

chapter 6

Committing to an Issue: Building Agendas

POLICY PREDICAMENT

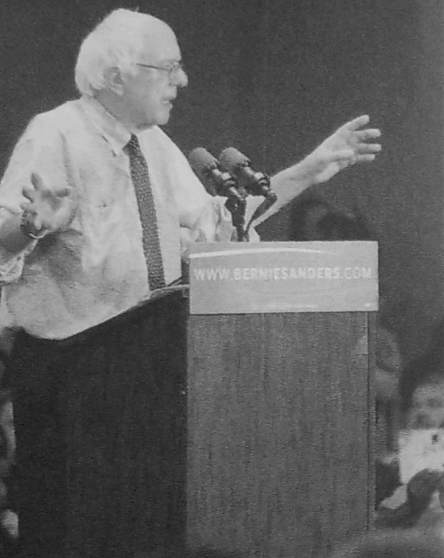
According to the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office, income of the richest 1 percent of American households rose 275 percent from the 1970s to 2008 compared with an increase of only 18 percent for the lowest 20 percent of the population. Data reported in 2014 by economist Emmanuel Saez reported that the average family income of the bottom 90 percent was \$33,068 compared to \$295,845 for the top 10 percent, \$448,489 for the top 5 percent, and \$1,260,508 for the top 1 percent. Little change had occurred by 2016 with the United States remaining the most unequal nation in the industrialized world. Yet little attention was given to economic inequality in the United States during this period. We discuss in Policy Advocacy Challenge 6.7 at the end of this chapter what social issues may be placed on the policy agenda in 2017 by a Republican Administration headed by Donald Trump as compared with policy agendas that may be pushed by a group of liberal Democratic U.S. Senators Democrats led by Senator Chuck Schumer, the new Senate Democratic Minority Leader.

This chapter discusses Task 3 of the model of policy practice and policy advocacy depicted in Figure 3.1. Experienced policy advocates realize that their first challenge is to get a specific policy issue on decision makers' agendas in agency, community, or legislative settings. Before an issue can advance into the later phases of policy practice, where proposals are actually refined, enacted, and implemented, decision makers must decide that a specific issue is important enough to merit serious consideration. It must compete with myriad other issues for the scarce time and resources of staff, executives, boards of directors, governmental officials, legislators, mayors, boards of supervisors, community leaders, and presidents. Policy advocates often have to use a combination of ethical, political, interactional, and analytic skills to place their issues on decision makers' agendas.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Students will be equipped to discuss:

1. The importance of agenda-building processes to policy practice
2. The three stages of agenda building: diagnosing, softening, and activating
3. How social problems and solutions reach agendas of decision makers
4. How political processes shape agendas of decision makers
5. How windows of opportunity and policy entrepreneurs shape agendas
6. How direct-service staff can build agendas
7. The challenges policy advocates face in shaping agendas



Senator Bernie Sanders places
Millennial students' tuition debt on
the policy agenda

Crush Rush/Shutterstock.com

How do we as policy advocates know when an issue is on the agenda? In legislative settings, this has happened when legislation has been introduced into the legislative process and referred to a committee and has attracted the serious attention of some legislators—preferably ones with clout. In agency settings, an issue is on the agenda when it has become part of the agency's deliberations. Perhaps the executive director has formed a task force or committee to study it. Maybe the staff or the agency's board plans to discuss the issue in a meeting. A group in the agency may have decided to rally support for a policy change. In communities, an issue is on the agenda when community leaders and decision makers have decided to take it seriously enough to convene meetings to consider solutions.

Of course, placing issues or proposals on these agendas does not necessarily have a positive outcome; many factors, such as opposition, can defeat them. Indeed, many issues never reach the agenda because opposing groups successfully use tactics to keep them off the agenda.¹ Also, placement on the agenda does not tell advocates precisely what kind of proposal or solution will finally emerge, because proposals are finalized in the give-and-take of deliberations. But placement on the agenda does tell them that a proposal is well positioned to receive serious attention and that it has received an initial impetus, unlike many issues that do not even achieve this status. Were we not to discuss agenda building, it might seem that policy reforms can be easily initiated without any preliminary work, such as discussing the proposed reform, analyzing its feasibility, convincing others that it merits attention, considering who might get the ball rolling, and deciding on the right time to introduce the issue to others.

In this chapter, we discuss some policy-practice skills that help get proposals onto agendas.

Taking the First Step

Assume that you work in an agency that provides job referrals and career assistance to women. You are perturbed because the agency provides little service to a specific client group, such as single teenage mothers. While some services are available to them, none of the services, you decide, focuses on their employment needs. While your distant challenge is to develop a proposal to help this population and perhaps secure funding for this help, your immediate challenge is to convince others, preferably decision makers at the agency, that the problem merits their serious attention. At this very moment, you are engaged in building an agenda. In this preliminary phase, you must place the issue on the agenda so that someone—perhaps an executive, a staff committee, or a committee of the agency's board—will examine the issue in more detail or delegate it to others for further exploration.

Agenda building is a critical phase of the policy development process. Skillful policy practitioners who are building an agenda try to create favorable conditions, interest, and support for a policy reform at the outset.

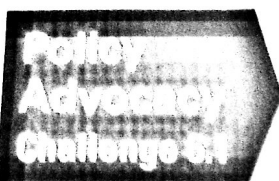


EP 6a

Why Agenda Building Is Needed

Legislatures

It is easy to see why most proposals fall by the wayside when we consider some simple realities that confront legislators and agency executives. Legislators must limit the number of issues they consider and must prioritize them. Thousands of pieces of legislation are introduced into each session of state legislatures and Congress, conceived by lobbyists, citizens, professional associations, or the legislators themselves (see Policy Advocacy Challenge 6.1).



Finding Emerging Legislation in State and Federal Jurisdictions

Stephanie Davis, Research Librarian, University of California, Irvine

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT INFORMATION

In 1995, a team of librarians and technologists from the Library of Congress created THOMAS, under a federal mandate from the 104th Congress to make federal legislative information freely available to the public via the Internet. THOMAS, located at <http://thomas.loc.gov>, is named for Thomas Jefferson and provides access to many types of political and government information:

- Legislation: text of bills and information about those bills introduced into the House and Senate, text of laws passed by Congress, record of how members of Congress vote on bills, motions, and more (roll call votes)
- Congressional Record: an index to and full text of the official record of the speeches, remarks, issues, and other happenings in Congress
- House and Senate Committee Information: membership, charges, schedules, text of hearings
- Senator/Representative Directories: links to homepages with contact information, constituency information, profiles, legislative agendas; finding aids for locating a specific member by ZIP code and state
- Other Congressional Internet Services: the Government Printing Office, the General Accounting Office, the Congressional Budget Office, and others
- Links to guides on the legislative process in the House and Senate, database of historical documents, and more

Your library may have access to a subscription database called *Congressional Universe*, which provides much of the same information as THOMAS. Both are excellent resources for finding federal legislative information.

STATE LEGISLATIVE INFORMATION

Finding state information is, in general, not as streamlined as finding federal information. States generally do not have the same mandate to place their legislative information on the Internet. Often the best way to find state information is to look for Web links on your state's homepage to government, legislature, agencies, elected officials, and state libraries or archives. You might also wish to explore websites of the National Council of State Legislatures, at www.ncsl.org/, and the National Governors Association, at www.nga.org/. These are excellent starting points.



EXERCISE

First, spend some time getting acquainted with THOMAS. Select a topic of interest to you, and search for bills or laws on that topic (i.e., health care, welfare, children).

Next, using the search engines we discussed in Chapter One, find your state's homepage, and then find your state legislature's website. If the website allows for searching introduced and passed legislation, repeat the search you did in THOMAS.

- Compare the results of your searches—how are the bills or laws similar? Do they address the same or similar problems? How is the state's approach different from the federal, and vice versa?
- Who introduced or sponsored each piece of legislation? Find their homepage and compare their legislative agendas.
- From your perspective, is the solution to the problem addressed in the legislation a good solution or a poor solution? Critique each piece of legislation as if you were a member of the state legislature faced with voting on that piece of legislation.

Were legislators to debate a large fraction of these proposals, they would work themselves to exhaustion and not give careful attention to any of them. When many people with different perspectives and constituencies are involved, it takes time and effort to consider even simple pieces of legislation. In each chamber of Congress, for example, subcommittees consider the policies and forward them for further debate and votes to the full legislative committee, which forwards them to the full chamber for floor debates and votes. If each chamber enacts a different version, they may have to be sent to a conference committee composed of members of both chambers, and then to the president. Moreover, during this process, many legislators must spend endless hours with lobbyists and other citizens. It is no wonder, then, that leaders of legislatures decide not to put most measures on the legislative agenda, thus reserving their scarce time for those pieces of legislation they want to concentrate on.

Legislators often avoid issues that appear to give them little or no political advantage in reelection, for example, not selecting issues that will not help them obtain or retain constituents' support. A particular issue may seem too controversial or may antagonize an important faction or interest group, even if it pleases other people. Yet legislators sometimes do select issues that they realize will be difficult to enact or controversial. So it is important not to assume that such issues cannot attract attention from those legislators who may be willing to invest political capital on them, such as when various presidents from both parties sought to enact national health insurance when they knew it would be controversial.

Unlike agency executives who often want to avoid contentious issues that could disrupt their agency, politicians are often attracted to issues associated with conflict if such issues can gain them support among their constituents. For example, liberal politicians may deliberately support an issue to anger conservatives and thus prove their ideological leanings to their liberal supporters. Legislators may opportunistically select issues that will give them media exposure and a resultant advantage over their opponents in an upcoming election battle. On other occasions, however, specific legislators decide not to invest their limited time and resources in issues that stand little or no chance of success.

Agencies

Agency executives must manage organizations, raise funds, hire staff, adjudicate conflicts, and plan—tasks that occupy most of their working hours. Executives also confront myriad policy issues, such as deciding what kinds of clients to serve and which social problems fall within the purview of the agency, naming overarching objectives or goals, developing policies and procedures within specific grant proposals, deciding whether to be advocates for their clients in the broader community or in a legislature, determining what kind of staff to hire, and developing policies and procedures to guide their staff. Some of these policies concern internal, procedural matters, while others concern the goals or mission of the organization in its political and funding contexts.

In light of these many tasks, executives must ignore or defer many issues, even ones that seem important to a staff member, a board member, or a client. Were executives to try to examine each issue in considerable detail, they would become exhausted and frustrated.

Executives also ignore or defer certain issues because they would embroil the agency in conflict. Even seemingly mundane issues such as changing an agency's intake procedures may impassion people who want the issue left alone. Often, they act only when they are convinced that an issue merits attention in spite of possible political conflict and the time and effort it may take. Perhaps they like an existing policy because it furthers their own interests, as when it facilitates a steady flow of certain kinds of clients to their units. Often more than staff, executives take a strategic view of their agencies, wanting policies that will give them a competitive advantage over other agencies. Policy advocates who can argue



that a specific policy innovation will help an agency increase its resources and clientele may attract more support to it than if the policy is perceived as diminishing or having no effect on an agency's ability to survive.²

Executives may like an existing policy or one that is proposed by a policy advocate for ideological reasons. They may be committed, for instance, to serving a specific vulnerable population and be unwilling to diminish services for it. Or they may be committed to a specific approach to serving a specific population, believing it most effectively and efficiently meets their needs.

Policy advocates must develop a strategy to convince agency executives that their issues merit attention. When policy advocates succeed in placing an issue on the agendas of executives and agency boards, they do not necessarily succeed in getting them to enact new policies or to accept policy innovations, but at least the proposals have a better chance of success than if these executives and boards develop little or no interest in the issue.

Communities

Agenda building also occurs in community settings as various issues vie for attention. Community activists may introduce ideas to community groups, the media, city or town councils, school boards, and other community influentials. These ideas could include blocking a freeway that will split the community, expanding a school, securing approval for a community park, or opening a counseling program for substance abusers. Activists may draw attention to a policy proposal by getting a story in the mass media, holding a community forum, or staging a protest. Or they may inject the issue into a campaign for city council or school board elections, with the ultimate objective of persuading community decision makers to prioritize it in their deliberations.

Elections

Policy advocates use their skills to get specific issues on decision makers' agencies during political elections. In the presidential primaries of 2016, advocates of greater equality in the United States sensed they had a golden opportunity to place the topic, inequality, on the political agenda after it had not been seriously considered by presidents or the Congress since the 1960s when the nation launched a "War on Poverty." Elections provide a favorable climate for introducing issues because the mass media and social media "come alive" during campaigns of opposing parties. If advocates can find and energize blocs of voters like Senator Bernie Sanders in 2016 with respect to income inequality, they cannot only publicize an issue but also extract promises from them to take action. We discuss their strategy in more detail at the end of this chapter.

Three Challenges in Agenda Building

Agenda building can be conceptualized as a funnel (see Figure 6.1). We will discuss this agenda-building framework from the top down. Policy practitioners face three challenges when considering specific reforms: they (or their allies) must *diagnose* the context as they *listen* to others, *soften* or *moderate* the context, and *activate* change.

The top funnel illustrates the process that policy practitioners use to winnow a few issues from the multitude of issues that could be presented for active consideration. At the top of the funnel are the context and the practitioner's diagnosing role. Just beneath these are the modified context and the policy practitioner's softening or moderating role. The numbers 1 through 10 just above the funnel represent the many potential issues that exist

in any setting. Policy entrepreneurs, discussed in more detail later, engage in the activating role when they pull a specific issue (in this case, number 8) into the funnel, where it is placed on the decision agenda when someone or some group prioritizes it for systematic deliberation. (See the decision agenda at the bottom of the top funnel in Figure 6.1.)

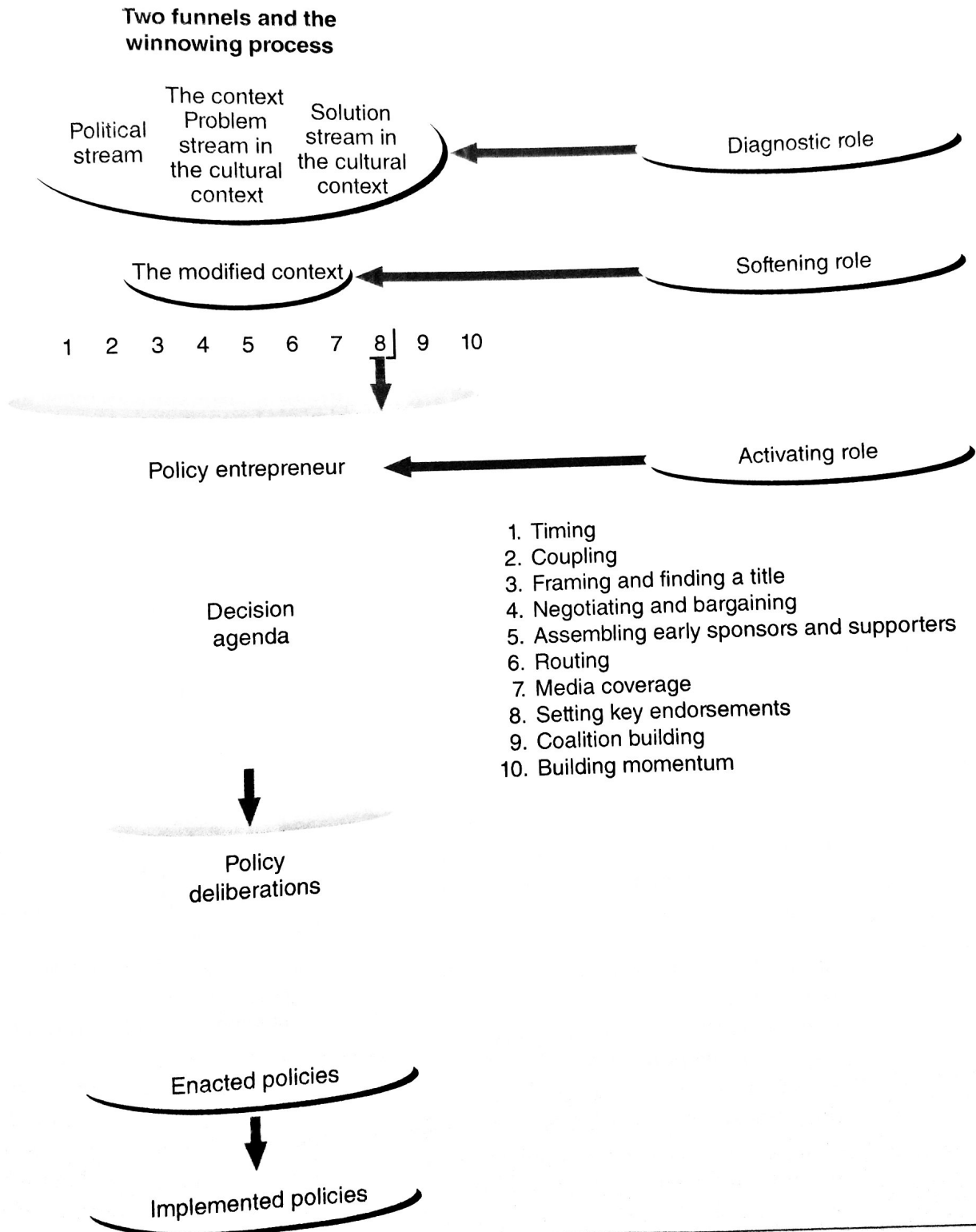


FIGURE 6.1 The Agenda Funnel

After an issue is placed on the decision agenda, such as on to the agenda of a meeting or committee, it enters policy deliberations wherein it is waylaid, defeated, or enacted. (See the bottom funnel in Figure 6.1.) This is a second winnowing process; fewer policies are actually enacted than were placed in the decision agenda funnel as decision makers prioritize only some of them."

From Figure 6.1, we can tell the stage at which an issue is by asking several questions: Has the issue been floated with little or no discussion? If so, it is in the original context or the modified context. Has the issue been forwarded to a committee, a task force, or some other deliberative entity for further discussion? If so, it is on the decision agenda. Have systematic deliberations begun? If so, it is in policy deliberations. Has the issue been enacted by decision makers? If so, it is positioned for implementation at the bottom of the second funnel.

Policy advocates need to diagnose the context to identify contextual constraints and opportunities as they listen to others. If they decide that specific policies will be extremely difficult to change, they must do considerable work to change the context or to focus on alternative policy changes. When they decide that the contextual opportunities far outweigh the number constraints, they can initiate a policy-changing strategy at once. In some cases, the prognosis will be guarded or unclear.

Having diagnosed the context, policy advocates must soften or moderate it; that is, they must make it more amenable to a specific policy initiative. Even when the context appears bleak, they may discover that engaging strategically placed persons will make the prognosis more optimistic or will indicate that their pessimistic forecast was unwarranted. Or they may work with a coalition or advocacy group to pressure decision makers to take interest in a specific issue, such as by sending a delegation to them or by getting the issue placed on the meeting of a city council or school board.

At some point, of course, policy advocates need to activate change. They need to get a community decision maker or legislator to put an issue on the agenda of the other decision makers in the agency, community, or legislative setting. The chairperson might place the issue on the agenda of an agency committee or staff meeting. Perhaps a legislator drafts a piece of legislation and initiates a search for cosponsors. Or maybe a state's director of health and human services presents a detailed analysis of a particular problem in the administration of his or her program.

Agenda building is, then, often a precursor to other policy-practice tasks, although in some cases policy advocates may proceed with other tasks, such as developing a policy proposal, even before decision makers have shown an interest in a specific issue. Even in this case, however, policy advocates must return to agenda building to get the issue on decision makers' agendas lest they find their issue stymied for lack of interest by them. And if policy advocates have successfully softened or moderated the context, they may make ultimate success in placing an issue on decision makers' agendas more likely.

In our discussion of agenda building, I rely heavily on the pathbreaking work of political scientist John Kingdon. Before Kingdon wrote his classic work, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, many people had ignored the agenda-building task altogether, conveying the misleading impression that policy reforms magically appear with no prior work by policy practitioners.³ Or they used simplistic explanations. Some *realists* assumed, for example, that decision makers placed issues on agendas whenever they received technical reports or data that recommended a specific change. While this assumption is sometimes true, issues are often placed on agendas without empirical studies—and technical reports often gather dust in agency, community, and legislative settings. Indeed, legislators and even agency executives sometimes retain policies that they know to be ineffective if they are supported by powerful lobbyists or bring revenues

to an agency. Some *incrementalists* assumed that administrators and legislators often introduced modest changes in existing policies in response to complaints or pressures, as when federal legislators expanded the Head Start program to include children with physical and mental disabilities in response to lobbying by groups representing these children. While incremental change often takes place, Kingdon rightly argues that decision makers, in both agency and legislative settings, often support major changes in existing policy.⁴ Legislators sometimes seek a major overhaul of a program or the enactment of a major social reform. Agencies sometimes launch new programs that diverge markedly from their existing programs.



EP 8a

Another theorist developed the *garbage can theory* of agenda building. Emphasizing organizations, he noted that many ideas bubble up regarding problems (e.g., social problems, service delivery problems, and administrative problems) and solutions (e.g., service delivery, program, or administrative innovations).⁵ These problems or solutions may surface at staff or committee meetings, or at a retreat of the executives and the board. Even when agency members and executives consider an issue fleetingly, these problems and solutions often retain a place in their memories, remaining in a state of limbo—a figurative garbage can—until they are placed on the agendas of decision makers at a later point in time as they recall them. Similarly, we can say that myriad problems and solutions exist in the “garbage cans” of legislatures. These problems and solutions derive from such sources as lobbyists, reform-minded legislators, think tanks, professional associations, and citizens. The garbage can theory suggests a more fluid and dynamic process than the rationalist or incrementalist theorists, but it does not discuss in sufficient detail how certain issues are activated or placed on policy agendas.

While we draw on Kingdon’s theory, we also modify it. We include more factors in the context than he does, and we add the diagnosing (or listening), softening (or moderating), and activating stages because they clarify the roles of policy advocates in bringing issues to the agenda.



EP 8b

As can be seen in Figure 6.1, agenda building is a precursor to actual deliberations. Agenda building merely gets specific issues or policies on the table, to be followed by actual deliberations of decision makers in agencies, legislatures, and governments. In this deliberative process, some of the issues and policies are also sifted out. Some are defeated. Some are cast aside. Some are tabled. What we have, then, are two funnels that each winnow issues and policies. What is actually enacted or approved—a small fraction of the issues and policies that began this trip at the top of the first funnel—comes out by the bottom of the second funnel.

Even though many issues, problems, or solutions do not emerge from the bottoms of the funnels—or only make it through one of them—it is important to realize that many policies do emerge from both funnels, as is illustrated by the many policies that are enacted or approved by legislatures, communities, and agencies.

The Diagnosing or Listening Stage

When diagnosing the context, policy advocates must analyze streams of problems and solutions, recent professional decisions and trends, and political realities.

Streams of Problems and Solutions When policy advocates begin their work, they must carefully consider the kinds of problems and solutions that have already been considered in a setting. Indeed, we can use Kingdon’s language, as he refers to problem and solution “streams” in specific settings.⁶

In many agencies, one needs to merely examine developments in the agency during, say, the last five years to see whether a problem stream exists. Take the earlier example of a small agency that provides job placement and career counseling services to women. The social worker who directs these services also founded the agency. In the beginning, the agency had a relatively narrow set of services, consisting mostly of posting job openings from area firms on a bulletin board and holding career-planning seminars for women. In the 10 years since its founding, the staff, the executive director, and the members of the board have identified problems that the agency could address. They initially discussed some of these ideas in meetings or in personal conversations, but over time, many of the ideas have led to new programs, funded grant proposals, and cooperative projects with other agencies. The agency has added special job placement and career-planning services for Latinos, single teenage mothers, and displaced homemakers; a job placement program for unemployed women funded by the federal Job Training Partnership Act; and job fairs for high school women in a local school district. Each of these programs stemmed from a problem that someone placed in the agency's general problem stream in conversations or meetings. Of course, many other problems have been discussed that never reached solution. For example, the agency staff decided not to pursue a suggestion to provide a support group for unemployed women with a mental health orientation, because they believed it fell outside their mission, which emphasizes concrete services like job referral, job search, and career development services.

A stream of problems exists in legislative settings, too. Policy practitioners interested in reforming the child welfare system of a specific county, for example, would be likely to interview advocates and highly placed officials to find out what kinds of problems concerning the child welfare system have already been discussed. (See Policy Advocacy Challenge 6.2 for ways to search for legislative proposals that are in the hopper.)

Similarly, a stream of solutions exists in agency, community, and legislative settings. In our women's job placement agency, the staff, the board, and the executive director have considered decentralizing services, adopting a sliding-fee schedule, merging with a local YWCA, developing joint programs with a community college, and developing a computer lab to help job seekers. In a specific county, the board of supervisors and child welfare officials may consider new management systems, new record-keeping systems, partnerships with local schools, use of evidence-based practice, and different ways of recruiting foster parents.

We can classify solutions into three broad groups. Some propose specific programs, such as interventions to help children, single mothers, or older people. Others aim to correct institutional problems, such as financing a program, changing an agency's fee structure, or enhancing the collaboration of different agencies in serving a specific client group. Still others propose methods of making decisions, such as setting up a task force, establishing a committee, or organizing an interagency planning committee.

We should place more emphasis on finding *funding strategies* for specific problems or proposals. Minus resources, specific problems are not addressed and proposals are ineffective. In the case of decreasing inequality by proposing programs that increase resources of relatively poor people, policy advocates have to identify resources that might fund these programs *as part of their proposal*.

Policy advocates rarely begin policy practice with a blank slate. By examining streams of problems and solutions in specific settings, policy advocates discover where their issue fits into this larger picture. They might discover, for example, that others have already introduced the issue, but that it failed to progress because of budgetary implications. Or they

Using the Mass Media to Discover Issues That Might Be Placed on Policy Agendas

Bruce Jansson, Ph.D.

Over a period of several weeks, collect stories in a local newspaper that suggest items, problems, or solutions that might be candidates for policy agendas in your jurisdiction. Group them under issues, problems, and solutions. Also analyze which public officials, parties, high-level officials, or advocacy groups might be candidates to champion them, and at what level of government or in the private sector. Are persons and parties with different ideologies likely to approach the issues differently?

might discover that their issue has never been discussed, but that related issues were the subject of initial discussion several years ago. By piecing together the history of streams of problems and solutions, policy advocates get a better sense of their issue's prognosis.

Recent Professional Developments and Trends Fads and trends can powerfully shape the prognosis of a policy reform. For example, partnerships and collaborations between agencies became popular in the mid-1990s, partly because many professionals, public officials, and funders came to believe that their clients required more intensive and sophisticated services than specific agencies could give. A policy reform encouraging collaboration would have fared better in this environment than if it had been introduced a decade earlier, when less attention was given to collaboration. More recently, evidence-based practice has been widely emphasized in professional literature—making it more feasible for policy advocates to put forward policies that are grounded in research, such as proposals for different or new interventions in a specific agency. With respect to inequality, for example, political scientists Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson discovered that so-called blue states with relatively high investments in education, infrastructure, urban quality of life, and human services are substantially improved with higher levels of education, longer life expectancy, and lower levels of poverty than so-called red states with lower levels of these investments. These data strongly support policies that reduce inequality. Fads and trends can be discerned by examining professional journals, conversing with professionals, and analyzing the kinds of innovations that funders (such as foundations and government agencies) prioritize.

Problem and solution streams exist in a cultural context, whether in nations or in specific settings. “Problems” in one setting are not perceived to be problems in other settings. Americans are less likely to view great discrepancies in wealth as a problem as compared with many Europeans. High levels of conflict between staff may be viewed as problematic in one agency but not in another. Similarly, some solutions, such as national health insurance, are widely accepted in European nations but not in the United States. It is important, then, to be familiar with the culture of specific settings to better understand the kinds of innovations that are relatively feasible in them, while also realizing that decision makers sometimes make policy choices that are discrepant with these traditions.

Political Realities Background political developments powerfully influence whether specific issues will be placed on policy agendas, as our discussion of the big picture in Chapter Four suggests. Let's start with legislative settings. When working on a policy issue



EP 9c

or reform, policy advocates need to consider the viewpoint of important officials by finding out what position they have taken on similar issues or reforms in the past. This consideration should include the following:

- The viewpoints of heads of government or chief executives
- The viewpoints of legislators, particularly those who have official positions (like majority speaker or committee chairperson) or who have influential roles in specific caucuses such as a women's caucus
- The viewpoints of the legislators from one's own district because they often support proposals made by their constituents
- The viewpoints of legislators who have assumed leadership on similar issues in the past, such as legislators who have taken a personal interest in child welfare issues
- The viewpoints of key members of government bureaucracy, whether political appointees or civil servants, particularly those who oversee programs and policies relevant to the present issue
- The viewpoints of lobbyists or the heads of interest groups that are active on the issue or policy
- The viewpoints of the public as reflected in polls or in recently contested elections
- The extent to which a policy reform is likely to receive sympathetic coverage in the mass media as reflected by media coverage of similar issues in the past

Read Policy Advocacy Challenge 6.3 for an example of how policy advocates capitalized on the sympathetic viewpoints held by the Democratic majority in the House and Senate in 2008–2010 to pass legislation to address homelessness.

Policy advocates also need to consider court rulings that are germane to their issue. With respect to homelessness, for example, court rulings have required some local jurisdictions to provide shelters for homeless people.

In agency settings, policy advocates must consider a range of factors that shape the prognosis of a specific reform or issue, including the following:

- The extent to which a policy reform is consonant with the agency's mission
- The state of the agency's budget, whether it is running a deep deficit or is balanced
- The amount of interest that specific agency funders are likely to have in a specific issue or problem
- The viewpoints of the key agency officials, such as the director, top administrators, or members of the board of directors, and the directors of important agency programs, as surmised from their position in previous years on similar issues
- The viewpoints of the agency officials or staff who are likely to be most impacted by a reform or issue
- The viewpoints of union leaders (if staff are unionized)
- The likely effects of a specific reform on an agency's clientele
- The likely position of the agency's accrediting bodies

In community settings, policy advocates must consider the following:

- The viewpoints of key community leaders
- Local public opinion
- The perspectives of the local media

Combating Homelessness Through Policy Advocacy at the Federal Level

Gretchen Heidemann, MSW, Ph.D

Policy advocates at the National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH) saw a silver lining in the economic recession that began in 2007, which wreaked havoc in the lives of thousands of Americans who lost their jobs and their homes. Advocates saw a unique opportunity to bring the issue of homelessness to the forefront, pushing it onto the policy agenda of Congress and the Obama administration, and accomplishing significant gains.

With a Democratic-controlled Senate and House of Representatives, these advocates were met with sympathetic ears when they came to the table to share the results of a study they had conducted: "Foreclosures to Homelessness: The Forgotten Victims of the Subprime Crisis." Their efforts in Congress resulted in the passage of S. 896—Protections for Tenants in Foreclosed Properties—that was signed by President Obama on May 20, 2009. This bill includes a nationwide 90-day pre-eviction notice requirement for tenants in foreclosed properties. This provision will prevent countless renters from being forced into homelessness.

In addition, the NCH, along with other national homeless advocacy organizations, provided comments to the Obama administration that led to \$1.5 billion of federal stimulus going to the Homeless Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program (HPRP). The \$1.5 billion in HPRP funding was distributed throughout the nation to homeless prevention and assistance programs, making it the largest investment in homeless prevention and eradication in history.

Finally, NCH and the National Low Income Housing Coalition are working to capitalize the National Housing Trust Fund, which was established as a provision of the Housing and Economic Recovery Act of 2008. The housing trust fund is a permanent program not subject to the annual appropriations process. Once capitalized, it will provide communities with funds to build, preserve, and rehabilitate rental homes that are affordable for very low-income households.

When considering the prognosis of policy changes in any setting, several factors often suggest when specific policy innovations will be relatively difficult to achieve:

- The sheer magnitude of a policy change: Large changes are often more difficult to obtain than more modest changes.
- Whether an issue is already politicized: If the issue has already excited considerable political conflict, it is likely to be associated with political conflict when it is reintroduced.
- Whether persons with considerable power believe that specific policy changes will harm their economic, professional, or political self-interest: If they have this negative orientation, policy reform will be more difficult.
- Whether a specific reform will be expensive or difficult to implement: Policies that present logistical or funding problems are often opposed by agency executives.

When engaging in diagnostic work, policy advocates should not prematurely abandon an issue when they believe it has a negative prognosis. Reforms that will help powerless



EP 8b

or oppressed populations, for example, often encounter opposition. Had Martin Luther King, Jr., abandoned the civil rights movement in the 1950s because of its poor prognosis, the subsequent enactment of civil rights legislation in the United States would have been significantly delayed.

The Softening or Moderating Stage

Policy advocates can sometimes attempt to improve the prognosis of a policy reform even before it enters policy deliberations by working in problem and solution streams and by building political support.

Working in Problem and Solution Streams As Kingdon suggests, those who want decision makers to take their problem seriously have to convince them that it is a problem and not merely a condition.⁷ Unlike a condition, a problem poses a threat or danger to someone, whether a group in the population, an agency, or politicians. When a condition is perceived as a problem, legislators, agency officials, and others are more likely to view it as important—and believe that someone (or they themselves) will suffer dire consequences if it is not addressed. If agency executives believe that their agency will suffer important consequences if they do not support a reform, such as loss of resources or clientele, they will be more likely to support it. If proponents of measures to end homelessness can persuade public officials in a specific jurisdiction that they will save resources by helping homeless persons find affordable housing and jobs—such as by cutting welfare costs and the use of emergency rooms—they increase the odds that they will support reforms. Advocates of policies to reduce inequality in the presidential elections of 2016 contended that excessive inequality spawns an array of social problems such as poverty, homelessness, poor health, and depression, as well as alienation of large segments of the population who view themselves as out of the economic mainstream.

But how do we as policy advocates convince other people that certain conditions *are* problems? We can use data to argue that a condition is serious by virtue of absolute numbers involved, that some subset of the population is afflicted far more than other portions of the population, or that the problem is steadily worsening.⁸ Absolute numbers, such as the percentage of women with inadequate or no child care, can shock decision makers into believing that a condition is a problem. Someone with data indicating that Latinos lack adequate child care in far greater numbers than white women may be able to use these data to persuade legislators to fund day care for Spanish-speaking children. Data showing that a problem is worsening may convince legislators that it will reach crisis proportions without governmental intervention.

Advocates for corrective action often use words such as *crisis* to describe a condition. Because this word is overused, the advocate needs some evidence or rationale for its use. Take, for example, the dramatic spread of tuberculosis in the United States in the 1990s, which particularly affected AIDS patients and immigrants. When drug-resistant strains of the disease spread because many persons failed to take the prescribed medications long enough, advocates of greater funding for tuberculosis programs were able to convince federal, state, and local officials to prioritize funding for public health programs.

Policy advocates also need to demonstrate that a problem is not hopeless and can be ameliorated. For example, advocates have often found it difficult to secure support for these problems as unsolvable, in contrast to simpler ones. Advocates can buttress their cases by citing research or finding successful projects that demonstrate that specific



EP 7a



EP 3a

reforms could well yield positive outcomes. As one example, Senator Bernie Sanders and other advocates of equality in the presidential elections of 2016 contended that increases of the federal minimum wage to \$15 per hour from \$7.25 per hour over a number of years would greatly augment the resources of millions of Americans without inducing employers to lay off many employees.

In addition, policy advocates can appeal to values such as the ethical principles of beneficence, social justice, and fairness by arguing that society (or a legislature) has a duty to address an issue. They can use value-based arguments, and they can illustrate them with specific case studies of persons who suffer from problems. Advocates of equality used the ethical norms of “fairness” and “equity” in 2016 to buttress their case for policies that would give working families “a fair shake.”

Because politicians often consider the effect of corrective action on their careers, advocates often try to state problems in relatively broad terms. They may stress the absence of child care for working women, the increased incidence of Alzheimer’s disease among all social classes and races, or inadequate sex education in American schools. By presenting problems in general terms, advocates increase the likelihood that more politicians will see the problem as important to significant segments of their constituencies.⁹

Terminology is important when describing problems. For example, some policy advocates may refer to a social program as “investing” in human needs rather than merely “spending” resources. Legislators and citizens are more likely to respond to the word *investing* because it suggests that society will receive a return on its expenditure of funds. Data developed by political scientists Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson demonstrated that public investments in states not only reduce inequality but also reduce levels of many social problems including increasing student graduation rates from secondary schools, improving health outcomes, and decreasing levels of poverty. Social scientists Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett have demonstrated that industrialized nations with lower levels of inequality have lower rates of homelessness, mental illness, poverty, crime, teenage pregnancy, and dropping out of secondary schools. Nomenclature can also take advantage of socially acceptable symbols.¹⁰ The Obama Administration named its major health reforms The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 to underscore how it would protect health consumers from health insurance companies and from lack of health insurance.¹¹ The legislation succeeded in providing health insurance to 20 million people by 2016 who had lacked it in 2010 although President Trump vowed to repeal it during his presidency in 2017.



EP 8b

Framing Issues to Attract Support for Policy Reforms

Bob Erlenbusch, Ph.D.

Go to www.cengage.com to watch this video clip.

Policy advocates often have to ponder how to “frame” issues so that other persons are more likely to take them seriously. They have to decide what symbols, words, values, and proposed outcomes will compel other persons to take note of them. Listen to the video in this policy advocacy challenge, in which Bob Erlenbusch, Executive Director of the Sacramento Regional Coalition to End Homelessness, discusses how he is trying to make homelessness an issue that persons who own their own homes can understand.



Advocates encounter a double-edged sword when they use the word *prevention* to seek support for a problem. Prevention is, on the one hand, a culturally acceptable symbol because everyone prefers preventing a problem to fixing it afterward. On the other hand, decision makers often perceive preventive programs negatively. They may wonder if a specific problem, such as teenage pregnancy or drug use, can be prevented. They may want to prioritize services for persons who are already afflicted with a specific problem rather than to fund prevention programs. Those advocating preventive programs need to find evidence that they can successfully avert problems when proposing a specific innovation.¹² For example, a significant body of research has emerged in the last two decades that demonstrates that preschool programs prevent cognitive and other problems and decrease drop-out rates in high schools.

Our discussion suggests that policy practitioners need to anticipate likely objections or opposition to a specific policy so they can diminish or rebut them. They should develop arguments to counter claims that a particular problem is not solvable or cannot be prevented, that a remedy is too expensive or too difficult to implement, that a particular issue does not fall within an agency's mission, that a specific problem is unimportant, or that voters will punish legislators who support a specific reform. When they successfully counter these objections, they soften the context, making it easier not only to get an issue placed on the agenda but also to get a reform enacted.

The media can serve as an important educational tool in policy practice. Stories in the press, on the radio, and on television about social problems can create powerful images in the minds of citizens and elected officials, who may decide to give them serious attention. A social worker in an agency found, for example, that a reporter from a local paper became a frequent ally.¹³ When the social worker wanted the city administration to replace junkyards with low- and moderate-income housing in a specific neighborhood, several stories in the newspaper about the blighted area prompted local politicians to take the neighborhood's problems seriously, and to help find federal and state programs to build affordable housing and recreation areas in it.

Social workers can help shape agendas by using the mass media (see Policy Advocacy Challenge 6.5). This can be challenging because the media ration their scarce time among many claimants. With their proximity to many social issues and problems, however, social workers should increasingly seek air time and print space in local and national media.

Social workers should use social media to increase public awareness of social problems as we discuss at greater length in Chapter Eleven.

As with social problems, only certain solutions make it to agency or legislative agendas. Those who examine solutions often test their fiscal, administrative, and political feasibility.¹⁴ Assume that a staff person in a job-counseling agency for women is not only referring women to jobs but also actually training them. Some staff may be skeptical about this idea's feasibility. They may ask whether the agency, which has emphasized job referrals and job search, can develop training programs in fields such as computer literacy. Can it find facilities to house these services, the needed staff, foundations, or government funders to fund them? Can it place the graduates in actual jobs? Because this program represents a marked departure from current programs, it is likely to encounter political opposition from some staff, as well as some board members, who will question whether the proposal falls within the agency's mission. Some staff may fear as well that the proposed service will detract from existing services. Decision makers also judge a solution's likely effectiveness and technical merits. Will a proposed program actually help clients, and will it be sufficiently inexpensive to prove feasible in light of the agency's budget? Policy advocates can counter such skepticism, of course, by citing evaluative research or by showing that

Using the Mass Media to Place Issues on Agendas

Bob Erlenbusch, Ph.D.

Go to www.cengage.com to watch this video clip.

Policy advocates increase their chances of getting media coverage if they develop a compelling story that has human interest. They need to be able to express the basic theme of this story in a few sentences because they will not often have the luxury of an extended story in the media. They can seek coverage from a single reporter with whom they have contact or who they call, telling him or her about their story. Additionally, they can make a press release to many print and visual media outlets, where they may convey in a succinct but compelling way what they will discuss during the press release, and who will make the presentation. They need to remember, however, that intensive competition exists for media space in light of the many possible stories that the media can cover. Their chances for coverage increase if the presenter or interviewee is a well-known community leader. For more discussion of strategies relating to the use of media, see the video in this policy advocacy challenge, in which Bob Erlenbusch, member of the Board of the NCH, discusses strategies for getting media coverage.

successfully used in model programs elsewhere. They can find possible funding sources for the proposed policy innovation.

Our discussion suggests that policy advocates must try to place a solution in a favorable light if they want it to get onto decision makers' agendas. They must accomplish this task, moreover, in settings where specific solutions vie with one another for the scarce space on agendas. They should also recognize that they may encounter opposition from persons or groups that do not like their solution and want to cast it in an unfavorable light.

Building Political Support Policy advocates can also soften the context by diminishing opposition to a specific reform. They can engage persons in strategic positions to educate them about the need for a specific reform. They can directly address the concerns or objections these persons have, and they can correct erroneous information.

As Tip O'Neill, the late Democratic Speaker of the House, suggested, it is often effective to co-opt others by asking for their suggestions.¹⁵ Policy practitioners can ask people to offer suggestions about getting a policy reform on the agenda. As these people offer guidance about how to proceed, they sometimes unwittingly become part of the change effort.

When softening the political context, it is important not to prematurely dismiss some people on the basis of their ideology or previous positions. To the extent they can, policy advocates often want to construct a "big tent" that contains an array of persons, even those with divergent perspectives, to build a coalition that can support a policy reform. To achieve this objective, they must be open to input from a variety of people, have good listening skills to understand various perspectives, and be willing to compromise.¹⁶

Of course, this approach is not always feasible in highly polarized situations, when policy advocates sometimes have to rely on the support of a specific faction. Indeed, in some situations, policy advocates have to create a ruckus to get decision makers to pay attention to an issue, such as organizing demonstrations, picketing, or sit-ins. Disruptive activities sometimes backfire by hardening decision makers against a proposal or issue,

Policy
Advocacy
Challenge 6b



EP 6b



Demonstrators place rights of unarmed black men on the policy agenda

but they can also mobilize popular opinion if used skillfully. Policy advocates who use a social-movement strategy frequently use attention-getting activities to make their issue more public and to put pressure on public officials, such as sit-ins and demonstrations by member of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s as well as *Black Lives Matter* in the years following the slaying of Trayvon Martin in 2012 in Sanford, Florida.

When an agency staff member wants to make the political context more favorable to a problem or solution, he or she can point to funding trends, court rulings, or professional developments that support a specific change in agency policy.

The Activating Stage

Now we turn our attention to the activating stage, which appears inside the top funnel in Figure 6.1. A policy entrepreneur is a decision maker, a legislator, a chairperson, an executive, or another person who has the power to pull an issue onto an agenda so that it will receive serious consideration.¹⁷

To pull an issue into the decision funnel, policy entrepreneurs use tactics that often include timing, coupling, negotiating, assembling early sponsors and supporters, and routing.

Timing and Windows of Opportunity Calling key periods “windows of opportunity,” Kingdon suggests that they represent relatively brief moments when “the time is ripe” for specific initiatives. In legislative settings, key events often sensitize legislators to a specific issue. Dramatic and publicized stories, such as a homeless person’s death from exposure or a flagrant example of child abuse or the slaying of an unarmed black male by police, may make them suddenly alive to specific needs.

Pivotal events in the political stream stir up support for a specific problem or solution. With Barack Obama’s victory in November 2008, after eight years of Republican rule, many people hoped that issues that had lain dormant would now reach congressional agendas,



such as national health care reforms, immigration reforms, job-training initiatives, changes in military policies concerning gay men and lesbians, and pro-choice issues. With renewed hope that their issues would now reach decision or choice agendas, people invested time and resources in publicizing and championing them. As this example suggests, though, the placement of issues on decision agendas does not mean they will be successfully resolved. Political opposition and budget deficits stopped many of Obama's reforms. This example also illustrates how windows of opportunity often close rapidly. When the Republicans captured control of the House of Representatives in 2010, the federal government experienced gridlock between the two parties in 2011 and 2012.

The election of Barack Obama to the presidency in 2008 opened the door to national health insurance—which had not been seriously considered since its defeat in 1994 in the Clinton administration. The deep economic recession of 2007 to 2009 and beyond made Americans more sympathetic to medically uninsured persons—because so many of them had lost it when they became unemployed or when their employers rescinded or cut their health benefits. Obama's presidency illustrates, as well, how windows of opportunity can quickly close. In the aftermath of the Great Recession and with big Republican Congressional victories in 2010 and 2014, his policy hopes were diminished by Republicans' blocking of his policy and budget proposals in his second term from 2012 to 2016.

Regular and predictable windows of opportunity open in legislative settings during annual budget preparations, when advocates can seek a discussion of expanded resources for specific programs.¹⁸ When legislation is being reauthorized—that is, renewed—advocates sometimes obtain reforms in the legislation. When tax revenues increase more rapidly than had been expected, policy advocates can seek greater budget allocations for specific social programs.

Pivotal events in social agencies also create opportunities for changing policy. A governor, a mayor, or a large foundation might announce a new program for dealing with a problem related to an agency's mission, thereby creating a positive milieu for policy changes. Dramatic events may sensitize an agency's executive director or board members to a problem that the agency does not currently address. An affluent person may unexpectedly bequeath funds to an agency, enabling it to start a new program.

New tides in an agency's politics also create opportunity, such as the arrival of a new executive director or other high-level staff.¹⁹ While executives are not omnipotent, their critical position enables them to chart new directions for agencies. Changes in the leadership of an agency's board of directors may also create a positive milieu for policy changes. When agencies engage in systematic planning about their mission and programs—often called *strategic planning*—their staff and boards are often open to program and policy reforms (see Policy Advocacy Challenge 6.3).

Similarly, a change of presidents and governors or a shifting of majorities from one party to another in one or both legislative branches of the federal government or state government can signal a window of opportunity for a policy. Not only did Democrats win the presidency in 2008, for example, but they also obtained large majorities in both the House and the Senate, sufficient to enable them to enact many pieces of legislation that would have been unthinkable before the 2008 elections. Democrats appeared headed toward a major victory in the presidential elections of 2016 as polls showed that Hillary Clinton had developed a substantial lead in early fall, but her ability to place issues on the agenda, such as inequality, would depend on whether Democrats won so-called down elections that would allow them to gain a majority in the Senate and far larger numbers in the House of Representatives. *They would depend, as well, upon the outcome of the presidential election which went to Republican Donald Trump to the surprise of many pollsters.*



EP 5c

Good timing enables policy entrepreneurs to capitalize on windows of opportunity. Their strategy involves (a) preparing for a possible opportunity by analyzing an issue or problem, (b) recognizing when a window of opportunity augurs well for the specific solution, and (c) seizing the moment by placing it on the decision agenda.²⁰ In government settings, the policy entrepreneur is often an enterprising legislator with persistence, creativity, respectability, and good timing skill, or a creative lobbyist or an advocate who convinces a legislator that the time is ripe to draft and introduce legislation on a specific issue before the window of opportunity closes. In agency settings, policy entrepreneurs can come from anywhere within the organization, recognizing a window of opportunity for a specific issue and persuading others to place it on the decision agenda.

Alas, windows of opportunity often close in a relatively short time. Perhaps crises emerge that divert attention of public officials to other issues. Perhaps leaders change, people think that a problem has been adequately addressed by some other measure, and new issues supplant older ones. Perhaps the momentum of a specific policy proposal is lost as persons haggle over the details of a suggested reform, as opposition emerges, as budget exigencies intervene, or as other issues surface.

President Barack Obama admits that he failed to take advantage of a window of opportunity in 2009. With the economic crippled by the Great Recession of 2007 to 2009, the economy took its deepest fall since the Great Depression of the 1930s. The timing was right for a massive program to repair the nation's ailing infrastructure, including bridges, roads, airports, and public buildings. Because these improvements would have been made in the districts of Republican as well as Democratic lawmakers, he probably would have received bipartisan support. Distracted by other issues, such as the need to increase regulations of banks that had caused the Great Recession in the first place, he settled for a smaller "Stimulus Plan." Obama admitted that his omission had contributed to the alienation of many Americans who felt left behind even as the economy had recovered from the Great Recession. Policy advocates often miss these windows of opportunity even as Obama *did* take advantage of other windows, including the need to help Americans get health insurance and the need to enact regulations over banks.

Coupling Policy practitioners sometimes try to make imaginative connections among the solution, problem, and political streams depicted in Figure 6.1. Perhaps someone in an agency has discussed decentralizing services (a solution), while someone else has noted the relative lack of services to the Latino population (a problem). A policy entrepreneur in the agency may suggest writing a grant proposal to develop outreach stations for the Latino population, a proposal that would couple the problem with the solution.²¹ President Barack Obama coupled his Stimulus Program in 2008 through 2011 with many social programs, such as alleviating homelessness, building infrastructure, and reforming the health system.

Framing and Finding Titles Policy entrepreneurs put a twist on proposals to make them appealing to decision makers. For example, they may portray a benefit as an *earned* benefit to make it difficult for opponents to argue that it is a *welfare* benefit. This strategy is illustrated by arguments used to support the enactment of the Earned Income Tax Credit in 1973, given to families with working parents, and to increase its coverage so that it is now the largest antipoverty program funded by the federal government. Had the Earned Income Tax Credit been framed as a *welfare* program, it probably would not have been enacted in light of widespread political opposition to welfare.

Negotiating and Bargaining Even before an issue appears on the decision agenda, policy entrepreneurs need to accommodate different points of view. Even though policy



EP 8c

proposals are not fully developed until an issue has entered policy deliberations (see the bottom of the funnel in Figure 6.1), policy entrepreneurs often develop their tentative outlines even before this stage. They often try to create a *win-win* atmosphere that allows different people and factions to believe they will each have a piece of the action. President Barack Obama tried in 2009 to secure bipartisan support for national health insurance, particularly in the Senate where he knew that he needed to keep conservative Democrats and some moderate Republicans supportive of it. When that failed, he used the same strategy within the Democratic Party to gain all of its 60 Senate votes to prevent a filibuster by Republicans who had decided to vote in unison against the legislation. By contrast, if a *win-lose* atmosphere exists, public officials are more likely to have a combative mood that will increase partisan conflict that imperils the policy's enactment.²²

Negotiating and bargaining take place in agency and community settings as well. Assume, for example, that a planning commission in a city is deciding whether to approve the placement of a residential treatment center for substance abusers in a specific neighborhood. If the supporters of this center give residents a chance not only to discuss the proposal but also to offer suggestions about how the proposed center might be administered so that it does not cause crime or other neighborhood problems, opposition to it is likely to decrease—and the planning commission is more likely to approve it.



EP 5c

Assembling Early Sponsors and Supporters In legislative arenas, policy entrepreneurs actually enlist people to sponsor a legislative proposal by placing their names on it. The characteristics of these sponsors are important: If they are powerful politicians who also represent an array of perspectives, the chances of the legislation passing are much better than if the legislation is sponsored by only a narrow range of politicians who lack power.²³ Even in agency settings, policy entrepreneurs often enlist an array of persons during the agenda-building process by soliciting their advice and making them part of the planning process.

To return to our example of the residential treatment center, policy advocates would be well advised to invite persons in the neighborhood to come to meetings about it. They would hope to cultivate highly respected neighborhood leaders who might be instrumental in persuading residents to support it.

Routing Policy entrepreneurs must find a home base for their issue by routing it to decision makers who want to resolve it in ways that the entrepreneurs find acceptable. They have to decide in legislative settings which committee should get jurisdiction, preferably one whose chairperson and members favor their issue or solution. By discussing the routing with highly placed politicians and members of a special committee (called the Rules Committee in the U.S. House of Representatives), policy entrepreneurs can sometimes influence routing decisions.²⁴ Policy entrepreneurs influence routing decisions in agency settings as well; they may seek jurisdiction by a specific committee, the general staff, the agency's board, an ad hoc committee, or the executive director. Of course, some issues, such as fundamental changes in agency policies, have to be considered by agency boards.

Media Coverage Timely coverage of proposals is often critical in projecting them onto decision agendas in the case of legislation and community decisions. Policy entrepreneurs who are state or federal legislators often use the media to get stories about their activities printed or placed on television in their home districts.

The Competition for Policy Agendas—and Diversions from Them

Bruce Jansson, Ph.D.

Go to www.cengage.com to watch this video clip.

The scramble for scarce resources in the wake of Hurricane Katrina illustrates the challenge that policy advocates often encounter. All experts agreed that the hurricane's wrath was most concentrated in New Orleans, as well as in specific cities in southern Mississippi and Alabama such as Gulfport, Biloxi, and Mobile. Yet considerable Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) assistance was given to counties and cities that experienced only tropical storm-force winds of speeds less than 74 mph. Jackson, Mississippi, for example, received \$21 million, where only 50–60 homes were declared uninhabitable. Mississippi requested the Bush administration to broaden the initial disaster area to extend as far as 220 miles inland. The Red Cross followed FEMA's example and gave extensive aid to outlying and relatively undamaged areas, some of it to persons who fraudulently claimed damage when none or little existed. A large amount of resources directed toward New Orleans actually went to repairing military facilities—resources not taken from the already-large military budget.

Some policy advocates feared that large amounts of federal loans and grants would go to private commercial interests intent on rebuilding New Orleans as a tourist center—thus bleeding funds needed for affordable houses, schools, and other basic needs of vulnerable populations.

Policy advocates in New Orleans had to contend, then, with intense competition for space on policy agendas. Wanting to prioritize the needs of vulnerable populations whose housing had been destroyed, they found that other claimants for resources often succeeded in getting on policy agendas even when their needs were not as dire as those of vulnerable populations and even when their resources could have come from existing military and other budgets.

Policy advocates also had to contend with diversion of resources—by fraud and corruption—from resources supposedly dedicated to meeting the needs of vulnerable persons. Government investigators revealed in June 2006 that over \$1 billion of FEMA resources was fraudulently claimed by criminals. Still other resources were wasted because FEMA staff miscalculated the benefits that specific persons were due. All told, the overall estimate of \$2 billion in fraud and waste amounted to nearly 11 percent of the \$19 billion spent by FEMA on Hurricanes Katrina and Rita by June 2006. According to Senator Susan Collins (R–Maine), who chaired the U.S. Senate's Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, “The blatant fraud, the audacity of the schemes, the scale of the waste—it is simply breathtaking.”¹

The scramble for resources in New Orleans continued into the Obama Administration. Activists in New Orleans were aware that President Obama has many pressing domestic and international issues to address. They faced an uphill battle in pressuring Congress and the administration to focus resources on the Gulf Coast areas. Yet they had considerable success. Temporary trailers were replaced with affordable housing units. A vast rebuilding of infrastructure to protect New Orleans from future hurricanes proceeded ahead of schedule and was nearly complete by 2012. Tourists and conventions greatly increased, augmenting the city's economic growth. Large numbers of young people flocked to New Orleans to teach in local schools and to participate in various projects of AmeriCorps. New Orleans was a far smaller city than prior to Katrina, but it was on an economic and social upswing by late 2012.

Listen to Russell Henderson, MSW, LCSW, in the online video, as he discusses competition for policy agendas and waste in New Orleans.

¹Eric Lipton, “Breathtaking Waste and Fraud in Hurricane Aid,” *New York Times* (June 27, 2006): A1, A13.

Can Direct-Service Staff Help Build Agendas?



EP 6a

Our discussion suggests that policy advocates in agency and legislative settings can diagnose and soften the context, as well as search for a policy entrepreneur.

Is agenda building restricted to legislators and high-level agency staff, such as executive directors? To be sure, these persons are best situated to assume pivotal roles in building agendas, but direct-service staff can participate in agenda building in both agency and legislative settings. They can begin by working within their agencies and agency networks, by locating unaddressed or poorly addressed community needs. They can read professional literature and find evidence-based practices that could be—but are not—implemented in specific settings, drawing this to the attention of other staff members as well as executives. They can gain credibility by joining coalitions and advocacy groups that already exist in the community. They can engage legislative aides about specific unaddressed or poorly addressed issues that they have seen in their work. They can encourage their clients to call high-level officials within agencies and agency networks, and within legislatures or commissions at the local, state, and federal levels. They can help their clients draft letters to these officials.

To the extent that their agency is not involved in trying to shape policies that are relevant to its clientele or to the community, direct-service staff can ask whether voter registration projects can be organized by their agency or by other agencies in their area, or whether informational materials can be distributed by agencies about specific propositions or initiatives on the ballot. Agencies cannot endorse specific candidates, but they can endorse propositions or initiatives. Agency staff can search for policy entrepreneurs who can place a specific issue on their agency's or a legislature's agenda, or on the agenda of a city council, school board, commission, or county board of supervisors.

Persons do not have to—and should not—wait to become policy advocates until they have risen to executive positions in agencies. If it is ethically meritorious to be a policy advocate, as we discussed in Chapter Two, why not begin this trajectory while in a school or department of social work, and in the initial phases of one's career?

Policy Advocacy for Powerless Populations and Unpopular Issues



EP 3a

Thus far, our discussion about agenda building has emphasized how agenda processes work and how a pragmatic policy practitioner can use these processes to reach policy goals. When we discuss how agenda processes actually work, however, it is important to remember that they are often skewed against unpopular issues and powerless groups. For example, the Children's Defense Fund, established in 1973, sought for more than 15 years to convince Congress to place day care on its agenda, finally succeeding in 1989. Advocates of initiatives to end homelessness have made considerable success, but still have a long way to go as homeless populations in major cities—and even some suburban and rural areas—suggest. Those who want to change the American federal tax structure to truly reduce economic inequality have been relatively unsuccessful for decades, although they have succeeded in taking many persons with low income off federal tax rolls, even if they must continue to pay Social Security and Medicare taxes.

Groups that plug away for unpopular issues and populations may be laying the groundwork for subsequent policy changes. In the case of day care and the Children's Defense Fund, advocates' diligent and sustained lobbying, as well as their assistance to grassroots reform groups throughout the United States, doubtless educated many politicians about

the specific problems and needs of children. When pressure from feminist groups and corporations that hired large numbers of women finally placed day care on Congress's decision agenda in the 1980s, the Children's Defense Fund spearheaded a coalition to seek specific legislation. Had they not promoted the issue in the preceding two decades, however, they might not have been successful in the legislation they enacted in 1990. Had they not been active over an extended period, this legislation, which was hardly adequate in its funding and scope, might have been even more limited. This success has facilitated awareness of the issue of unfunded day care, leading Hillary Clinton to propose in 2016 that the federal government reimburse most of the child-care costs of low-income single mothers.

We have mostly discussed policy change through conventional channels, such as by working with public officials in legislative settings or with executives in agency settings. We should note, however, that some policy advocates conclude at specific points in time and in specific places that they cannot secure policy initiatives working solely through conventional channels. Abolitionists in the 1850s, suffragettes in the early part of last century, and civil rights advocates in the 1950s and 1960s used nonviolent protest strategies to force neglected issues onto public officials' agendas, as did a national movement of persons seeking reforms in immigration legislation in 2006. They persisted despite criticism that their tactics were unethical or unwarranted, or that they were counterproductive. Bernie Sanders has initiated a social movement to reduce inequality in the United States that he proposes to continue after 2016 with considerable support from millennial persons.

Policy advocates who use protests as a part of their strategy to secure policy changes should realize that they can sometimes harden the positions of some public officials against the reforms that they seek, and that protests can sometimes lead to a backlash by persons who oppose their policies. Yet some policy advocates believe they must use nonviolent protests and demonstrations because decision makers will not otherwise pay attention to them, and the general public will remain ignorant or opposed to their positions. The organizers of nationwide protests to secure more human immigration policies in the United States came to this conclusion in 2006, leading to a series of massive, nationwide demonstration of hundreds of thousands of persons. Feminists made the same decision in early 2017 when they organized huge demonstrations on the day after Donald Trump's inauguration. Consider public demonstrations, then, to be an arrow in policy advocates' quivers, but realize, too, that they are not a panacea and must, in any case, be supplemented with efforts to work through conventional channels to get specific proposals enacted.²⁵



EP 3a
EP 3b

Electoral Processes

Agenda setting often takes place within electoral politics as politicians, parties, and activists try to find issues that can be used to distinguish themselves from their opposition. They want issues that will appeal to their natural constituencies while also allowing them to appeal to swing voters. Sometimes they want issues (so-called wedge issues) that will divide the opposing party. If they do not find new issues and their opponents do, they lose a strategic advantage in upcoming elections.

The search for new issues is particularly intense after a party loses an election. Bolstered by support from the so-called Tea Party's emergence in 2009, Republicans won control of the House of Representatives and many governorships and local elections in 2010. Democrats, led by Barack Obama, had to decide what issues to prioritize to allow them to regain the House and retain the presidency and the U.S. Senate in 2012, while burdened with high unemployment. In this context, Obama decided by late 2011 to contrast his (and the Democrats') vision of society with Republicans' vision, that is, to pit his relatively liberal

philosophy with (in his view) the outdated conservative philosophy of the Tea Party and Republican leaders who had subscribed to it. He sought to link his vision with specific policies, such as increasing taxes on millionaires, funding job development programs, extending payroll tax cuts for working Americans, not deporting immigrant youth who had been brought to the United States by their parents, and cutting defense spending. In turn, Republican leaders favored policies and arguments to convince voters that Democratic policies had worsened the Great Recession that had begun in 2007. They argued that Obama's policies would slow economic growth—favoring, instead, to retain tax cuts for wealthy persons that President George W. Bush had initiated, cut social spending and repeal the Affordable Care Act of 2010. President Trump adopted these same proposals in 2017.

Local candidates also engage in agenda building as they seek issues that will generate support for themselves as compared to their opponents.

In this nonstop process of agenda setting, ideology assumes a key role partly because the two major parties have somewhat different bases of political support. A large segment of Republicans' constituencies derives from relatively affluent segments of the population, farmers, and southerners, as well as residents of so-called red states in the Midwest and Rocky Mountain area. In contrast, the more urban, northern, and working-class population, as well as the so-called blue coastal states, such as New York and California, provide a base of support for Democrats. Republicans' natural base of support is relatively more conservative than Democrats', so the two parties gravitate toward somewhat different ideologies and, therefore, positions on issues.

Developing Links with Advocacy Groups

Policy advocates who wish to build agendas in the broader community, but who do not know how to get started, should consider connecting with an established advocacy group (see Box 2.1). Effective advocacy groups try to shape public officials' agendas by pressuring them to consider solutions or problems, presenting research that underlines the importance of addressing specific social needs, and publicizing stories in the mass media that dramatize certain issues. Would-be advocates can join a local group or a local chapter of a national group, meet the director of the advocacy group, subscribe to its newsletters and other materials, volunteer to work on its outreach and education projects, help its staff conduct research, and help the group lobby public officials. Those who want to be involved can work with local and state chapters of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), whose leaders and lobbyists pressure legislators. Both advocacy groups and the NASW not only generate ideas for policy agendas, such as specific pieces of legislation, but also pressure politicians to move these ideas toward choice or decision agendas. They often try to convince the chairpersons of pivotal legislative committees, for example, to hold hearings and discuss proposals, rather than let them slip into oblivion.

Policy advocates can also campaign for politicians they believe will put certain issues on policy agendas. For example, the Political Action for Candidate Election, the political action arm of NASW that backs politicians who support issues favored by NASW, regularly canvasses NASW members to work for the candidates it supports.

Using Multiple Skills in Agenda Building

Policy advocates use the four skills discussed in Chapter Three when they try to influence policy agendas. They use *political skills* to analyze and engage in the political stream; *analytic skills* to develop and use data in the problem and solution streams; *interactional skills* to help problems and solutions reach policy deliberations in agency and legislative settings,



EP 6



EP 1a



EP 8a

persuade people to consider specific problems and solutions, participate in committees and task forces, and organize coalitions; and *value-clarifying skills* to decide whether to invest energy in promoting an issue in the first place and to decide how to frame it.

Using the Agenda Funnel to Predict What Social Issues President

Elect Donald Trump will Place High on his Policy Agenda in 2017 and What Social Issues Senator Chuck Schumer, the Democratic Senate Minority Leader, will Place High on his Policy Agenda in 2017.

It seemed in early 2017 that an impasse was likely between the two major political parties. President-Elect Donald Trump had defeated 17 Republicans in Republic primaries including party leaders such as Jeb Bush, the son of President H. W. Bush and the brother of President George Bush. He subjected these 17 Republicans to withering attacks that included derogatory nicknames for many of them like “Low Energy Jeb” and “Lying Ted Cruz.” In the campaign for the presidency as during the primary races, he positioned himself to the far right, pledging to terminate the ACA, build a wall across the border with Mexico, deport millions of undocumented persons, and make huge tax cuts for wealthy persons and the middle class. He called Hillary Clinton, his Democratic presidential opponent, “Crooked Hillary.” Hillary Clinton, in turn, put forward a liberal policy agenda that included large taxes on the top 10 percent of Americans, free tuition for those millennial students in public universities whose parents earned less than \$125,000, raising the minimum wage to \$13 per hour over five years, immigration reform with a path to citizenship, and providing free child care to single mothers. (She also listed scores of additional policies in *Stronger Together* co-authored with Senator Tim Kaine in 2016 and published by Simon Schuster.)

One scenario might be gridlock because Republicans, while having a large majority in the House of Representatives, lacked the 60 votes needed in the Senate to prevent a filibuster. Under this scenario, Democrats might resort to gridlock hoping to prevent passage of almost no measures by either party—the same strategy used by Republicans during most of President Obama’s tenure. The ill will created during the hard-fought and bitter presidential race suggested gridlock might be possible.

Other scenarios also seemed possible. Some problems and solutions in the agenda funnel as depicted in Figure 6.1 suggested that some of them might lead to agreements between the two parties. The following developments existed in the problem stream.

- A huge majority of Americans believed government is dysfunctional as witnessed by years of gridlock, so many of them in both parties *wanted* some positive accomplishments by the Senate, House, and president.
- Addressing poverty and other social problems in inner cities disproportionately inhabited by persons of color.
- Addressing poverty and other social problems in rural areas, areas inhabited by coal miners, and distressed cities like Flint, Michigan, that had lost jobs as manufacturing companies had left them.
- Donald Trump in late 2016 appeared to moderate many of his positions. He spoke about retaining parts of the ACA and not building a wall on the Mexican border once. Commentators wondered if he was moving from the confrontational style of his campaign to a presidential one. If so, they speculated he might be willing to work with Democrats.

Many solutions existed in the solution stream depicted in Figure 6.1. These included:

- Raising the federal minimum wage from its level in 2016 of \$7.25
- Revising trade treaties with Japan and Mexico to decrease the exodus of American corporations to other nations as advocated both by Trump and Clinton

- Improving economic and social conditions in inner-city areas
- Many Americans wanted improvements in the nation's infrastructure of water systems, roads, bridges, public transportation, and airports as advocated both by Trump and Clinton

Yet other developments in the political stream in Figure 6.1 made positive programs on these problems and solutions uncertain. These included:

- Queasiness among many Democrats with engaging in compromises with President Trump, partly as "pay-back" for Republicans' gridlocking government when Obama was president and partly to avoid some Democrats from moving to the Republicans' side
- Queasiness among many Republicans with making compromises with Democrats for fear they might receive partial credit for their legislative successes
- Queasiness by members of both parties about huge deficits likely to be incurred by President Trump if he couples a massive infrastructure program and a military build-up with massive tax cuts

So make some predictions with these and other developments that you wish to enter into your best guess about future events. If you read this policy advocacy challenge as Trump enters the second or third year of his presidency, list items in the proposal and solution streams as well as ones in the political stream to help you predict future developments. Or take a specific policy you favor, such as reducing inequality or immigration reform, and make an educated judgment as to whether it will be addressed by the Congress and the president. How might social workers try to influence the course of events?

If you agreed with Senator Bernie Sanders that the nation needed to move toward greater equality, ask at any point in the Trump presidency: (1) To what extent have resources of the bottom 90 percent, bottom 50 percent, and bottom 20 percent been *increased*? (2) To what extent have resources of the top 10 percent, top 5 percent, and top 1 percent been *decreased*? (3) To what extent has overall inequality been *reduced* or *increased* as a result of enacted policies?

