## CHAPTER 6

# The Policy Primeval Soup

*I took [the draft bill] into the Senator—I was an eager young fellow at the time—and we engaged in pleasantries. After about twenty minutes, he indicated that I should leave. I said to him, "But Senator, don't you want to ask me any questions about this, discuss the policy implications or anything?" "No," he said, "I'll just introduce it tomorrow." "But Senator," I said, "aren't you even going to read the bill?" "No," he said, "I'll just introduce it tomorrow." Then he said, "Let me tell you something. We'll introduce this tomorrow, but it will take twenty to twenty-five years for it to be brought into being. If it takes that long, there's not much point in my looking at the bill now, is there?"*

—a respondent who had worked with collaborators for more than a year on a landmark bill

Picture a community of specialists: researchers, congressional staffers, people in planning and evaluation offices and in budget offices, academics, interest group analysts. Ideas float around in such communities. Specialists have their conceptions, their vague notions of future directions, and their more specific proposals. 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. The process often does take years, as the quotation above illustrates, and may be endless.

Generating alternatives and proposals in this community resembles a process of biological natural selection.[1] Much as molecules floated around in what biologists call the "primeval soup" before life came into being, so ideas

[1]Robert Axelrod's work is a brilliant combination of biological natural selection and social science mathematical models. See his "The Emergence of Cooperation Among Egoists," *American Political Science Review* 75 (June 1981): 306–318; his *The Evolution of Cooperation* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); and his article coauthored with William Hamilton, "The Evolution of Cooperation," *Science* 211 (27 March 1981): 1390–1396. For another application of evolution in social sciences, see Richard Nelson and Sidney Winter, *An Evolutionary Theory of Economic Change* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Howard University Press, 1982).



float around in these communities.[2] Many ideas are possible, much as many molecules would be possible. Ideas become prominent and then fade. There is a long process of "softening up": ideas are floated, bills introduced, speeches made; proposals are drafted, then amended in response to reaction and floated again. Ideas confront one another (much as molecules bumped into one another) and combine with one another in various ways. The "soup" changes not only through the appearance of wholly new elements, but even more by the recombination of previously existing elements. While many ideas float around in this policy primeval soup, the ones that last, as in a natural selection system, meet some criteria. Some ideas survive and prosper; some proposals are taken more seriously than others.

This chapter describes the policy primeval soup and the selection process. We begin by describing the policy communities; then we consider how ideas float around, and how the community of specialists and the public is "softened up." We present various criteria for survival of an idea, analyzing how some ideas become more prominent than others. Finally, the presence of an available alternative is portrayed as another important factor that makes it likely a subject will achieve lasting high agenda status.

## POLICY COMMUNITIES

Policy communities are composed of specialists in a given policy area—health, housing, environmental protection, criminal justice, to name a few. In any one of these policy areas, specialists are scattered both through and outside of government. Some of them are on committee staffs in Congress, or in such congressional staff agencies as the Congressional Budget Office or the Office of Technology Assessment. Others work downtown, in places like planning and evaluation offices and budget offices. Still others are academics, consultants, or analysts for interest groups. But they have in common their concern with one area of policy problems.

They also have in common their interactions with each other. People in the health community know each other's ideas, proposals, and research, and often know each other very well personally. As an unobtrusive indicator of these interactions, I asked respondents to name others to whom I should speak. The same names would rather quickly surface as I went from one person to the next, suggesting that the circle of specialists was fairly small and fairly intimate. More than once, an interview was interrupted by a telephone call from someone who was also on my list of respondents.

This community of specialists hums along on its own, independent of such political events as changes of administration and pressure from legislators' constituencies. These specialists are affected by and react to the political

[2]For an excellent discussion of evolution and its various implications, see Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976). His description of the primeval soup is on p. 16. The word "primordial" could also be used, but I have chosen to follow Dawkin's usage. Another discussion is in L. E. Orgel, *The Origins of Life* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1973).

events, to be sure. But the forces that drive the political stream and the forces that drive the policy stream are quite different: each has a life of its own, independent of the other. As one astute journalist observed: "There are a lot of technicians in medical policy, and that world follows a separate track from the political. Welfare reform is an example of that. The formulation of the Nixon administration proposals came out of that community of welfare professionals, and it has lived on in that community as well."

## *Fragmentation*

From one policy area to another, the relevant communities of specialists vary tremendously in the degree of fragmentation. Some communities are extremely closed and tightly knit. Others are more diverse and fragmented. Health and transportation provide an instructive contrast because health is far less fragmented. The health community does have diverse elements, including biomedical researchers, manpower specialists, health insurance advocates, and budget makers. But most health specialists deal with problems related to making people healthy and paying for their medical care, and there is a fair amount of interaction among the admittedly diverse elements. One health analyst perhaps overstated the point by saying, "Everybody knows everybody. This system is very inbred." During my years of interviewing, the interaction was even formalized in a tradition called the Health Staff Seminar, funded primarily from foundation grants, which brought together health specialists working in government from all over town to hear presentations, think about common problems, and meet one another in a quasi-social context. In the process, they exchanged information, developed more common ways of looking at problems, and cultivated their informal contacts in the health network.

The transportation community is much more fragmented, partly because it is divided into the different modes. I would ask a congressional committee staffer, for instance, about the major problems in transportation, and he would reply, "We're railroads here." Or it might be urban mass transit, or highways, or aviation. It was not unknown for health respondents to say at the beginning that they were only going to deal with biomedical, or manpower, or Medicare, but such a disclaimer was far more common in transportation. The technologies involved in the modes are different from one another, the industries and interest groups tend not to cut across modes, and the jurisdictions of both the administrative agencies and the congressional committees are defined by mode. Thus there are communities of specialists in rail, highways, aviation, urban transit, and waterways, but very few people are concerned with issues that involve two or more of these modes.

Nor is modal fragmentation in the transportation community the only kind. There is also a division between those involved in regulation and those involved in federal grants programs. Both the Interstate Commerce Commission and the Federal Highway Administration deal with truckers, for instance, but the regulatory and grants worlds are completely different. Then there is the freight world versus the passenger world. There may be other dimensions of fragmentation as well.



A few structures in transportation bridge these various sources of fragmentation. The Department of Transportation does act as an umbrella under which various modes must gather. For the most part, the Department is only a collection of the separate fiefdoms, but some degree of cross-modal planning and competition does take place that would not occur in the absence of the Department. The Office of the Secretary examines the work of the various modal administrations, coordinates approaches to the White House and the Hill, and introduces some modicum of communication across the modes. As one observer put it, "You couldn't have them together in the same department for too long before it became obvious that these things related to each other. You could see right away that highways were related to mass transit, for instance." Such a bridging departmental structure might encourage at least some people to think of such proposals as intermodal passenger terminals that would accommodate train, bus, and commuter traffic; multimodal freight transportation through containerization; or even multimodal trust fund arrangements in which user charges from various modes would be brought together into a single fund with allocations considered tradeoffs among the modes. There are limits to the efficacy of such a structure knitting together an inherently fragmented system, but at least some integration has taken place.

## *Consequences of Fragmentation*

The first consequence of system fragmentation is policy fragmentation. The left hand knows not what the right hand is doing, with the result that the left hand sometimes does something that profoundly affects the right hand, without anyone ever seeing the implications. Transportation respondents often cited the beginning of the interstate highway program as their case in point. Basically, the debates at the beginning swirled around highway issues themselves—how the financing would be arranged, trust fund versus general revenues, the extent of the system, and the location of the highways. Yet the construction of the system, in addition to reaping all of the benefits of convenient long-haul passenger and freight transportation, also created tremendous problems for the railroads and for urban areas. The railroads found themselves extremely hard pressed by long-haul trucking competition, which was one major factor (among several) leading to the deterioration of railroad service. Urban areas experienced considerable dislocation as multilane highways were built: new land-use patterns, the spread of both residences and industry from the central city, and the leveling of whole neighborhoods to make room for highways. One might find after diligent searching that somebody, somewhere had anticipated these consequences. But according to several respondents, such consequences received only scant attention at the time, due quite directly to the fragmentation of the transportation policy community.

Second, a more closely knit community generates common outlooks, orientations, and ways of thinking. These common features, a result of the relatively tight integration of the community, in turn strengthen that integration. As people have a common language, they can better communicate with one another. A fascinating example occurred in my health interviews. As I asked people in

health what the major problems were, respondent after respondent referred to what one of them called "the big three": cost, access, and quality. They often started with the cost of medical care to consumers, insurers, and government. But they would also discuss gaps in access to medical care, and the quality of care that people receive. Over and over, health respondents discussed these concepts in general terms, and used exactly the same three labels to refer to them. It could be that this magic triumvirate was first mentioned in some by-now-ancient commission report, or that it has come to be a common paradigm in public health instruction around the country. But even for people not socialized in these circles, the triumvirate had entered *lingua franca* in the trade.

Nothing like this common paradigm emerged in transportation. There could in principle be such a paradigm, as respondents might classify the world into passenger versus freight, regulation versus finance, interstate versus commuter, or air versus surface. Indeed, each of these classification schemes would be entirely recognizable among transportation specialists, entirely commonsensical, and implicitly used every day. But the striking feature in the interviews was that health respondents spontaneously produced an explicitly common paradigm, using exactly the same terminology, whereas transportation respondents did not. Such a paradigm not only indicates an integrated community, but it also enhances the integration.

Finally, fragmentation begets instability. There have been previous hints of greater stability in health than in transportation: Crisis events were far more important in transportation; similarly, fewer health than transportation variables exhibited change over the four years (Table 4-3). Let us now observe directly the agenda stability in the two domains.

Table 6-1 shows the intercorrelations among groupings of variables across the four years in health and in transportation. Substantively, a high correlation between two years means there was a high degree of stability within the groupings. The cost of health care, for instance, was prominently discussed each year, so that the values for cost remained high across the four years. On the other hand, mental health was mentioned quite infrequently in each of the four years. But with both cost and mental health, there was a high stability—cost remained prominent in the interviews, mental health remained low—and the values did not fluctuate much from one year to another. For the regulation grouping in transportation, by contrast, the highest-valued variable jumped abruptly between 1978 and 1979. If there were many such changes, the correlations from one year to the next would drop, indicating less stability.

Note in Table 6-1 that the correlations for health are noticeably higher than for transportation. The highest transportation figure is lower than the lowest health figure, and the mean correlation is much higher for health than for transportation. This indicates that the agenda changed from one year to another a good bit more within transportation than within health. Between 1978 and 1979 in transportation, for instance, the correlation is quite low indeed, due to the rapid take-off of the deregulation and energy-related variables and the sharp decline in others (including highways and waterways).

I believe that agenda stability is due to what we might call "structural anchors to the agenda." Transportation, with its greater fragmentation, fewer



**Table 6-1**
*Correlations Among High-Valued Variables Across Year**

| | Health (N = 17) | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 1976 | 1977 | 1978 |
| 1977 | .81 | | |
| 1978 | .83 | .93 | |
| 1979 | .83 | .83 | .86 |
| | Mean correlation for health = .85 | | |
| | Transportation (N = 20) | | |
| | 1976 | 1977 | 1978 |
| 1977 | .79 | | |
| 1978 | .66 | .72 | |
| 1979 | .60 | .59 | .39 |
| | Mean correlation for transportation = .63 | | |

*I first defined a "grouping" of variables. All of the variables related to the cost of medical care, for instance, would constitute a cost grouping within the health domain. I then noted the variable within the grouping that had the highest value (the highest percentage coded "very" or "somewhat" important) for each year. In the health cost grouping, for instance, the highest-valued variable in 1976 was 83 percent, in 1977, 81 percent, in 1978, 82 percent, and in 1979, 71 percent. Thus there was not a great deal of change within the health cost grouping over the four years, with cost always being very prominent. But for the "transportation regulation" grouping, the comparable values were 43, 44, 45, and 83, indicating an abrupt change upward in 1979. There were 17 such groupings for health, and 20 for transportation.

I then made up a data matrix in which the four variables were the four years (1976–1979), and the cases within each variable were the groupings. Thus the values for the cost grouping within the health domain would be 83, 81, 82, 71 (the percentage values for that grouping ranged across the four years or four variables). I entered analogous values for each of the 17 health and each of the 20 transportation groupings. I could then correlate the values among the years. A high correlation would show that there was high stability from one year to another, whereas a low correlation would show that the values flopped around a good bit from one year to another.

agreed-upon paradigms, and greater susceptibility to crisis, is simply less completely structured. That relative lack of structure leaves the agenda free to shift from one time to another in a more volatile fashion. In the more tightly knit health community, with its greater sharing of paradigm, there is less chance for the health agenda to shift abruptly. The fragmentation of a policy system affects the stability of the agenda within that system.

## COMMUNITIES AND THE SOUP

Within the policy communities we have just described, many, many ideas are considered at some stage and in some way. Many people have proposals they would like to see considered seriously, alternatives they would like to see be-

come part of the set from which choices are eventually made. They try out their ideas on others in the policy community. Some proposals are rather rapidly discarded as being somehow kooky; others are taken more seriously and survive, perhaps in some altered form. But in the policy primeval soup, quite a wide range of ideas is possible and is considered to some extent. The range at this stage is considerably more inclusive than the set of alternatives that is actually weighed during a shorter period of final decision making. Many, many things are possible here.

To deal with the deteriorating condition of the railroads, for instance, many ideas and proposals have floated among those who make policy or are close to policy makers in the rail area. Over the past decade or two, these ideas have included complete nationalization, nationalization of the roadbed only, regional nationalization, subsidies for equipment or operating expenses, loan guarantees, greater freedom from regulation to allow railroads to abandon unprofitable operations and gain greater pricing flexibility, merger reform, government-operated passenger service, a free marketplace that lets economically sick railroads go under, and even a proposed pneumatic tube to suck passengers in capsules from Washington to New York. To deal with rising medical care costs, health specialists have contemplated comprehensive national health insurance, catastrophic insurance, various regulatory programs, reimbursement reform, direct government delivery of medical care services, various ways of introducing competition into the system, and essentially doing nothing.

The range of possibilities is really quite impressive. Interviews were filled with comments like: "There are lots of things that people are studying." "There are lots of good ideas around." "I honestly don't think there was any option that was not surfaced somewhere along the line." "These things float around all the time." One of my more sharp-tongued respondents dryly observed, when asked if nationalization of railroads was being considered, "Yes, sure, it's being considered. There's hardly a bad idea that isn't being considered. If you think of a bad idea that isn't being considered, call me up collect. I'd like to hear about it."

## *Incentives and Policy Entrepreneurs*

We have spoken of advocates for proposals or for the prominence of an idea. Let us label these advocates policy entrepreneurs.[3] These entrepreneurs are not necessarily found in any one location in the policy community. They could be in or out of government, in elected or appointed positions, in interest groups or research organizations. But their defining characteristic, much as in the case of a business entrepreneur, is their willingness to invest their resources—time, energy, reputation, and sometimes money—in the hope of a future return. That return might come to them in the form of policies of which they approve, satisfaction from participation, or even personal aggrandizement in the form of job security or career promotion.

[3]For a few previous uses, among many, of the concept of policy entrepreneur, see Jack L. Walker, "Performance Gaps, Policy Research, and Political Entrepreneurs," *Policy Studies Journal* 3 (Autumn 1974): 112–116; Walker, "The Diffusion of Knowledge, Policy Communities and Agenda Setting," in John E. Tropman, Milan J. Dluhy, and Robert M. Lind, eds., *New Strategic Perspectives on Social Policy* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1981), pp. 75–96; and Robert H. Salisbury, "An Exchange Theory of Interest Groups," *Midwest Journal of Political Science* 13 (February 1969): 1–32.



Why do they advocate? Or more broadly, what incentives prompt advocacy? What purposes might a given proposal serve? One fairly straightforward possibility is that people sense there is a problem, and they advocate solutions to solve the problem. Some portion of the time, such problem solving does take place. But people in and around government sometimes do not solve problems. Instead, they become advocates for solutions and look for current problems to which to attach their pet solution. What makes the solution a "pet"?

One incentive that prompts advocacy is the promotion of personal interests. This might mean the protection of bureaucratic turf—keeping one's job, expanding one's agency, promoting one's personal career. The legendary battles between the Federal Highway Administration and the Urban Mass Transit Administration within the Department of Transportation are in part battles for bureaucratic turf: protecting and expanding their budgets, employees, and programs. In the case of a lobbyist, advocacy of a proposal might be prompted by the group's interest. The American Medical Association advocated a version of national health insurance in the mid 1970s, for instance, not because they were particularly enthusiastic but because they felt they should be a part of the discussions in order to protect the interests of their members. In the case of a politician, advocacy has electoral benefits. Members of Congress become active in order to claim credit for some accomplishment or to gain publicity. Presidential candidates need policy proposals to make their campaigns credible. These considerations are akin to what James Q. Wilson calls "material" incentives—direct, personal, concrete gain is at stake.[4]

Second, people sometimes advocate proposals because they want to promote their values, or affect the shape of public policy. Advocates of comprehensive national health insurance, for instance, generally have a rather well-articulated vision of a complete package of social insurance programs. Their ideology about the proper role of government in social insurance prompts them to advocate national health insurance as a part of that package. The activists who comprised the first Reagan administration had a vision of smaller government, balanced budgets, and lower taxes. Their ideology prompted them to advocate the curtailment of domestic spending that became a major hallmark of Reagan's first year in office. Advocacy sometimes serves Wilson's "purposive" incentives.

Finally, some of these entrepreneurs are what we might call policy groupies. Much like people who participate and join for "solidary" incentives, some entrepreneurs simply like the game. They enjoy advocacy, they enjoy being at or near the seat of power, they enjoy being part of the action. They make calls,

[4]James Q. Wilson, *Political Organizations* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), Chapter 3. See also Peter B. Clark and James Q. Wilson, "Incentive Systems: A Theory of Organization," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 6 (September 1961): 219–266. My discussion of incentives is quite similar to their material-purposive-solidary typology.

have lunch, write memos, and draft proposals, probably for the other reasons we have discussed as well, but in combination with the simple pleasure they take in participating.

## *Origins, Mutations, and Recombinations*

We have just discussed the variety of incentives that lead entrepreneurs to advocate their favorite proposals. Much as we argued in Chapter 4, however, a concentration on origins tells only a small fraction of the story. In fact, many, many proposals are possible—a theoretical infinity of them. This policy primeval soup does not closely resemble a rational decision-making system with a few well-defined alternatives among which decision makers choose. Instead, for the reasons just discussed, a very large number of proposals are considered somewhere along the line. The process is evolutionary, a selection process in which some of these ideas survive and flourish. With this reasoning, the origins become less important than the processes of mutation and recombination that occur as ideas continuously confront one another and are refined until they are ready to enter a serious decision stage. Thus the order ideas are tried out sometimes approaches randomness, but the key to understanding the process is knowing the conditions under which ideas survive.

Many theorists of evolution have come to distinguish between mutation and recombination.[5] According to some current thinking, evolution proceeds not so much by mutation, or the sudden appearance of a wholly new structure, as by recombination, or the new packaging of already familiar elements. Similarly, creative activity usually involves recombination of old elements more than fresh invention of new ones.[6] New musical or artistic forms are found, on analysis, to be new combinations of familiar forms. Likewise, breakthrough scientific discoveries usually build on a lot of previous research.

So it is with the evolution of public policy ideas. Wholly new ideas do not suddenly appear. Instead, people recombine familiar elements into a new structure or a new proposal. This is why it is possible to note, "There is no new thing under the sun," at the very same time change and innovation are being observed. Change turns out to be recombination more than mutation. One of my respondents captured this change process in a particularly apt analogy, arguing that the elements that go into a policy change can be understood better than how they came into contact and were combined with one another:

> It's like the right combination of gases at the creation. You don't know exactly how the creation took place, except that the right combination of elements was present. The gases sort of swirled around until the right ones came into contact and created the right molecular structure.

[5]This distinction goes by different names with different authors. Some describe a process of crossing-over, for instance, not recombination, to label an exchange of previously existing genetic material. Inversion is another form of genetic change, in which previously existing chains of cells are turned end-to-end. But the general distinction between mutation and recombination is maintained in some form. For a general discussion, see John Maynard Smith, *The Theory of Evolution*, 3rd ed. (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1975), Chapters 3–5. See also Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, op. cit., Chapter 3, especially pp. 32–33. For a more technical treatment, see John H. Holland, *Adaptation in Natural and Artificial Systems* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975), Chapter 6, especially p. 110.

[6]For example, Koestler argues that an act of creation involves "bisociation," or the combination of diverse but familiar elements in unexpected ways. See Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (London: Hutchinson, Danube Edition, 1969), especially Chapters 1 and 23.



## *Ideas, Not Pressure*

Political scientists are accustomed to such concepts as power, influence, pressure, and strategy. If we try to understand public policy solely in terms of these concepts, however, we miss a great deal. The content of the ideas themselves, far from being mere smokescreens or rationalizations, are integral parts of decision making in and around government.[7] As officials and those close to them encounter ideas and proposals, they evaluate them, argue with one another, marshal evidence and argument in support or opposition, persuade one another, solve intellectual puzzles, and become entrapped in intellectual dilemmas. This mode of working through problems and proposals, in contrast to working through them by lobbying muscle or mobilization of numbers of people, is particularly true of the policy community we are discussing in this chapter. As John Maynard Keynes said, "The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed, the world is ruled by little else. . . . I am sure that the power of vested interests is vastly exaggerated compared with the gradual encroachment of ideas."[8]

Governmental officials often judge the merits of a case as well as its political costs and benefits. By most informed accounts, for example, the arguments of academic economists in favor of airline deregulation really did play a major role in its passage. One of my respondents, in fact, took me through the arguments marshaled by the airlines against deregulation, and showed me how their arguments were "simply destroyed" during the course of the hearings. Another portrayed the originally skeptical senators as being persuaded by the arguments and evidence, rather than by some lobbying campaign or the anticipation of electoral consequences. Then the arguments were carried over into the trucking and rail cases, once airline deregulation had passed. When I asked one respondent why there was movement in the trucking case, despite the formidable opposition of the regulated truckers and Teamsters, he replied, "Well, I hate to say it, but by God, every once in a while in this town, somebody stands up and says something because it's right. You have to allow for the possibility that something is being talked about because it's the right thing to do." Its "right-

[7]For a discussion of the difference between politics as learning and as power or influence, see Hugh Heclo, *Modern Social Politics in Britain and Sweden* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), pp. 304–322.

[8]John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1936), p. 383.

ness" was in dispute, but his point is well taken: People often advocate proposals or become persuaded "on the merits."[9]

Policy making is often a process of creating intellectual puzzles, getting into intellectual binds, and then extracting people from these dilemmas. Items might be held off of a public policy agenda for a considerable amount of time while such puzzles are being solved. The key break in the logjam over an interstate highway system, for instance, was an idea—the notion of earmarking funds. Everyone wanted to do something about traffic congestion and clogged highways, but nobody wanted to pay the bill. When the Clay Committee appointed by President Dwight Eisenhower advocated an earmarked trust fund so that the interstate system could be financed from user charges (a fuel tax), the dilemma disappeared and the idea very quickly found its way into enactment.

Preoccupation with rising costs creates a similar bind for health policy makers. As they have wrestled with cost control, they have developed theories to explain the persistence of the problem. These theories concentrate on the fact that because insurance pays, neither providers nor patients have much incentive to reduce costs. The widespread acceptance of this theory has then implied that some solutions gain acceptance more easily than others. Various regulatory programs, and allowing greater marketplace competition to act as a regulator, for instance, seem to show some promise for extracting health policy from its basic dilemma. By contrast, more insurance, while seriously considered during the Carter years, was not enacted in the end. Indeed, some observers argued that the administration's insistence on hospital cost containment as a precurser to national health insurance locked the administration into a logical bind: If cost containment proposals were not adopted, as happened eventually, the administration could not very well advocate national health insurance after arguing that cost containment was a necessary first step.

Even if argumentation is nothing more than rationalization, it is still important. Some events may be governed by lobbying influence or by judgments about clout at the polls, but governmental officials still try to reason their way through problems. Lobbyists marshal their arguments as well as their numbers. The regulated truckers and Teamsters, for instance, known in popular lore for their pressure tactics, employ many experts and analysts who worry constantly about refuting the calculations and arguments of their opponents concerning the likely effects of deregulation. Representatives of barge owners feel their cause really is seriously damaged by arguments about environmental effects of rivers and harbors projects, so they go to considerable lengths to show that water navigation is environmentally sound. One bureaucrat stated the point nicely after referring to a refurbished lobby for intercity buses as a "very dynamic organization." I asked how he judges the dynamism—whether by volumes of letters, or what:

[9]For an excellent discussion of the translation of academic economists' arguments into deregulation proposals, see Martha Derthick and Paul J. Quirk, *The Politics of Deregulation* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1985), Chapter 2.



> No, there are not a lot of letters. It's mostly in the sophistication of their talk when they come in to see you. They talk about the number of people that buses carry, the kinds of financial problems they face. They really make a good case.

Superior argumentation does not always carry the day, to be sure. But in our preoccupation with power and influence, political scientists sometimes neglect the importance of content. Both the substance of the ideas and political pressure are often important in moving some subjects into prominence and in keeping other subjects low on governmental agendas.

Finally, sometimes ideas fail to surface in a policy community, not because people are opposed to them, not because the ideas are incompatible with prevailing ideological currents, but because people simply find the subjects intellectually boring. Among my health respondents, for instance, the subject of fraud and abuse did not receive much attention. Over the four years of my interviewing, the highest proportion that discussed any facet of fraud and abuse as a prominent agenda item was 11 percent. This occurred despite the fact that it received a great deal of press play during the same period, and despite the fact that legislation was passed on the subject. A major reason for this lack of interest, it seemed to me, was that policy makers just found the subject boring: messy, unlikely to produce much cost savings, and, most important, not really tied to their intellectual preoccupations with things like market structures, third-party payment, and the contributions of high technology to burgeoning medical care costs. These policy communities are a bit like academic disciplines, each with their own theories, ideas, preoccupations, and fads.

The tendency to concentrate on interesting subjects and avoid boring ones has important implications. First, one who advocates a position tends to oversell it. If a specialist qualifies his or her analysis appropriately, others will lose interest. As one observer put it:

> If you try to sell an idea by saying, "Well, this might work but on the other hand, there are problems with it, but the data show this, but there are problems with the data, so we have to qualify it, but nevertheless I think we should perhaps try this out," you won't get anywhere. You have to go in there and say, "This is the greatest thing to come along in years."

Second, to the extent that policy communities are swept by intellectual fads, attention to subjects will naturally decay as well as advance. Part of the atrophy is due simply to the fact that the subject becomes commonplace, routine, and boring. Attention then turns to subjects that are more interesting. The problem may not be solved, concern with it might still be just as important, approaches to the problem might still be as valid as they ever were, but the idea just isn't novel any longer.

## *Softening Up*

To some degree, ideas float freely through the policy primeval soup. But their advocates do not allow the process to be completely free-floating. In addition to starting discussions of their proposals, they push their ideas in many different

forums. These entrepreneurs attempt to "soften up" both policy communities, which tend to be inertia-bound and resistant to major changes, and larger publics, getting them used to new ideas and building acceptance for their proposals. Then when a short-run opportunity to push their proposals comes, the way has been paved, the important people softened up. Without this preliminary work, a proposal sprung even at a propitious time is likely to fall on deaf ears.

The respondent quoted at the beginning of this chapter expressed the point well when he described the years and years of discussion that it would take to obtain serious consideration of his landmark proposal. But this respondent was not alone in my interviews by any means. Consider the following expressions of the same idea:

> It takes a long time to educate people. And then once you get them educated, you have to build up some power to do something. Educating people is very time consuming and energy consuming.
>
> What you have in these things is a group of dedicated advocates who work long hours and expend a lot of energy to get an idea talked about.
>
> A proposal like airline deregulation has to go through a gestation period. It takes a number of years.
>
> All the talk over the last several years in congressional hearings and elsewhere has been a deliberate attempt to create a climate that will allow you to introduce change.

There are many common language expressions of the same idea, phrases like "greasing the skids" and "getting your ducks in a row."

Case histories underline the same point. The passage of Medicare, for example, was the culmination of years of agitation—publicizing the health and financial problems of the aged, introducing draft bills, making speeches, and holding hearings. Discussion of some version of public passenger rail service started back in the 1950s; enactment did not come until 1970. Receptivity for Health Maintenance Organization legislation was built throughout the 1960s by a drumfire of prominent talk about a health care crisis that was then channeled into the HMO debate. Deregulation proposals in transportation were enacted only after years of academic economists "educating" various policy makers and activists about the issue, followed by years of presidential initiatives that "failed" but paved the way for eventual success.

Who are policy entrepreneurs trying to soften up? Some of the time, they speak of educating the general public. Presidential speeches, for instance, are used to "bring the public along," in the words of one bureaucrat. Repeated attention to medical care costs serves to heighten general public sensitivity to the problem. A second target is a more specialized public, peculiar to a particular issue. As with the general public, the purpose of the softening up is to insure that the relevant public is ready for a certain type of proposal when its time does come. Railroad groups try to educate shippers, to make them sensitive to the ways that public policy decisions affect their interests. National health insurance advocates try to create an aura of inevitability so that physicians will



become accustomed to the idea of insurance even if they don't like it. The final target is the policy community itself. Even specialists might not be sensitive to a problem or aware of a given proposal, so entrepreneurs try to educate their fellow specialists. One health policy activist, noting that even specialists were not working on long-term care, said, "It's a difficult thing to get people to concentrate on, and we haven't got them to concentrate on it very much yet. But we'll still work on it. We'll plug away at it. It has to come as an issue."

Entrepreneurs use many different means of educating, often several of them at once. On the Hill, introducing a bill can "get people to talking," and "get people to face the issue," in the words of a lobbyist and a congressional staffer. Holding congressional hearings can also dramatize a problem or a proposal. Senator Kennedy's repeated hearings on drug problems, for instance, while not necessarily aimed at a given legislative outcome each time they were held, paved the way for eventual serious consideration of food and drug regulatory reform. Or as a congressional committee aide told me about medical fraud and abuse legislation, "Members sat through those hearings that showed really fantastic things—people ripping off the public with the greatest of ease, intermediaries who were either inept or co-opted. It was a real education for them. Then when it came around to fraud and abuse legislation, they were not going to poo-poo the problem as something that wasn't there."

Bureaucrats have their channels as well. Prominent appointees and civil servants make many speeches around the country. As one told me, "All of us have a lot of speaking engagements around the country—the administrator, the deputy, me, and others here. If we're promoting something, we make sure it shows up in all the speeches we make." Bureaucrats and analysts constantly issue studies, reports, and other papers, some mandated by statute and some done on their own; these can play a part in preparing the policy community for some future direction, even though no immediate result is evident. Reports of presidential commissions, White House conferences, and advisory panels to presidents and secretaries can serve the same purpose. Some of the softening up is quite specialized, but some of it is aimed at rather general audiences and carried through the mass media. As one high-level bureaucrat summarized the effort, "You have to create the right climate to get people to focus on the issue and face the issue. The lead time for that sort of thing is two to six years."

Softening up sometimes consists of floating trial balloons. A bureaucrat tries out an idea by slipping a paragraph into a secretary's speech to see what the reaction is. Or a senator introduces a bill, not because it will pass that year but because he tests the water and gauges the state of receptivity to an idea. Many of these trial balloons don't survive the scrutiny. As a journalist put it, "You let an idea float up, and see how it goes. If it's shot down, it's shot down." Thus Senator Edward Kennedy's idea of a doctor draft and Congressman James Howard's idea of financing mass transit through a corporate income tax never got very far. But advocacy may have been worth the effort anyway; attention was focused on specialty maldistribution and transit financing, and on themselves. Some trial balloons are taken more seriously; people notice the idea, debate it, or at least file it away in their minds for future reference. One of my re-

spondents summarized the process beautifully: "There's an idea floated, and it gets thrown in the wastebasket. Then it comes back. Somebody fishes it out of the wastebasket and floats it again."

Some of the bill introduction and speech making without immediate results have the purpose of keeping an issue alive in lean times.[10] Long-time advocates of national health insurance, for example, characterize the parade of bills, proposals, and analyses of the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s in those terms—"in there just for the purpose of keeping something alive," as one put it. My analysis of subjects of congressional hearings revealed many, many topics that were not prominent in the interviews, indicating that somebody, somewhere was keeping issues alive and floating their ideas, even though they were not at the moment very hot items. As one committee staffer said of an admittedly losing effort, "We'll probably report it out of the committee, and they'll tear us apart on the floor. But that's to be expected." The issue gets attention anyway, the point is made, and the proposal is aired once more in the hope that it will eventually pass. Another respondent said, "It isn't futile to try and to lose because at least it brings attention to a problem."

Softening up seems to be necessary before a proposal is taken seriously. Many good proposals have fallen on deaf ears because they arrived before the general public, the specialized publics, or the policy communities were ready to listen. Eventually, such a proposal might be resurrected, but only after a period of paving the way. One political appointee stated the importance of this preparation extremely well:

> A lot of preconditioning has to happen. This town does not respond instantaneously to a new idea. There has to be a lot of preconditioning, a lot of maneuvering in the first place. There's a lot of talk going on right now about prevention, the limits of medical care, and so forth. Nothing specific, no specific proposals, but just a vague feeling. Suddenly, maybe tomorrow, maybe six months, maybe longer, out of the wind will come someone with an idea. It doesn't make a lot of difference where it comes from. The critical thing is that the preconditioning has taken place.

Despite the fact that ideas sweep policy communities like fads, a phenomenon we discussed in Chapter 5, government does not act on ideas quickly. To become a basis for action, an idea must both sweep a community and endure. This situation is frustrating to those who promote the idea, but reassuring to those who value stability. Using transportation deregulation as a case in point, a Carter administration appointee provided an apt summary:

> The Ford administration deserves due credit. The Ford administration laid the groundwork for this, softened up opinions, got people interested in the issues. Then we slugged it out. But it does take that period of softening up first. You can go up to the Congress and you can hit them over the head with a baseball bat once, then you have to allow them a period of time to recover from that before you can hit them again. It takes a while.

[10]Polsby's discussion of the Senate as incubator makes a similar point. See Nelson Polsby, "Strengthening Congress in National Policymaking," *Yale Review* (Summer 1970): 481–497; reprinted in Polsby, ed., *Congressional Behavior* (New York: Random House, 1971), pp. 3–13.



## CRITERIA FOR SURVIVAL

We have conjured up a picture of ideas floating about in the policy primeval soup. But, as we have hinted, they don't simply float. They bump into one another, they combine with one another; some survive, some die out, and some survive in a form quite different from their origins. Even if the beginnings are somewhat haphazard, the survival is not. As in any selection system, there is a pattern to the elements that endure. Let's now reflect on the characteristics that enhance the odds of an idea's survival.

Some of the criteria for survival, such as technical feasibility and value acceptability, are internal to the policy community itself. Specialists develop a sense for the "right" type of policy direction and for the technical characteristics that make a proposal viable. Specialists must also anticipate what might happen should the proposal be advanced in the larger political arena. They concern themselves with the cost of a proposal, for instance, in anticipation of a budgetary constraint. They ask themselves whether the proposal stands a prayer of passage on the Hill, and whether it will meet a test of public acceptance. Proposals that fail to meet these criteria—technical feasibility, value acceptability within the policy community, tolerable cost, anticipated public acquiescence, and a reasonable chance for receptivity among elected decision makers—are not likely to be considered as serious, viable proposals. If a proposal initially fails one or more of these tests, it might be reworked or combined with something else, and then floated again. A proposal that survives usually satisfies these criteria.

### *Technical Feasibility*

Even faulty ideas can be trial balloons. But eventually, advocates of a proposal must delve deeply into details and into technicalities, gradually eliminating inconsistencies, attending to the feasibility of implementation, and specifying the actual mechanisms by which an idea would be brought into practical use. It is a bit difficult to specify precisely what policy makers mean by technical feasibility, but they all sense, as they react to a proposal, whether it is "worked out," "staffed out," "worked through," or "ready to go." Many a good idea is sent back to the drawing board, not because it isn't a good idea, but because it isn't "ready" or "all worked out." As one bureaucrat said, "You don't want some stupid fatal flaw to come to light on the first day of hearings and have the whole thing discredited." Or as a researcher put it, "It's important to do your homework, to be prepared, to do in-depth research, and don't sell people on something that won't work." Or to quote a congressional staffer who would have liked to tackle a particular issue, "A lot of people advocated it. We seri-

ously considered doing it in the bill, but we had to drop it because we didn't have enough time to work up a proposal on it in the press of the other things."

Feasibility, as policy specialists talk about it, is heavily involved with implementation. The word "actually" constantly comes into their conversation as they discuss feasibility. "Will it actually accomplish what we want to accomplish?" "Can it actually be administered?" Proposals for nationalizing rail roadbed form a case in point. One solution to the problem of roadbed deterioration discussed during the 1970s was nationalization of the roadbed only, and then allow many users to run trains over the common roadbed, much as trucks, buses, and cars use highways. This proposal was discarded for several reasons, including a serious doubt in the minds of many railroad specialists that the analogy to highways was apt, that the idea could technically be implemented. Several respondents told me in some detail about the difficulties of constructing switching and signaling equipment that would be compatible with rolling stock, how roadbed and rolling stock must go together in an integrated package, and thus why a proposal to separate roadbed from trains would be extremely difficult and costly to implement.

Attention to the technical aspects of a proposal can become extremely detailed. As one presidential staffer put it:

> Just attending to all the technical details of putting together a real proposal takes a lot of time. There's tremendous detail in the work. It's one thing to lay out a statement of principles or a general kind of proposal, but it's quite another thing to staff out all the technical work that is required to actually put a real detailed proposal together.

A serious proposal eventually receives that detailed attention, and is worked on until the obvious bugs are ironed out. As an informed observer summarized the development of one committee chairman's proposal for transportation financing:

> His first proposal, as it was reported in press releases and so forth, was all garbled up. It just seemed to be a bundle of earth-shaking ideas, and we sat here looking at it, trying to figure it out, chuckling to ourselves, and noticing that it was quite a can of worms. Gradually, this has evolved into at least a coherent package. I'm not sure I favor it all, but at least it is coherent.

Attention to the details of implementation does not necessarily result in enacted programs that work. Policy makers do not always anticipate all of the consequences that will flow from their actions, issues are often extremely complex, and in retrospect even advocates of a proposal may conclude that it was a futile attempt right from the beginning. To be seriously considered, however, policy makers believe that a proposal will work if enacted, even if the idea seems far-fetched in hindsight. Without that belief in its technical feasibility, the proposal is not likely to survive to the point of serious consideration.

## *Value Acceptability*

Proposals that survive in the policy community are compatible with the values of the specialists. Obviously, all specialists do not have the same values, and in



the instances of disagreement among the specialists, conflicts spill over into the larger political arena. But in some respects, the bulk of the specialists do eventually see the world in similar ways, and approve or disapprove of similar approaches to problems. One respondent told me that a proposal that had received a great deal of press attention was not being taken seriously among the specialists because "it doesn't really represent any mainstream thinking." Their thinking is composed not just of ordinary liberal-conservative dimensions, but also of such concepts as equity and efficiency. Proposals that don't fit with specialists' values have less chance of survival than those that do.

Some of the participants' values are composed of their view of the proper role or size of the federal government vis-à-vis the states and localities, and their view of the proper size of the public sector vis-à-vis the private sector. Their views on these issues directly affect the alternatives they propose or oppose. Those we usually classify as liberals support larger government roles while those we usually classify as conservatives oppose them. Within the health area, for example, a knot of ideological liberals believes in more ambitious social welfare programs in general, and in more ambitious national health insurance in particular. They have a view of the proper package of social insurance that every advanced country should offer its citizens, and they work to fill in the gaps in that package, piece by piece, as the appropriate opportunities arise. First they support social security pensions, then the expansion of death benefit and disability coverage, then the enactment of Medicare and Medicaid, and then the same advocates for all of those initiatives push for eventual enactment of comprehensive national health insurance. As one of them told me, "Ours is not really a response to a perceived need, but it's ideological, if you will. People like me have this concept of what ought to be done in the area of social insurance, and we want to fill in the logical gaps in that program."

This component of ideology, based on the participants' view of the proper size of government, has a cross-national aspect. Some writers argue that a distinctive ideology or political culture dominates American politics, one that places much more emphasis on the virtues of private sector activity and the evils of government than the thinking that dominates the politics of other industrialized countries.[11] Programs that are commonplace in other countries, such as nationalized railroads, national health insurance, and public ownership and operation of sizable portions of the housing stock, are not even considered live options in the United States, according to this argument. One of my transportation respondents illustrated graphically the different mind set:

> I was just talking to somebody from Sweden. In Sweden, they designed their system so that they would have various modes of passenger transportation all coming into the same terminal, and various modes of freight transportation all coming into the same terminal. They coordinate these things very nicely. When I asked this man how they do that, he replied, "How else would you do it?"

[11] For example, see Samuel P. Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), Chapter 2; Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955), Chapter 1; and Anthony King, "Ideas, Institutions, and the Policies of Governments," *British Journal of Political Science* 3 (July and October 1973): 291–313 and 409–423.

If there is such a national culture or dominant ideology, it affects different policy arenas differently. In this study, health seems to be affected by the ideological biases in the American political culture much more than transportation. Fully 36 percent of my health interviews contained an unprompted, prominent reference to such ideological biases, compared to only 7 percent of transportation interviews. The health interviews contained many references to a distinctive American distrust of governmental solutions, such as the following:

> There are possible solutions that would never fly here. This country is built on private initiative, and that runs very deep in our thinking.

> Personal lifestyle is a matter of personal choice. I hope the federal government won't get in the business of telling me whether I can smoke or drink or what to eat.

But transportation interviews had far fewer such references, suggesting that transportation is a less ideologically laden arena. One transportation respondent confirmed this impression in his own experience:

> Compared to a lot of government activity, transportation is relatively insulated from emotional content. It's true that you get a lot of protest about pollution and you do get emotional protest against certain highway projects. But almost everybody sees the need for good transportation, and they are willing to put money into it. There is no Republican or Democratic position on transportation, no liberal or conservative view. You don't get bound up in a lot of ideological conflict. I say that because I came over here from the Department of Defense. Over there, there is a large emotional and moralistic content to everything you do. Shall we have a strong national defense, peace, and all that.

Debates over nationalization illustrate the point. Nationalization does not have serious agenda status in either health or transportation. Only 7 percent of the transportation interviews included a prominent mention of railroad nationalization. There was some flurry of interest, particularly in the idea of nationalizing roadbeds, during the Penn Central crisis, but it quickly died. Similarly, socialized medicine, in which providers would be employees of the government, was prominently discussed in only 3 percent of the health interviews.

On the face of it, these figures might argue that a dominant national ideology that emphasizes the virtues of limited government controls the agenda in both health and transportation. But digging a bit deeper, it becomes apparent that the arguments used in the two policy areas are sharply different. In health, particularly in response to my questions about why some version of a national health *service* is not seriously considered, in contrast to the widely discussed national health *insurance*, people often responded in terms of national political ideology, culture, or symbolism:

> Our ethic is personal initiative, and when the government tries to do anything, people cry socialism.

> If you think things are bad now, see what happens when the government controls everything. I don't think that a health service would be acceptable to most of the population.

> I think the words are too frightening



As one source close to the American Public Health Association wryly observed of many members' advocacy of a national health service, "Well, it's not exactly the shot that's been heard round the world."

There was a similar reaction in transportation when nationalization was mentioned; respondents talked about "national traditions" and "general opposition to the idea." But these general mentions were overshadowed by a much more pragmatic discussion about the disadvantages of nationalization: high cost, such problems with roadbed nationalization as incompatibility with rolling stock, the skimming of profitable traffic by large corporations that would leave common carriers with the dregs, and the administrative problems that would overtake the system. A typical response was the following: "There is no great political clamor for nationalization. The primary reason is that it is expensive, and we may be able to do the job much more inexpensively." When asked why nationalization did not win out during the Penn Central crisis, another respondent summarized the general thinking:

> The administration's opposition to nationalization was not over the philosophy of nationalization or anything like that. It was not an ideological thing. The problem for the administration was that they didn't want to put the funds into it. Nationalizers want funds, and very large quantities of funds. The question is really over money, not ideology. Nationalization isn't unthinkable. That's not it at all. But it won't resolve the underlying problem.

Thus, to the extent that a dominant ideology affects public policy outcomes in the United States, it does not do so very simply. The differences between health and transportation suggest that ideology may be more at work in some domains than in others, more at work under some circumstances than others. In some cases, we might be tempted to attribute great power to a dominant national ideology, when it may not really be at work at all.

We have been discussing ideology as if it were completely conceived as people's attitudes toward the size and role of the federal government, vis-à-vis the states and localities and vis-à-vis the private sector. But the ideologies of government officials or people close to them have other components, including the theme of equity. Proposals sometimes come to be prominent on governmental agendas because they would serve to redress inequities, imbalances, or unfairness. Governmental officials and those around them sometimes perceive an inequity so compelling that it drives the agenda. Even if a principle of equity is not a driving force, fairness or redress of imbalance is a powerful argument used in the debates for or against proposals.

One example of the principle of equity as a driving force is the case of the government's renal dialysis program.[12] As soon as the technology for convenient dialysis was perfected, it became clear that some people were receiving this life-giving treatment and others were not. The selections of patients to re-

[12]For an account of the progress of the issue, see Richard A. Rettig, "The Policy Debate on Patient Care Financing for Victims of End-Stage Renal Disease," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 40 (Autumn 1976): 196–230. An interesting classroom exercise that plays out the policy dilemmas is in Ronald Brunner, *The Kidney Problem* (Boston: Intercollegiate Case Clearing House, 1977).

ceive treatment were made on the basis of ability to pay, qualification for experimental study groups, proximity to the few centers where dialysis was being performed, and the happenstance of personal health insurance coverage. Gripping stories appeared in the popular media about "death committees" of physicians that were charged with deciding whose lives should or should not be saved. Such a fundamental, dramatic difference of treatment was more than decision makers' values could bear. The Senate passed a short rider introduced right on the floor which provided that renal dialysis and kidney transplants be financed by Medicare, and the House quickly followed suit. So compelling was the inequity that had thrust this item onto the agenda that Congress really did not consider the cost of the program in any detail, a cost that exceeded a billion dollars within a few short years. As one knowledgeable respondent summarized the forces that led to such sudden agenda status and passage, "When there is serious inequity, that is politically and socially unstable. Once a technology is developed, everybody will want it." The moral pressure to avoid letting people die, when a procedure was available to save them but for its cost, was simply irresistible.

There is even more discussion of equity in transportation than in health. Overall, equity considerations were important in 28 percent of the interviews. But they were prominently discussed in only 13 percent of the health interviews, as compared to 45 percent of the transportation interviews. In addition, 20 percent of the transportation interviews contained some side mention of equity, compared to only 8 percent of health interviews.[13]

Much of the discussion of equity in transportation concerns comparisons across the various modes. Railroads complain that waterways have an unfair disadvantage because of the free use of the Corps of Engineers' navigation projects, and they claim that truckers are not paying their fair share of highway construction and maintenance. Buses complain that the huge amount of taxpayers' money poured into Amtrak unfairly diverts traffic from buses. Without taking a position here on the validity of various claims, we can point out that the frequency of such discussion is noteworthy. The different transportation modes operate to some degree in similar markets, placing them in potential competition with one another for the traffic. Yet their technologies differ, the governmental regulatory programs differ, and the government subsidies differ. Inevitably, those who feel at a disadvantage raise questions about inequity, arguing that they are put at an unfair competitive disadvantage because of government action.

A final component of policy makers' values has become a principle of efficiency. They increasingly concern themselves not only with the cost of a program but with the benefits that are being realized from that expenditure, whether these benefits justify the costs, and whether the benefits could be achieved at a lower cost. Some of this concern is attributable to short-run economic and budgetary problems. But it also probably reflects a long-range trend toward more economists (and people receptive to their thinking) in government. Economists' language is everywhere: references to cost-effectiveness, tradeoffs, efficiency, cost allocation, and cross subsidy. As one health respondent said of the concern with the efficacy of medical care, "That efficacy issue is coming along, and that's an important development because it puts the cost issue in a new perspective. People are starting to ask what they're *getting* for the cost. Part of the concern about cost is not really about cost *per se*, but rather, are we getting anything for all the money we're spending?"

[13]In the case studies, there is no substantial difference between health and transportation. Equity considerations were coded as very or somewhat important in prompting agenda prominence in 9 of the 23 cases.



Sometimes, the concern with efficiency is reflected in formal cost-effectiveness evaluation studies. At other times, the concern is less formal. Respondents would talk about Amtrak in cost-benefit terms, for instance, as in the following passage: "The costs are going to get astronomical, and you're not providing a public service in return for that cost. There are trains running around all over the place and nobody is on them. You have them in place for rail buffs." The same type of reasoning was applied by others to the proposed construction of new subway systems: "People are increasingly coming to the view that urban mass transit is a rathole down which money shouldn't be pissed any more than it has. Take the Washington METRO system. It's a beautiful system, but Jesus Christ Almighty, is it expensive!"

As some of these cases illustrate, efficiency does not always carry the day, particularly as an issue moves from the community of specialists we have been discussing into a larger political arena. Some respondents even argued that political processes systematically favor inefficiency. In the health area, for instance, the pressure to opt for heroic treatment and heroic expenditures to save lives seems nearly irresistible. As one health respondent put it, "The concentration on the cost of Medicare and Medicaid is reflected in the thinking of almost all the people in HEW now. That's as long as they aren't sick. Of course when they're sick, then cost be damned, I want to have the best care, and full speed ahead." Or as a transportation respondent said:

> Economists somehow think that waste is a politically potent issue. But they get to the Hill, and they discover that congressmen favor waste. You know, "What do you mean, waste? You mean small town service is waste? Do you mean servicing the beet growers in my district is waste?" The very place that there is waste is also the toughest thing to handle politically.

Another spoke of large-scale, expensive subway systems: "It has always been apparent to me that subways are not the way to go. But they take so much money, they are so inefficient, that there is a great deal of support for them." Then he added, in an absolute masterpiece of pithy summary, "*For a politician, the costs are the benefits.*"

## *Anticipation of Future Constraints*

Specialists in policy communities know that as an initiative's saga unfolds, some constraints will be imposed on proposals that are adopted or even seri-

ously considered. Down the line, decision makers need to be convinced that the budgetary cost of the program is acceptable, that there is a reasonable chance that politicians will approve, and that the public in its various facets—both mass and activist—will acquiesce. Anticipation of these constraints within a policy community forms a final set of criteria by which ideas and proposals are selected. Some ideas fail to obtain a serious hearing, even among specialists, because their future looks bleak, while others survive because specialists calculate that they would meet these future tests.

One of these tests is a budget constraint. Members of a policy community know that somewhere along the line a proposal must be shown to have a tolerable cost, at least a tolerable cost to the federal budget. So they spend untold hours costing out proposals, paring them down to manageable proportions, and floating the slimmed-down version again. If they cannot come up with a proposal that is financially acceptable, the idea may be dropped. As one respondent said of an administration proposal, "They went back and did their cost estimates right, and discovered that it was going to cost a lot more money than they'd figured to do it right. When they discovered that, they became less interested in it." Some proposals never really see the light of day because of anticipated cost. Many health respondents cited long-term care as an example. As one put it:

> Long-term care is a back burner item. I have heard people talk about it for years, but nobody can decide what to do. None of the health insurance proposals take it on. There is a simple reason for that. Nobody can figure out how to handle it, and they're scared to death of trying. The numbers rise so fast when you crank in the demographic facts plus the cost of long-term care, it really boggles the mind when you think of taking on this additional financial commitment. So people play around with the alternatives and they fuss about doing something about home care, but that's about it.

A second test is public acquiescence. Specialists in a policy community know that ultimately their proposals must be acceptable to the public. They may conceive of the public as the bulk of the people in the country, as a more narrow set of activists who have a special stake in the outcomes, or as both. It would be a mistake to argue that proposals more or less well up from the public, but it would be equally in error to argue that advocates ignore public reaction as they design their proposals. The case of health habits is an appropriate example. Health policy makers know that people's own habits—smoking, diet, sleep, exercise—have a great deal to do with both the population's health and the population's medical care bill. Many of them fairly itch to do more in the area of habits, but their experience with public reaction has convinced them that aside from education and warnings, not much more can be done. Public outrage over seat belt interlocks, for instance, is often cited as the major cause of the very quick repeal of a proposal that had actually been enacted.

Sometimes, a broad, general public is being considered; at other times, it is a more specialized public. Proposals to require physicians to work in rural areas, for example, run afoul of anticipated physician opposition. As one respondent observed, "Physicians just don't want to go to Horse's Ass, Idaho, to practice, and there isn't any way you can force them to."



Policy specialists often interpret the support or opposition of elected officials as closely tied to or indicative of public sentiment. The reactions of senators and House members, congressional staffers, the president, and presidential advisors are anticipated as proposals are formed and debated in the policy community. Many ideas are discarded because specialists cannot conceive of any plausible circumstances under which they could be approved by elected politicians and their appointees. Some ideas are kept alive in the hope that the larger political climate will change, even though the ideas might not be currently in favor. Other ideas are actively pushed to the forefront in anticipation of approval by elected politicians. One health committee staffer summarized his problem: "It's a matter of arithmetic. You need eight votes in subcommittee, fifteen in full committee, and fifty-one on the floor." When asked if he dropped ideas when he felt he didn't have the votes, he replied, "Yes, often."

## THE SHORT LIST OF IDEAS

A policy community produces a short list of ideas. Through the selection process we have described, some ideas are formulated, survive the process of softening up, and largely satisfy the criteria by which specialists evaluate proposals. There may or may not be a single proposal on which all specialists agree, but at least a set of a few prominent alternatives has risen to the top of the policy primeval soup, ready for policy makers to consider. Ideas have been sharpened and changed, combinations have emerged that serve the purpose better than the original proposals, people have become accustomed to thinking along certain lines, the list of alternatives under discussion has narrowed, and a few ideas have emerged as the leading candidates for further serious consideration.

In the rest of this chapter, we discuss the emerging consensus, the general knowledge that results, and the importance of an available alternative.

### *The Emerging Consensus: Of Bandwagons and Tipping*

Through the processes we have been describing in this chapter, consensus spreads through a policy community. This diffusion among specialists involves two different kinds of subject matter: awareness of problems, and agreement on solutions or proposals. We discussed the awareness of problems in Chapter 5. People who are aware of health policy questions, for instance, come to a rough agreement that rising Medicare costs, overbedding, physician surplus or maldistribution among specialists, and the spread of high-cost technology are serious problems. Some agreement on the short list of alternatives also diffuses in a policy community. Health specialists start to agree that increased emphasis

on prevention and on promotion of good health through changed personal habits would be a good idea. Transportation specialists start to reach consensus on the desirability of user charges, and on the necessity of cutting back on funding for Amtrak and Conrail. If most specialists do not reach agreement on one alternative in a given domain of problems, they at least reach some understanding on the fairly narrow set of alternatives from which some authoritative choice might be made.

Within the policy community, and according to the principles of diffusion and acceptance we have discussed in this chapter, something akin to a bandwagon effect often occurs. As two respondents put it:

> It's a very complex process, almost like a snowball. It starts with a voice or two in the wilderness. That voice in the wilderness recruits somebody else. You talk to people and keep hammering at it.

> I know a lot of the important people. These people meet in various places—conferences, parties, and so forth—and they all talk to each other. There is a grapevine. If you have a new idea, you can enter that idea into the grapevine. If it has anything going for it, it will spread.

Gradually, the idea catches on. People in and around government speak of a "growing realization," an "increasing feeling," a "lot of talk in the air," and "coming to a conclusion." After some degree of diffusion, there seems to be a take-off point: Many people are discussing the proposal or idea. At that point, knowledgeable people refer to a "widespread feeling," or, as another respondent put it, "by now, this is orthodox thinking." This process of take-off looks similar to Thomas Schelling's "tipping" model, which is used to describe the process of change in racial mix in neighborhoods.[14] A few minority families move into a previously all-white neighborhood until a "tipping" point is reached, after which the neighborhood progresses very quickly to one in which very few whites reside. In this case, an idea starts with a few people, and its diffusion rises rapidly from those few to the point where the idea becomes commonplace. The more a proposal is discussed, the more seriously it is taken. As Robert Axelrod says:

> Problems that are raised only once are probably not often regarded as serious, and it seems that proposals that are suggested by only one person are not often retained as salient options. So the problems and proposals that are regarded as most significant have been brought to the respondent's attention in many different ways and therefore rarely have distinct sources.[15]

[14]Thomas C. Schelling, *Micromotives and Macrobehavior* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), pp. 99–102.

[15]Robert Axelrod, "Bureaucratic Decisionmaking in the Military Assistance Program: Some Empirical Findings," in Morton Halperin and Arnold Kanter, eds., *Readings in American Foreign Policy* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), p. 160.



As respondents discuss this process of diffusion, it is sometimes unclear exactly to which population they refer. When they refer to a "growing realization" or a "widespread feeling," one often has little but an intuitive feel among *whom* the realization or feeling is spreading. Usually, however, they are referring to the specialists we have been describing in this chapter—researchers, bureaucrats, academics, congressional staffers—all of whom specialize in a policy domain such as health or transportation. Within that set of people, the bandwagon or tipping phenomenon is quite different from a similar phenomenon that one might find in a more political arena. As we will describe it in Chapter 7, tipping in politics is a process of coalition-building; bargains are struck, concessions are given in return for participation in a coalition, and as the bandwagon gains momentum people join out of fear of being excluded from participation in the goodies to be obtained. Here, the process emphasizes persuasion and diffusion: An idea with something to recommend it, according to the criteria for survival, becomes accepted by ever larger numbers of specialists. The diffusion may be fully as explosive as in the political stream, but the process by which the growth takes place is quite different.

## *"There is no new thing under the sun." (Ecclesiastes 1:9)*

People in and around government are fond of calmly and patiently pointing out to the novice that nothing is new. Various respondents described a given proposal with versions of that reaction: "Everybody knows about that." "It's been kicking around for a long time." "That one is as old as the hills." "Everything seems like the same old stuff to me." Perhaps expertise is demonstrated by showing familiarity with an idea, familiarity approaching boredom. In some respects, in fact, there *is* no new thing under the sun. As we pointed out in Chapter 4, everything has its antecedents, trapping one who attempts to track down an ultimate origin into an infinite regress. And as we pointed out in that same chapter, the agenda may show a great volatility at the same time that the alternatives being seriously considered might be quite familiar to the participants.

This familiarity is the logical outcome of the processes we have been describing in this chapter. If alternatives change not by mutation but by recombination, there will always be familiar elements in the new combinations. And if the softening up process is as critical as we have claimed, it would be exceedingly surprising if wholly new ideas suddenly appeared on the scene in the policy primeval soup and immediately received a serious hearing. When the time for action arrives, when the policy window described in Chapter 8 opens, it is too late to develop a new proposal from scratch. It must have already gone through this long process of consideration, floating up, discussion, revision, and trying out again.

Ideas, proposals, or issues may rise into or fall from favor from time to time. One respondent described them as perennials—flowering in one season, then lying dormant, only to flower anew. Or as another put it, "Issues fade in and fade out, but they never, ever go away. They always come back—always." Proposals may not come back in the same form; rather, they are recast, com-

bined with something else, or attached to a problem different from the one they started with. After a subject has been through the lengthy gestation period of most major issues, the alternatives become familiar, the options narrow to a few well-understood possibilities, and a limit is reached on the ability to introduce new material. A new recombination, a new twist—yes—but not wholly new material. Advocates pull old proposals out of drawers, cut and paste them, rehashing old ideas in response to new demands.[16] Consider and sympathize with the exasperation of one respondent who took exception to the reaction of the Carter inner circle to the old, old national health insurance issue: "HEW sent up a package to the White House, and the White House complained that they had worked up the same old hash. Well, there isn't anything around *except* the same old hash."

Public policy analysis could treat these political events as somehow outside of the policy-making process. The making of public policy, such a notion would run, is the province of specialists, found particularly among bureaucrats, congressional staffers, and researchers. That conception, in my view, would be fundamentally wrong. It is misleading to conceive of policy making as if it were essentially a process such as the one described in the last chapter. To be sure, specialized program development is an important part of the process. But the political stream we are about to describe is also an important, integral part, not at all exogenous to policy making.

In this chapter, we will start with the public and work toward government. We first discuss a vaguely defined but nonetheless important national mood, and consider the place of social movements within that national mood. We then turn to organized political forces, patterns of support for or opposition to the prominence of certain agenda items, within interest groups or other extragovernmental structures. Governmental phenomena occupy our attention last, when we consider such factors as protection of bureaucratic turf and turnover of key personnel brought about by election results. We will end by describing consensus building in the political stream. Throughout, change will be seen as a function of the shifts of important participants (e.g., a change of administration or the influx of new legislators), or as a response to shifts in national mood or interest group configurations.

## THE NATIONAL MOOD

People in and around government sense a national mood. They are comfortable discussing its content, and believe that they know when the mood shifts. The idea goes by different names—the national mood,[3] the climate in the country,[4] changes in public opinion, or broad social movements. But common to all of these labels is the notion that a rather large number of people out in the country are thinking along certain common lines, that this national mood changes from one time to another in discernible ways, and that these changes in mood or climate have important impacts on policy agendas and policy outcomes. In the view of close observers, these changes in public opinion are not confined to the policy communities we discussed in the last chapter, nor to the themes that float around in those communities. Instead, talk of a "swing to the right" or an "antigovernment mood" in the country means something much more general. As one health respondent replied when asked why there had been a shift in the direction of emphasizing the virtues of the private marketplace, "I think it is not related to the health field, really. There is a whole environment out there that is moving in that direction."

[3]Thanks to John Campbell for this terminology.

[4]Cobb and Elder discuss a "climate of the times." See Roger W. Cobb and Charles D. Elder, "Communications and Public Policy," in Dan Nimmo and Keith Sanders, eds., *Handbook of Political Communications* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1981), p. 405.



Governmental participants' sense of the national mood serves to promote some items on their policy agendas and to restrain others from rising to prominence. As for promotion, their sense of national mood is one thing that creates the "fertile ground" that we discussed in Chapter 4. We pointed out there that the seed can come from anywhere, but the key to understanding its germination and growth is whether there is fertile ground or an initial receptivity to the ideas. Many respondents pointed to a general climate of hostility to government regulation as one factor that made it possible for deregulation proposals in transportation to get a sympathetic hearing during the 1970s. As one put it, "These changes involve whole attitudes toward government which affect the administration's success in making new proposals. There was an appropriate mood for deregulation. It could have come earlier, but it didn't because that mood wasn't there." Similar effects were evident in health, as prominent discussion of proposals to increase marketplace competition rose from near zero in the first three waves of interviews to 38 percent in 1979, and as Health Maintenance Organizations, a keystone of this procompetitive approach, rose to 63 percent.

In contrast to this ability of the national mood to promote a higher agenda status for some items, policy makers' perception of the national mood also serves as a constraint, pushing other items into relative obscurity. During the 1970s, the same time that this perceived antigovernment climate promoted deregulation schemes, it demoted proposals for ambitious new spending and additional government regulation. As one congressional committee staffer said, "Add to [the budget constraint] the panic of Proposition 13, and the overwhelming concern with inflation and with wasteful big government. These things affect the debate at every turn, and affect all the actions that you would want to contemplate." Or as another said while describing the government interest in promoting good health habits and the public reaction against initiatives like banning saccharin and requiring seat belt interlocks, "Last year, the health side was pushing on this issue of lifestyle. This year, society is pushing back. The issue really is the limit on government telling people what's good for them." Indeed, prominent commentary among my health respondents on the theme of excessive government regulation rose from 23 percent of health respondents in 1976 to 71 percent in 1979.

Not only do participants feel that they can accurately sense the national mood at any one point in time, but they also feel that they can sense changes in the mood. Most of my respondents in the mid- to late-1970s, for instance, were confident of their characterization of the national mood as conservative—against ambitious new federal programs, in favor of whittling down the size of government, against big expenditures, and against regulation in general terms. In my interviews this was called "the conservative tidal wave in which we are all engulfed" and "a general societal trend." One respondent said, "There's a general antipathy toward government right now. I don't know why that is, but everybody feels it and it has effects." Researchers on public opinion will long debate the validity of these perceptions, but for our purposes the critical fact is that important people held them strongly.

In some measure, such swings in national mood are regarded as inevitable as swings of a pendulum. Politics move left at one point in time, and as surely as a pendulum must swing back, politics will move rightward in turn. The 1970s, for instance, were seen as a reaction to the policy enactments of the Great Society in the 1960s. As one respondent claimed quite directly, "The ideas of the 60s are shot. There's an unease, an uncertainty about what to do, a lack of direction." Said another, "National health insurance would be the biggest social program of all, and there is a healthy skepticism about the social programs of the 1960s." Some of these swings of the pendulum may follow partisan realignments.[5] Others may be feedback cycles; a program is enacted, problems with its implementation emerge, corrections are made, and new problems emerge from the corrections.

We have been speaking of a national mood as a rather vague presence that people in and around government sense, something that is palpable to them but hardly concrete or specific. Where does this mood actually reside, and how do these people sense its content? One fairly clear answer is that the mood does not necessarily reside in the mass public. Operationally, we could take sample surveys of the mass public to discern the popular preferences that make up the national mood or climate, and scholars often do. But to policy specialists and even to politicians, such samplings are a bit beside the point. Referring to the general antiregulation mood, for instance, one respondent argued, "I don't think that there is a great public groundswell in favor of fat in their meat, or in favor of Saturday night specials, or in favor of high-tar cigarettes. In fact, polls show that people overwhelmingly want gun control and some of these other things." Even as my respondents characterized the national mood as strongly antiregulation, for instance, the Gallup poll in 1977 actually showed the public favoring a government requirement for air bags on all new cars.

Similarly, the shifts that we have come to call social movements may not be very widespread in the general public. Ordinarily, social movements need organization and leadership to have a policy impact.[6] Indeed, they may be led by just a few very active people, and have surprisingly few adherents. The consumer movement, for instance, started, grew, and prospered due to the efforts of Ralph Nader, a few other activists, and their allies in Congress.[7] The successful social movements, of course, catch on in the more general public and

[5]See Benjamin Ginsberg, "Elections and Public Policy," *American Political Science Review* 70 (March 1976): 41–49; Barbara Deckard Sinclair, "Party Realignment and the Transformation of the Political Agenda," *American Political Science Review* 71 (September 1977): 940–953; and David Brady, "Congressional Party Realignment and Transformations of Public Policy in Three Realignment Eras," *American Journal of Political Science* 26 (May 1982): 333–360.

[6]For a statement of a "resource mobilization" perspective on social movements, which emphasizes the importance of leaders mobilizing resources, see John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, "Resource Mobilization and Social Movements," *American Journal of Sociology* 82 (May 1977): 1212–1241.

[7]See Mark V. Nadel, *The Politics of Consumer Protection* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), Chapter 5.



eventually have electoral impacts. Politicians, seeing the electoral payoff, climb on the bandwagon. Such movements eventually add up to the sort of shift in national mood that we have been discussing here. But organizationally, they may not be the broad-based movements that we tend to assume they are.

If the national mood does not reside in the mass public, then where can it be found? And how, specifically, do people in government sense it? I find it difficult to give very precise answers. Generally, governmental officials and those near them have a lot of experience with collections of attentive publics, activists, and political elites out in the country. They hear from interest groups' leaders both in Washington and in the hustings; they read newspaper editorials; they give talks and listen to questions and comments at meetings; they see how public events are being covered in both general and specialized media; and they talk to party activists and other politicos who presumably have their ears to the ground.

The process of sensing a national mood works in two ways. First, elected politicians judge their constituents' mood from such communications as mail, town meetings, smaller gatherings, and delegations of people or even individuals coming to them during their office hours in the district. Second, nonelected officials tend to sense the national mood from what they hear from politicians. It is quite common for career bureaucrats, for example, to discuss the political climate or the national mood in some detail, with the current statements being made on the Hill as the only evidence for their conclusions. They simply assume that politicians have their fingers on the national pulse because it is their business and their livelihood to do so.

The diffusion of an impression of the national mood does not work exclusively in this version of a two-step flow from politicians to nonelected officials. Both sets of people follow the media, for instance, which is filled with commentary on and impressions of the nature of the times. And the national mood may, in some important respects, be an echo of events at the governmental level. Reagan is elected, and everybody assumes that the national mood has swung in a conservative direction. Leading columnists write that the climate is thus-and-so, and this in turn affects the national mood. A president communicates his sense of priorities to the nation, influencing the viewpoints relayed by the general public to their elected representatives.

People in and around government believe quite firmly that something like a national mood has important policy consequences. It has an impact on election results, on party fortunes, and on the receptivity of governmental decision makers to interest group lobbying. A shift in climate, according to people who are actively involved in making or affecting public policy, makes some proposals viable that would not have been viable before, and renders other proposals simply dead in the water. Advocates for the newly viable proposals find a receptive audience, an opportunity to push their ideas. Advocates for the proposals currently out of favor must adapt to their unfortunate situation, present their ideas for consideration as much as is possible under the circumstances, and wait for the mood to shift once again in their direction.

along more quickly as well. Thus overlapping jurisdictions actually enhanced the chances for serious consideration, as the various players vied with one another for the credit and for the claim to jurisdiction.

This promoting aspect of competition cuts across the legislative and executive branches as well. As bureaucrats see an issue moving on the Hill, for instance, they will often take action first, in order to have some control over the events, rather than simply responding to and implementing legislation that is not of their own making. The threat of legislation to regulate clinical laboratories, for instance, prompted HEW to stiffen their own regulation, which in turn took some of the steam out of the movement for new legislation. One respondent said, "A natural bureaucratic reaction is self-preservation, and one way to do that is to bend with the wind."

So sometimes jurisdictional competition results in stalemate, while at other times it results in greater movement. Under what conditions does each result obtain? The key difference seems to be the perceived or potential popularity of the issue. If the various participants see a current or potential constituency for action out there, or if they see some electoral or publicity mileage in it, competition will enhance the chances of the issue rising on the agenda. If the issue has no such constituency or some opposition, or if it is unpopular, then competition contributes to its downfall. Put another way, competition for jurisdiction simply reinforces the other forces that are already at work. If the complex of political and policy forces are already balanced against an issue, competition for turf will drive the last nail into the coffin. But if that same balance tilts toward the issue, competition will contribute its share to moving the issue along.[16]

Finally, many potential agenda items never are the subject of a given policy maker's attention, largely because they fall into someone else's jurisdiction. They may be agenda items somewhere in government, but not where a given official is located. So an item may be ignored with the rationale that it is being taken care of somewhere else. As Tom Lehrer would say, "That's not my department."[17]

There are specialized agendas within such larger policy domains as health and transportation. Within health, for instance, there are specialists in direct delivery of medical services, food and drug regulation, and biomedical research. These subjects were never high on the general health policy agenda during the years of my study. Despite the tremendous clamor over recombinant DNA research in the biomedical research community, for instance, the subject was never prominent in more than 8 percent of my health interviews. Similarly, the highest-rated variable in the food and drug area was 9 percent, and no direct

[16]Incidentally, competition as an inhibitor and competition as a promoter are mentioned with about equal frequency in the interviews, and coded as important with about equal frequency in the case studies, although the promoter frequency is slightly greater than that for inhibition.

[17]This phrase comes from Tom Lehrer's song in which he "quotes" a rocket scientist as saying, "Once the rockets are up, who cares where they come down—that's not my department."



delivery item ever rose above 11 percent. These items are on a government agenda in some sense, but the set of people occupied with them is confined to one particular location in the panoply of jurisdictions within larger policy domains, and these subjects do not diffuse very widely into the domains' larger communities.

In addition to the importance of specialized agendas within policy domains, some items are not high on the agendas of health or transportation specialists, even though they could easily be in some conceptual sense, because they have their primary location elsewhere in the executive branch or congressional committee structure. Transportation respondents could have talked about energy, for instance, long before the crisis brought about by the 1979 gas lines, but they did not. When asked why not, they often responded by saying that energy was the province of the Department of Energy or of other committees of the Congress than their own. One high-level Department of Transportation bureaucrat told me, when asked in 1978 why energy was not high on a transportation agenda, "I don't know the answer to that. I've been wondering about it myself. There was quite a bit of concentration on it in the Department of Transportation before the Energy Department was created. Now there's some inclination to think that this other operation is supposed to be worrying about that, so we don't have to do as much with it." Similarly, protecting the environment is more the province of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) than of the health bureaucracy, despite the clear impact of pollution on health. Indeed, only 4 percent of my health interviews included prominent discussion of pollution that was not prompted by my questions. The tremendous government involvement in health in the form of the veterans' health system also was mentioned very little. As one respondent said, "It's an entirely different universe."

## CONSENSUS BUILDING IN THE POLITICAL STREAM

In the policy stream, we discovered in Chapter 6, consensus is built largely through the processes of persuasion and diffusion. If an idea survives scrutiny according to a set of criteria for survival, it diffuses within the policy community.

There is also consensus building in the political stream. However, the processes which set bandwagons in motion are radically different in the two streams. In contrast to the policy stream's emphasis on persuasion, the political stream's consensus building is governed by bargaining.[18] Here, coalitions are being built through the granting of concessions in return for support of the coalition, or as actual or potential coalition members make bargains. Joining the coalition occurs not because one has simply been persuaded of the virtue of that course of action, but because one fears that failure to join would result in

[18]For a thorough discussion of bargaining, see Robert A. Dahl and Charles E. Lindblom, *Politics, Economics, and Welfare* (New York: Harper and Row, 1953), Chapters 12 and 13.

exclusion from the benefits of participation. The proposals have already been discussed and honed in the political stream. The actors are now trying to reach toward a winning coalition. Thus the discussion is more likely to be, "You give me my provision, and I'll give you yours," rather than, "Let me convince you of the virtue of my provision."

Let us be clear once again that the processes are different from the participants, and that we are discussing processes here. In fact, policy specialists do not have a monopoly on persuasion; nor do politicians have a monopoly on bargaining. One often observes politicians persuading and specialists bargaining. We are making this distinction between the two different types of coalition building to draw attention to the differences between the processes in the political and policy streams, not to argue that one process is the exclusive preserve of one type of actor.

Illustrations of these bargaining processes, and their contrast to persuasion processes, abound in the interviews and case studies. In the transportation field, for example, a bargain developed between highway and mass transit advocates that resulted in benefits to both. As interstate highways were being built, urban legislators became increasingly unhappy, both because freeways were distorting land use in the urban areas and because a substantial program was underway which benefited small town and rural areas and not cities. They first pressed for raiding the highway trust fund for mass transit, and found considerable resistance—to say the least—to that idea. The controversy over that tack receded, however, because of a not-so-tacit understanding that the highway advocates would support mass transit appropriations from general funds if mass transit advocates would leave the highway trust fund alone. Each had its funds, and while there were still disagreements around the edges, a powerful coalition was built to their mutual benefit. They had not persuaded one another so much as they had generated a logrolling exchange.

Attempts to build support for national health insurance during the Carter administration provide another illustration of such coalition-building processes through bargaining. The arguments, facts, and proposals had really been aired for many years. Building the administration's proposal thus involved not only persuasion, but assiduous attention to giving people their pet provisions in return for support. One source close to administration thinking said that by inserting maternal and child health benefits and more low-income aid into their proposal, they could attract some liberal support, which would be convenient in terms of denying Senator Kennedy his undisputed claim to liberal adherents. Of course, this strategic consideration was not the only reason for including these provisions. The administration had always made clear their interest in a package of benefits broader than simple catastrophic insurance. Nor did their strategy succeed in the end. But the case does illustrate the bargaining process well.

In the political stream, if one does not pay sufficient attention to coalition building through bargaining, one pays a major price, as the Carter administration discovered. Many health respondents who were well-acquainted with both the issues and the political realities roundly criticized the administration's handling of hospital cost containment. Administration officials told me that they had consulted with important people on the Hill and elsewhere prior to sending up the proposal. But the recipients of the consultation drew a distinction between being told of administration plans or floating proposals, on the one hand, and genuine consultation on the other. As one congressional committee staffer portrayed the difference between hospital cost containment and food and drug reform:

> On the cost containment thing, what the administration meant by consultation was briefing us on what they wanted to do. So our attitude was, "Okay, if that's the way you want to do it, screw you. Go away and write your own bill, and then we'll do with it what we want to do." And we won. On the drug bill, they agreed to let us put it together on the Hill, and we wouldn't go with a bill unless we were satisfied with it, in the sense that we liked the bill in substance and thought it would pass. Because of the way we went through it, everybody's name is on the bill, and we have a real chance of passing it.



## *Of Bandwagons and Tipping, Again*

We talked in Chapter 6 of the explosive diffusion of ideas within policy communities. A good idea catches on, snowballing as it picks up adherents. Sometimes a bad idea does the same. We can also observe explosive growth in coalitions in the political stream, but driven by very different dynamics. Here, a bargaining process is at work; potential coalition supporters are enticed into support by promises of some benefit, and others climb aboard the bandwagon out of fear that they will be left without their share of the benefits, in the event that something should pass.

Initially, participants stake out their positions somewhat rigidly, refusing to compromise on their principles. On national health insurance, for instance, Senator Kennedy and his organized labor compatriots steadfastly held out for a plan of comprehensive insurance, with a rich package of benefits, full coverage of the population, and no deductibles. Years after it was apparent that such an approach would not be viable, they held to it. As one congressional staffer close to the action told me, "You stake out a position, because if you don't, you won't have anything to compromise with." Kennedy tried in 1973–74 with Wilbur Mills to pass a more modest program, but labor insistence on the whole comprehensive proposal derailed the attempt. As one observer said, "You need something to the left of center sometimes, to get people to move over."

The time comes when rigid adherence to one's original position would cost one dearly. These times are the real opportunities for passage, the policy windows that we will discuss in the next chapter, when compromise is in the air. At these times, participants of all types conclude that the bandwagon is rolling, and that they should be active in shaping the outcome. Advocates of change push hard for their proposals. Even enemies of change introduce their own proposals in an attempt to bend the outcomes as much as they can to their own purposes. Informed observers describe such events with phrases like "wanting to be in the game," "trying to be dealt in," and "jumping on before it's too late." Consensus is built, sometimes very rapidly, by cutting in many and diverse interests.

The progress of national health insurance during the 1970s provides a convincing illustration. Up until the first years of the Carter administration, Kennedy and labor had indeed held fast to their comprehensive proposal. At that point, seeing the new administration and a Democratic Congress as their opportunity, they made what many respondents called a dramatic move. As one of them told me, "We decided not to posture any longer" with the comprehensive proposal. They decided instead to back a less ambitious plan that would provide a place for private insurance companies and keep large portions of the cost off the federal budget. As one savvy observer described the change, "Kennedy wants to be in the ball game. If there's going to be a table with people sitting around it and everyone dealing out the goodies, Kennedy wants to be sitting at that table."

Once an issue seems to be moving, everybody with an interest in the subject leaps in, out of fear that they will be left out. In the national health insurance case, Senator Russell Long, chairman of the Finance Committee, introduced several of his own proposals, including one that would provide for catastrophic insurance only, and even held markup sessions on the subject. Many reasons for his action were advanced by knowledgeable informants, but among them was his desire to play a part in the outcome, in the event that the steamroller was moving. As one put it, "He wanted to introduce this as a way to trot it out in case there was any bigger threat that was coming along. This is his way to take the steam out of a comprehensive plan whenever it looked like it might get serious." Even the American Medical Association weighed in with their own proposal. At the time of Kennedy-Mills in the early 1970s, the AMA threw something together in such a big hurry that one source close to the AMA told me, "Our original bill was a laugh—I'll freely admit it." But as another informant put it, "They have to put these bills up just to be able to be in the game in case something is going to happen." So we might distinguish between genuine advocates and pseudoadvocates. The pseudoadvocates, such as the AMA in the case of national health insurance, are not genuinely interested in pushing the cause. They advocate their own plans in the event, likely or unlikely, that an issue of concern to them becomes a serious threat to their interests.

## CONCLUSION

Independently of the problems and policy streams, the political stream flows along according to its own dynamics and its own rules. It is composed of such factors as swings of national mood, election results, changes of administration, changes of ideological or partisan distributions in Congress, and interest group pressure campaigns.

Politicians and other participants believe they can sense both a national mood and changes in that mood. The national mood does not necessarily reside in the mass public, but instead is perceived in the attitudes of various more active sectors of the public. Politicians sense the mood from various communications that come to them, including mail, visits, trips home, newspaper coverage, and conversation with constituents. Nonelected officials take their reading of the national mood from politicians. Perceptions of the national mood affect governmental agendas, both by promoting items that fit with that mood and by inhibiting attention to items that do not.



Governmental officials judge the degree of consensus among organized political forces. If there is widespread agreement among those forces, officials either try to go along with them, or at least know what they are up against. If there is conflict among those forces, officials judge the balance of the strengths among them. Strength is perceived partly in terms of frequency or intensity of communications, and partly in terms of the various groups' resources. Often the balance of organized forces mitigates against change, as beneficiaries of current programs attempt to protect their current interests. Change is aided by a constituency in favor of it, and hampered by the absence of such a constituency or by the active opposition of organized interests. However, the balance of organized forces does not always determine outcomes. Indeed, powerful interests are sometimes overcome, and change occurs despite their opposition.

In government, turnover has powerful effects on agendas. A change of administration, a substantial turnover of congressional seats, or a change of top personnel in an administrative agency all change agendas substantially. Agendas are also affected by jurisdictional boundaries. Competition for turf does not necessarily produce stalemate. Indeed, if a popular issue is involved, competition promotes rather than retards action. Another jurisdictional effect is the neglect of some potential agenda items because they are supposedly being handled elsewhere in government. Some subjects are very prominent on specialized agendas without being prominent on more general agendas.

Consensus building in the political arena, in contrast to consensus building among policy specialists, takes place through a bargaining process rather than by persuasion. Once participants sense that there is some movement, they leap in to protect their interests. This entry into the game, sometimes sudden entry, contributes to sharp agenda change, both because various interests receive some benefit from their participation, and because a generalized image of movement is created.

### *The Political Stream in the Larger Scheme of Things*

The political stream is an important promoter or inhibiter of high agenda status. All of the important actors in the system, not just the politicians, judge whether the balance of forces in the political stream favors action. They also judge whether the general public would at least tolerate the directions pursued at the elite level. Without that tolerance, the potential for retribution at the polls is likely to torpedo the idea in Congress.

We have been equating the various political forces—national mood, organized interests, election repercussions, the orientations of elected officials—with each other, and arguing that participants somehow total them up and arrive at a balance, or a notion of the preponderance of pressure in the political