These studies produced the basic insight that problems do not receive attention simply because we think they are important, and policymakers do not select solutions simply because they are the most effective. Rather, actors exercise power to raise attention to some issues at the expense of others, drawing on a combination of facts and emotional appeals (Dearing and Rodgers, 1996; True et al, 2007: 161). They use persuasion and argument, alongside the use of material and other resources, to challenge or reinforce often deeply held beliefs about the nature of policy problems and appropriate solutions (Majone, 1989; Hall, 1993; Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier, 1993; Kettell and Cairney, 2010; Baumgartner, 2014). The success of this agenda setting strategy depends as much on the substance of the policy solution as the power of participants:

Lobbyists marshal their arguments as well as their number ... The content of the ideas themselves, far from being mere smokescreens or rationalizations, are integral parts of decision making in and around government (Kingdon, 1984, p. 133; 131).

However, Kingdon also challenges the phrase, ‘an idea whose time has come’ to emphasize how policy solutions are *received* within governments and wider policy communities. He argues that the notion of an idea providing ‘an irresistible movement that sweeps over our politics and our society, pushing aside everything that might stand in its path’ is misleading because it ignores the conditions that have to be satisfied – during a brief ‘window of opportunity’ – before a policy will change significantly. Three separate ‘streams’ must come together at the same time.

Problem stream – attention lurches to a policy problem

Policymakers ‘could attend to a long list of problems’ but they ‘pay serious attention to only a fraction of them’ (1984, p. 95; 120). Attention does not relate to an ‘objective’ measure of its importance (Majone, 1989, p. 24). Rather, much depends on the biases and interests of the audience. For example, attention can lurch following an unpredictable ‘focusing event’ (Birkland, 1997) but, in a congested agenda, major events may not produce sustained attention to perceived crises unless they reinforce a problem ‘already in the back of people’s minds’ (Kingdon, 1984, p. 103). Getting attention is a major achievement, based on the ability of actors to tell a persuasive story, often by making simple emotional appeals or assigning blame to certain social groups (Stone, 1989; McBeth et al, 2014; Schneider et al, 2014). Agenda setting success must be acted upon quickly, before attention shifts elsewhere. Further, the partly counter-intuitive insight from MSA is that rising and sustained attention to a problem may only occur when policymakers know that a solution already exists.

Policy stream – a solution to that problem is available

The solution-production process can be treated as independent of problem solving for three reasons. First, what we call ‘solutions’ are often developed to solve different problems, legitimize the work of public organizations or simply help people get elected (Kingdon, 1984, pp. 129–30). Second, while attention lurches quickly from issue to issue, viable solutions involving major policy change take far more time to develop. Kingdon (1984, p.131; 123) describes policy solutions whirling around in a ‘policy primeval soup’, ‘evolving’ as they are proposed by one actor then reconsidered and modified by a large number of participants. This takes place within communities of ‘researchers, congressional staffers, people in planning and evaluation offices and in budget offices, academics, interest group analysts’ (Kingdon, 1984, p.18). Although some solutions take off rapidly (Zahariadis, 2007, p.72), many go through a process of ‘softening’, to make them acceptable within policy communities, based on criteria such as: ‘technical feasibility’ (will it work if implemented?); ‘value acceptability within the policy community’; tolerable anticipated costs (often producing ‘slimmed down’ versions of ideas); public acceptability (or an important sub-set of the public); and, a ‘reasonable chance for receptivity among elected decision makers’ (1984, pp. 138–46).

Third, to deal with the disconnect between lurching attention and slow policy development, actors develop widely-accepted solutions in anticipation of future problems: ‘They try out their ideas on others by going to lunch, circulating papers, publishing articles, holding hearings, presenting testimony, and drafting and pushing legislative proposals’ (1984, pp.122–4). Then, they find the right time to exploit or encourage attention to a relevant problem (note the phrase ‘solutions chasing problems’). In particular, actors often described as ‘policy entrepreneurs’ become crucial to the process of linking solutions to problems. These are the people, such as elected politicians or leaders of interest groups, with the knowledge, power, tenacity and luck to be able to exploit windows of opportunity and

heightened levels of attention to policy problems to promote their ‘pet solutions’ to policymakers (Kingdon, 1984, pp. 165–6; Cairney, 2012, pp. 233-7).

Politics stream – policymakers have the motive and opportunity to turn it into policy

Policymakers have to pay attention to the problem and be receptive to the proposed solution. In some cases, this involves the same policymakers modifying their own beliefs, perhaps when responding to their perception that the ‘national mood’ has shifted or the feedback they receive from interest groups and political parties. In many cases, only a change of government or the balance of power in Congress may be enough to provide that motive (Kingdon, 1984, p.19). This third requirement can represent a key block on major change since, for example, policymakers have established beliefs about a range of policies, and well-established policy communities may resist initiatives from less experienced advocates (1984, p. 159). Yet, swings in ‘national mood’ can happen quickly, while some policymakers thrive on a challenge to vested interests (1984, p.160). Similarly, the competition between authoritative venues could work both ways: as an obstacle when they oppose each other, or a new impetus for change when several venues challenge each other’s positions (1984, p.165). Overall, the metaphor of a ‘window of opportunity’ suggests that policy change requires a degree of, if not serendipity, at least a confluence of events and actions in a short space of time. Successful advocates of change know that a policy solution generally has to go through a ‘process of consideration, floating up, discussion, revision and trying out again’ before it will be selected and, therefore, ‘advocates lie in wait in and around government with their solutions at hand, waiting for problems to float by to which they can attach their solutions, waiting for a development in the political stream they can use to their advantage’ (1984, p.149; 165–66). The emphasis is on a need to explain, often in some depth, why that opportunity may arise only at a particular time and place – and a lurch of attention to an issue is only just the beginning.

MSA's 'universal' elements

Kingdon's object of study was the US federal-level political system, which tends to separate elements of the policy process, constitutionally (via a separation of powers) and in response to a large and often unmanageable system. A huge number of actors, with different perceptions and aims, are involved. Some actors, such as the President, may be effective at raising issues up the public and government agenda but not producing solutions or gaining congressional approval for major policy change (perhaps with the exception of foreign policy – Durant and Diehl, 1989). Since policymakers do not have the time to devote to detailed policy work, they delegate it to civil servants who consult with interest groups, think tanks and other specialists to consider ideas and produce policy solutions. However, the groups involved in producing solutions over the long term may struggle to get attention or buy-in from policymakers.

Therefore, the likelihood of significant policy change is difficult to predict since it requires sustained and high attention, an acceptable solution and some spirit of compromise in the political system. A perception of the infrequency and unpredictability of opportunities may also influence behaviour: when new, major legislation looks likely to be adopted, there is a deluge of interest and a range of participants keen to jump on a solution's bandwagon. This is a process often made possible by the US system of legislation, in which actors can attach their pet solutions to other bills in progress.

If we were to compare political systems in a superficial way, MSA would seem like a good fit with studies of the European Union, in which power is spread across multiple venues and the policy process often seems messy and unpredictable (Richardson, 2005; Cairney, 2009). It would seem less applicable to studies of countries like the UK, in which one political party can dominate key parts of the political system, such as Parliament and the

legislative process – although even the UK is studied increasingly as a multi-level system in which power is spread horizontally and vertically (Cairney, 2012, p. 240; 167).

Yet, MSA has endured largely because its concepts are abstract enough to be described as ‘universal’. These elements of the policy process are not specific to any political system, including:

- *Ambiguity and competition for attention.* There are many ways to frame any policy problem, and few problems reach the top of the agenda, so actors compete to frame problems in one way, at the expense of another, to generate demand for its solution.
- *An imperfect selection process.* New information is difficult to gather, and policymakers use short cuts to gather it from a select number of sources. Consequently, the presentation of information is subject to bias and manipulation.
- *Limited time.* Policymakers have to make choices before, for example, they have completed an exhaustive search for information, they understand fully the problem and the likely effects of their solution, or their preferences are clear (Zahariadis, 2003, pp. 2–15).

Further, Kingdon draws on Cohen et al’s (1972) ‘garbage can’ model, of policymaking in organizations, which rejects the idea of a linear decision-making process in which policymakers identify problems and their aims, bureaucracies perform a comprehensive analysis to produce various solutions to meet those aims, and policymakers select the best solution. Instead, policymaker aims and policy problems are ambiguous and bureaucrats struggle to research issues and produce viable solutions quickly. Sometimes people wait for the right time to present their ready-made solutions. Sometimes aimless policymakers just want to look busy and decisive. So, problem identification, solution production, and choice are ‘relatively independent streams’ and organizations represent:

collections of choices looking for problems, issues and feelings looking for decision situations in which they might be aired, solutions looking for issues to which they might be an answer, and decision makers looking for work (1972, p. 1).

The garbage can metaphor describes where a mix of problems, solutions and choices are dumped. This metaphor is doubly powerful at the level of small organisations since it suggests that, in *any* choice situation, people: have limited information processing abilities; move in and out of the policy process; form ad hoc coalitions to address specific goals; and appear to be creating or raising problems to justify their policy desires. When the size of the organization increases, or the policy process becomes larger and more fragmented, so does organizational fragmentation, variations in participation/interest and the inability to define precise goals (Cairney, 2012, p. 233).

The application of MSA: from the federal US to the rest of the world

Jones et al (2016) identify 311 meaningful MSA applications produced from 2000-2014 (there are many more books and articles citing Kingdon more superficially). Many are studies of the US (132), but most are of the rest of the world. In particular, 205 are applications in European countries and/ or the European Union, including 53 in the UK, while 140 studies are outside the US and EU (the total is greater than 311 because many articles compare multiple systems). At least 65 countries are covered by MSA. Further, approximately one-third involves applications of subnational policymaking.

In that context, we should expect that the MSA gives us a ‘universal’ language to go beyond studies of the federal US, and potentially compare agenda setting processes across all political systems at an abstract level, but that more detailed discussions of political systems raise specific issues and important differences. The aim, when considering the cumulative insights gathered from MSA, is to produce concepts that are flexible enough to aid comparison without stretching them so hard that they lose their practical meaning.

A key example is Zahariadis' (2003) study of privatization policies in the UK, France and Germany. Although he identifies the same basic process, in which the streams must come together at the right time, each issue and each country provides evidence of different ways to define problems, generate solutions and produce the motivation to accept them. For example, for the UK, the problem was defined in terms of a new government's unwillingness to invest in nationalized industries, but the effect was different on each industry, partly because the 'technical feasibility' of privatization was less of an issue in telecoms than rail. Further, for example, in France, the policy rationale was distinctive – with a relative focus on encouraging industry competition – and, in Germany, the scale of the task was smaller, since its government only maintained a minority stake in many companies, and its window of opportunity was distinctive (in relation to reunification between East and West). Few MSA-inspired studies go into this much depth, or remain faithful to the original MSA concepts,¹ but Cairney and Jones (2016) identify several strands of the newer literature that raise new agenda setting issues in a non-US and/ or subnational context.

First, studies of multi-level political systems identify additional sources of problem definition and solution production. In Kingdon's original study, policy solutions were largely produced domestically, and it is generally more likely for US-derived studies of agenda setting to identify a relatively enclosed process. In other countries, international organizations and countries like the US may have an important external influence on agendas. Or, in subnational studies, including those of the US, a federal or supranational body may influence problem definition and be a source of solutions (Cairney, 2012, pp. 269-71). For example, Bache (2012) and Bache and Reardon (2013) identify the role of the EU and other international organisations in generating solutions, based on 'wellbeing' policy, adopted in countries such as the UK. Cairney (2009) highlights a mix of tobacco control policy solutions generated internationally and adopted in the EU, UK and devolved arenas. Liu et al (2011)

define subnational policy feasibility partly in terms of compatibility with federal government policy, and link policymaker receptivity to policy solutions to their specific jurisdictions; McLendon (2003) links the solution stream to learning from other US states. Zahariadis (2004) charts a shift in UK competition policy to reflect growing Europeanization as a new source of policy responsibility and solution production. In a study of Burkina Faso, Ridde (2009) highlights the problem of implementing national policies originating largely from international initiatives.

Second, studies of sub-national policymaking suggest that actors may have different resources or interact in a different way than in a US federal setting, while the streams often take on different properties. Robinson and Eller's (2010, p.209) study, of Texas schools policies, suggests that the problem and policy streams are more difficult to separate because the same actors participate to raise and solve problems. Dudley (2013) argues that the London Mayor was not only part of the politics stream, but also a key influence of the definition of the problem and the promoter of a well-established solution to road congestion. Henstra (2010) identifies how an entrepreneur kept a low-attention issue – municipal emergency management - high enough up the agenda, following a potential emergency as a focusing event, to produce policy change (but note that the case study discusses a mere \$100,000 investment in emergency equipment). In each case, the policy terrain was far smaller and conducive to influence by key individuals.

Third, studies of the EU reinforce the importance of venue shopping, which is discussed to some extent by Kingdon but advanced most strongly by Baumgartner and Jones (1993; see also Cairney, 2006; 2013). The piecemeal development of the European Union, and the 'Europeanization' of some domestic policies, has produced uncertainty about which level of government, and which EU institution, is responsible for policy development. This is coupled with ambiguity: there is competition to define the policy problem which, in turn, can

determine which jurisdiction should take the lead in trying to solve it. Both Ackrill and Kay (2011) and Sarmiento-Mirwaldt (2013) highlight the potential for policymakers or entrepreneurs to assert a primary jurisdiction or for interest groups to venue shop, linking the analysis of multiple streams to studies of punctuated equilibrium.

Finally, a small number of studies prompt us to think in more depth about how ‘universal’ key MSA concepts are. In particular, Zhu (2008) interrogates the extent to which a policy theory derived from studies of the US can be used to explain policymaking in China. The case study focuses broadly on Kingdon’s streams, but specifically on the importance of technical *infeasibility* to major policy change. In the Chinese system, the proposal of an otherwise politically acceptable solution that *cannot be dealt with routinely by the governing bureaucracy* prompts the strong external government attention that is necessary to shift well established rules. In the original US study, one would assume that technical infeasibility would rule out a policy solution, at least without a long period of softening. Although this is only one case, it demonstrates that, while some ‘universal’ concepts travel well, they do not tell us much about the specific policy processes of other countries.

Operationalizing MSA: Clear enough to be proven wrong?

Is it possible to operationalize MSA, to move beyond a flexible metaphor and identify precisely the meaning and causal effect of its main elements? This may not have been the original intention of Kingdon, and many scholars may argue that flexibility is a key feature of MSA. However, we argue that greater specificity – and a common research agenda - helps us generate an overall sense of accumulated knowledge of agenda setting processes derived from comparative studies of MSA. By encouraging clarity we can identify the extent to which many empirical studies discuss the same causal factors (Cairney and Jones, 2016). Consequently, in this section, we examine hypotheses and measurement issues to help make MSA more concrete and analytically useful.

The problem stream: measures to exploit ambiguity

The presence of ambiguity permits multiple and contested interpretations to ‘compete’ for scarce attention. Although there is a heavy dose of serendipity endemic in the process, because no actor or institution controls it, agendas are not set randomly. Context, some structural features, and actor skill help explain how the process works. Consequently, a key aim of empirical studies is to demonstrate how actors use information selectively and exploit people’s biases, perceptions, beliefs, or emotions, to make a persuasive case to pay attention to one aspect of a policy problem. Relevant strategies include:

Identifying and interpreting variations in policy-relevant indicators. Indicators are devices that describe or measure social conditions. Examples are unemployment rates, annual GDP percentages, and numbers of retirees or uninsured persons. We pay more attention to things we value and less attention to things we don’t, so indicators of things that we value, and affect more people, stand a greater chance of becoming public problems. Yet, not all of such conditions become problems, and it is not enough to specify a particular measurement or value to generate attention to a problem. For example, unemployment rates are not problems in and of themselves, and stating that, say, unemployment is 10 percent will not attract attention *per se*. Instead, issues or conditions become problems when there is a perceived sudden change in value. There need to be at least two values (preferably more) to establish a pattern. In a country where unemployment is consistently 10 percent, to claim that the unemployment rate of 10 percent is an issue makes no sense. However, if unemployment is consistently 6 percent, a jump to 10 percent will gain public attention. In such cases, actors compete to highlight and interpret the changes of important values. Advocates for a policy response will argue that something wrong is happening for such a drastic change to occur, and based their appeal on, for example, a simple story of the personal costs to inaction (as a more attention grabbing proxy for societal costs).

Interpreting 'feedback' to identify policy success or failure. Actors present narratives to link current problems to the effects of past policies (Dudley, 2013). For example, the perception of persistent policy failure helps them raise agenda setting questions. Why did President Johnson's war on poverty fail? Was it that inadequate resources were expended? Was it because the problem is too complex or difficult for government to tackle? Was it because government itself was the problem? Depending on how one answers these questions, new issues may arise and become problems. There may be an 'objective' or commonly agreed set of measurements of policy outcomes, to inform policy evaluation and lesson drawing, but the perceptual element is paramount. Different groups interpret policy failures or successes differently and therefore raise different issues as a result.

Exploiting 'focusing events' or crises. Focusing events or crises are a special category of problems (Birkland, 1997). Although they are difficult to define categorically, such phrases highlight events that (a) are vivid and have a highly visual impact, and (b) are relatively conducive to agenda setting campaigns. For example, a plane crash raises issues of transportation safety, a major oil spill highlights problems with industry regulation, and a photograph of the death of a lonely child highlights a refugee crisis. The greater the perceived magnitude of the effects, the higher on the agenda an issue is likely to be. One plane crash with four casualties may not become a public issue, but five crashes of the same type of plane with 200 casualties each may prompt the perception of a crisis, because the events are vivid and personally relatable; there is suspicion that these acts go beyond chance. No answers may be found, but people will demand a response to highly salient issues and advocates can use this attention to generate demand for a policy solution.

The problem stream

The policy stream is difficult to operationalize when we primarily use the metaphor of a 'primeval soup' of ideas that emerge to solve potential problems. What this means in

practice is that advocates compete to generate support for their favored solutions, recognizing that this process can take years to resolve. Solutions are feverishly debated in networks of policymakers and advocates (Zahariadis, 2003). Each proposal is constantly debated, rejected or amended by experts in these networks using criteria such as technical feasibility or value acceptability. Is the proposal feasible, meaning easily implementable, using current technology? A proposal that can be implemented using current laws is more appealing than one that requires significant legislative changes. If so, the chances are higher that pragmatic experts in the network will espouse it. Do its values or impact (in terms of equity, justice or efficiency) appeal to many participants? If so, the chances are higher that it will compete well with other solutions. A special constraint is the budget. Other things being equal, proposals that require fewer new resources are more likely to appeal to a wider audience than more expensive options. In other words, the probability of a solution's progress depends on the ability of advocates to generate support based on the accepted 'currency' within government, which varies from political system to system, but also includes generally important considerations such as perceived or demonstrable value for money.

The politics stream

The politics stream is operationalized in different ways, which depend crucially on national structural features. The stream involves legislative and administrative turnover, the 'national mood', and the balance of power between participants such as interest groups (Kingdon, 1984). For example, in the United States, it makes sense to separate key branches – such as executive and legislative - analytically because they involve independently powerful actors or important venues. It is also reasonable to focus attention on interest groups as they play a big role in a system with many access points and veto players. However, we need to make adjustments for comparative settings. For example, in a Westminster-type of 'majoritarian democracy' such as the United Kingdom, control over the legislative and the

executive are normally fused into the hands of a single governing party. Changes in the legislative branch are frequently accompanied by changes in executive control. For this reason, Zahariadis (1995) proposes a single indicator, the ideological complexion of the governing party (or coalition) measured in terms of the partisan left-right orientation. In other systems, a more complex and nuanced approach is necessary. In Germany, for example, interest groups can play a role by launching opposition campaigns, which can be quite damaging to ruling parties. Moreover, the term 'ideology' contains significant cross-national variations. Herweg, Huss and Zohlnhöfer (2015) suggest two quite useful extensions. Because parties are concerned with re-election, they are more likely to embrace proposals that involve issue areas they 'own', are popular with the voters, and where they don't expect powerful interest groups opposition campaigns. In the rare cases involving unpopular issues, governing parties are more likely to embrace unpopular or heavily contested proposals if they view the proposal as a way to deal with problems whose continued existence endangers their re-election.

Perhaps the most difficult element to operationalize in the politics stream is the 'national mood'. Kingdon categorically asserts that it does not refer solely to public opinion, but rather the perceived climate of opinion by elites and other politicians. Some scholars refer mainly to public opinion (e.g. Stimson, 1999). Zahariadis (2015b) follows a different path. He conceptualizes mood as collective emotion and tracks its effect by way of mainly blocking rather than enabling certain policy options. Because individuals selectively orient their attention to emotion-associated information, he hypothesizes that novel events that evoke fear require greater attention because they interrupt ongoing behavior to assess potentially threatening stimuli (see also Marcus et al, 2000). He measures mood - fear in his case - as the presence or absence of threat signals. He uses evidence from interviews and archival sources to record it if sources identified it as such. Even so, this category seems

amorphous, requiring scholars to describe carefully what they take it to mean when they use it to explain policy decisions.

Windows of opportunity

Windows – defined as interruptions in time that signal potential changes – are the analytical beginning and end of the process. Windows are fleeting opportunities for policy entrepreneurs to push their pet proposals up the government’s agenda. They may be predictable, such as annual budgets, or unpredictable, such as natural catastrophes. The idea behind this point is to stress the contingent nature of the process. To fully appreciate MSA’s main goal, that is to explain ‘why an issue’s time has come’, analysis must carefully assess context. Agendas are not set in contextual vacuums. Rather the fact that an issue rises on the agenda at one time and not another depends largely on what is happening at that time.

Windows may open in several ways, prompted by attention to a problem, developments in the acceptability of a solution, or a shift in the politics streams such as a national election. It interrupts the flow of normal politics and marks a fleeting moment when new issues have a chance to be aired.

However, this description remains vague, and policy windows are the most criticized for lack of operationalization. Sabatier (2007) among others laments the lack of clarity and specification: they seem to appear as *deus ex machina* in *ex post* argumentation. How do we know that a window has opened? This is an important question that multiple streams analysts have not addressed to the fullest extent possible. We note at the outset that size and duration shape the number and nature of issues that might make it high on the agenda. Size refers to how big the opportunity is. For example, the events of 9/11 are qualitatively different in size than floods in local neighborhoods. Although both may constitute events that demand attention, the number of people affected and damage caused will likely shape the number of issues and the quality of policy maker attention. Duration is another factor. How long will the

window stay open? In recurrent opportunities, duration is predictable and the process is a bit more orderly. In non-recurrent opportunities, such as natural catastrophes, there is no *a priori* specification of duration. In that case, a plethora of issues attempt to crowd the agenda in a contested and disorderly attempt to ‘finish first’. A tool to decrease the level of political conflict in this case is to impose deadlines (Zahariadis, 2015a). Some issues may fall by the wayside because policy makers may not feel ready to tackle them or because actors who push for them have other more pressing things to do.

Of course, there is no one way to operationalize windows. National elections are a good way but there exist others, such as a military coup or an assassination of a prominent politician. Windows may also open in the problem stream. Consider the 9/11 events or Katrina. Both events proved to be catalysts for substantial changes by bringing to focus various deficiencies that successful policy entrepreneurs dubbed to be problems. In the case of 9/11 a slew of issues came to the fore from airport security to national defense to civil liberties and everything in-between. The events provided the context. What precise issues made it to the government agenda became a political contest (Birkland, 2004). The same goes for Hurricane Katrina. It provided the right set of circumstances for issues such as ecological degradation, poverty, race, and inadequate federal emergency management systems to come to the fore (Farley et al, 2007). These events helped focus attention on a range of possible issues by making some issues more likely to receive attention than others at that time. There was still room for strategic representations of different definitions and policies to rise to the top.

The role of skill and entrepreneurship in coupling streams

The idea of ‘policy entrepreneur’ is vague throughout the policy literature, often referring to exceptional individuals that, by definition, do not share common properties. In MSA, their role affects the confluence of streams. This interaction is not automatic. Rather,

agenda setting is fundamentally an actor-based process, albeit one that cannot be divorced from structure or context (Kingdon describes entrepreneurs as surfers waiting for the big wave). Policy entrepreneurs are key actors in the agenda setting process that advocate solutions, broker communication, and build or sustain coalitions (Mintrom and Norman, 2009) to couple or join together the three streams.

This activity requires skill and strategy. Skill is operationalized in terms of persistence and measured in terms of factors such as successful access to key venues. Because the likelihood of failure to couple streams is high, requiring multiple attempts to raise problems and promote solutions, policy entrepreneurs who are persistent are more likely to successfully couple the streams than those who are not. Entrepreneurs who have easier access to centers of power are more likely to be successful because they can ‘sell’ their pet proposals at the right time to the right people. Of course, individual attributes are not enough. The act of coupling involves strategy that connects choice to context (Zahariadis and Exadaktylos, 2015). The MSA has not yet developed an exhaustive taxonomy of strategies or scope conditions for their success, but some effort has gone into identifying successful strategies. For example, Zahariadis (2014) suggests that entrepreneurs who use salami tactics, higher order symbols, and appropriate framing techniques are more likely to be successful. Clearly more empirical research needs to be done to identify the precise elements of these and other strategies and the conditions that bring about success or failure.

Conclusion

The MSA has evolved from its beginnings as a framework of agenda setting in the United States into a powerful analytical tool that travels with ease into comparative national, sub-national, and supranational settings (Zahariadis, 2014). It advances agenda setting studies by highlighting the importance of ambiguity and contingency. Because attention is scarce and subject to manipulation, the framework stresses interactions of disparate elements of the

policy process and actor strategies as keys to unlocking the agenda puzzle. It depicts a fluid, often non-rational, and often serendipitous process. The framework seeks to explain instances of the policy process that others fail to explain, or view simply as pathological. Agenda setting is a good place to start this exploration.

However, without greater attention to operationalizing concepts, MSA has the potential to divide the discipline, containing supporters of its flexible metaphor, which can be used to inform detailed case studies, and critics of its vague framework, which can limit our ability to generalise from multiple cases. There is scope for greater operationalization, guided by five main hypotheses, three of which refer to specific elements of the framework while the other two take a broader and still metaphorical view of the process. Together they provide a comprehensive estimate of the probability that a given issue is likely to gain prominence on the agenda:

1. Issues stand a greater chance to be viewed as problems when they include sudden changes in indicators involving items of higher social value that affect more people, establish a precedent, or contain focusing events.
2. The availability of a policy proposal depends on its technical feasibility, value acceptability, and budgetary acceptance in the policy network.
3. Policy makers in the political stream are more receptive to proposals they 'own', options that converge with the prevailing national mood, and items that face muted opposition by powerful interest groups.
4. Policy entrepreneurs are more likely to couple the three streams when they are more persistent, enjoy greater access to political power centers, and build sustainable coalitions through successful framing strategies.
5. An issue's chances of making it to the top of the agenda increase when skilled policy entrepreneurs show policymakers, during open policy windows, that the problem can

be solved by an already available solution which has been well received within policy networks.

Notes

¹ In fact, Jones et al (2016) find that most references to MSA are superficial, citing Kingdon but few other studies, and providing limited discussion of MSA's key concepts (in other words, only a small minority of studies will provide as much detail as this chapter). Cairney and Jones (2016) also find that, in some cases, articles produce new, detailed models which redefine MSA concepts, making it difficult to compare their insights with Kingdon's original work.

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