

The following excerpts provide two different and very brief overviews of the elitist and pluralist theories.

The B. Guy Peters reading also incorporates the "State-Centric concept as well.

If these ideas interest you, be sure to go to the original sources. Such summaries, and certainly my lectures, do not do justice to the complexity and thought of the underlying research and thought.

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Section II

Readings on who
Controls The
Public Agenda

choices to produce the intended or desired impact on society. Even recurrent issues may not be returned easily to institutional agendas when existing programs are perceived to be "good enough," or when no new solutions are readily available. Indeed, the beneficiaries of a program may work hard to keep it off an active agenda, lest new legislation upset the existing policy.¹⁶

Jack Walker classes problems coming on the agenda in four groups.¹⁷ Walker defines issues that are dealt with time and time again as either "periodically recurring" or "sporadically recurring" issues (similar to our cyclical and recurrent issues). He also examines the role of crises in placing issues on the agenda, as well as the difficulties of having new, or "chosen," problems selected for inclusion on agendas. Within each institution, those interested in an issue must use their political power and skills to gain access to the agenda. The failure to be included on any one institutional agenda may be the end of an issue, at least for the time being.

Who Sets Agendas?

Establishing an agenda for society, or even for one institution, is a manifestly political activity, and control of the agenda gives substantial control over the ultimate policy choices. Therefore, to understand how agendas are determined requires some understanding of the manner in which political power is exercised in the United States. The idea of a punctuated equilibrium may be a good description of the process of change, but it does not explain how the punctuations come about. The most important answer to that question is that political power is used to alter the agenda.¹⁸ As might be imagined, there are a number of different conceptualizations of just how power is exercised. To enable us to understand the dynamics of agenda setting better, I will discuss three important theoretical approaches to the exercise of political power and the formation of policy agendas: *pluralist*, *elitist*, and *state-centric*.

Pluralist Approaches

The dominant, though far from undisputed, approach to policymaking in the United States is pluralism.¹⁹ Stated briefly, the pluralist approach assumes that policymaking in government is divided into a number of separate arenas and that the interests and individuals who have power in one arena do not necessarily have power in others. The American Medical Association, for example, may have a great deal of influence over health care legislation but little influence over education or defense policy. Furthermore, interests that are victorious at one time or in one arena will not necessarily win at another time or place. The pluralist approach to policymaking assumes that there is something of a

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 marketplace in policies, with a number of interests competing for power and influence, even within a single arena. The competitors are conceived as interest groups competing for access to institutions for decision making and for the attention of central actors in the hope of producing their desired outcomes. The groups are assumed, much as in the market model of the economy, to be relatively equal in power, so that on any one issue any interest might be victorious. Finally, the actors involved in the political process generally agree on the rules of the game, especially the rule that elections are the principal means of determining policy. The principal function of government is to serve as an umpire in this struggle among competing group interests and to enforce the victories through public law.

The pluralist approach to agenda setting would lead the observer to expect a relatively open marketplace of ideas for new policies. Any or all interested groups, as a whole or within a particular public institution, should have the opportunity to influence the agenda. These interest groups may not win every time, but neither will they systematically be excluded from decisions, and the agendas will be amenable to adding new items as sufficient political mobilization occurs. This style of agenda setting may be particularly appropriate for the United States, given the multiple institutions and multiple points of access in the structure of the system.²⁰ Even if an issue is blocked politically, the courts can enable otherwise-disadvantaged groups to bring it into the policy process, as happened with civil rights and with some aspects of sexual harassment.

Elitist Approaches

The elitist approach to American policymaking seeks to contradict the dominant pluralist approach. It assumes the existence of a power elite that dominates public decision making and whose interests are served in the policymaking process. In the elitist analysis, the same interests in society consistently win, and they are primarily those of business, the upper and middle classes, and whites.²¹ Analysts from an elitist perspective have pointed out that to produce the kind of equality assumed in the pluralist model would require relatively equal levels of organization by all interests in society. They then point out that relatively few interests of working- and lower-class individuals are effectively organized; compared to its European counterparts, American labor is not particularly well organized or powerful. Although all individuals in a democracy certainly have the right to organize, elitist theorists point to the relative lack of resources (e.g., time, money, organizational ability, and communication skills) among members of the lower economic classes.²² Thus, political organization for many poorer people, if it exists at all, may imply only token participation, and their voices will be drowned in the sea of middle-class voices described by E. E. Schattschneider.²³

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The implications of the elitist approach are rather obvious. If agenda formulation is crucial to the process of policymaking, then the ability of elites to keep certain issues off the agenda is crucial to their power. Adherents of this approach believe that the agenda in most democratic countries represents not the competitive struggle of relatively equal groups, as argued by the pluralist model, but the systematic use of elite power to decide which issues the political system will or will not consider. Jürgen Habermas, for example, argues that the elite uses its power systematically to exclude issues that would threaten its interests and that those "suppressed issues" represent a major threat to democracy.²⁴ If too many significant issues are kept off the agenda, the legitimacy of the political system can be threatened, along with its survival in the most extreme cases.

Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz's concept of "nondecisions" is important here. Bachrach and Baratz define a "nondecision" as a decision that results in the suppression or thwarting of a latent or manifest challenge to the values or interests of the decision maker. More explicitly, nondecision making is a means by which demands for change in the existing allocation of benefits and privileges in the community can be suffocated before they are even voiced; or kept covert; or killed off before they gain access to the relevant decision-making arena; or failing all else, maimed or destroyed in the decision-implementing stage of the policy process.²⁵ A decision not to alter the status quo is a decision, whether it is made overtly through the policymaking process or is the result of the application of power to prevent the issue from ever being discussed.

These issues may not remain suppressed forever, even in the face of powerful economic and political elites. For example, large-scale discontent with the banking industry and business in general has placed on the agenda a number of issues that might have been unthinkable previously. These responses to economic crisis have included placing caps on the salaries and bonuses of individuals in the private sector.

State-centric Approaches

Both the pluralist and elitist approaches to policymaking and agenda setting assume that the major source of policy ideas is in the environment of the policy-makers—primarily interest groups or other powerful interests in the society. It is, however, quite possible that the political system itself is responsible for its own agenda.²⁶ In a state-centric analysis, the environment is not filled with pressure groups but with "pressured groups," activated by government. As governments become more interested in managing the media and in influencing public opinion, the state-centric view may be more viable.²⁷

The state-centered concept of agenda setting conforms quite well to the "iron triangle" conception of American government but would place the bureaucratic

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agency or the congressional committee, not the pressure group, in the center of the policy process.²⁸ This approach does emphasize the role of specialized elites within government but, unlike elitist theory, does not assume that the elites are pursuing policies for their own personal gain. Certainly their organizations may obtain larger budgets and greater prestige from the addition of new programs, but the individual administrators have little or no opportunity to appropriate any of that budgetary increase.

In addition, the state-centric approach places the major locus of competition over agenda setting within government itself, rather than in the constellation of interests in society. Agencies must compete for legislative time and for budgets; committees must compete for attention for their particular legislative concerns; and individual Congress members must compete for consideration of their own bills and their own constituency concerns. These actors within government are more relevant in pushing agenda items than are interests in the society. This competition may be not only about getting an issue on the agenda, but also about framing it in a particular manner that will advantage one agency or another.²⁹

One interesting question arises about agenda setting in the state-centric approach: What are the relative powers of bureaucratic and legislative actors in setting the agenda? An early study by the Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations argued that the source of the continued expansion of the federal government was within Congress.³⁰ The authors of that study argued that Congress members, acting out of a desire to be reelected or from a sincere interest in solving certain policy problems, have been the major source of new items on the federal agenda. The behavior of Congress in the early twenty-first century would seem to support that contention, given the number of programs initiated by Congress, even when the legislative branch presumably was dominated by conservatives from 2000 to 2006.³¹ Other analyses have placed the source of most new policy ideas in the bureaucracy as much as, or more than, in Congress.³² Also, the nature of American government requires that the president and Congress work together to set agendas and make policy, and presidents may have as much to do with the expansion of the public sector as does Congress.³³ Because the chain of events leading to new policies is complex, it may be difficult to determine exactly where ideas originated, but there is (at least in this model) no shortage of policy advocates.³⁴

The agenda resulting from a state-centric process might be more conservative than one resulting from a pluralist process but less conservative than one from the elitist model. Government actors may be constrained in the amount of change they can advocate on their own initiative; they may have to wait for a time when their ideas will be acceptable to the general public. Members of Congress can adopt a crusading stance, but that is a choice usually denied to the typical bureaucratic agency. Except in rare instances—efforts by the surgeon

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general and the Food and Drug Administration to reduce cigarette smoking, perhaps—a government-sponsored agency may be ahead of public opinion but only slightly so.

When we consider a state-centric approach in the United States, we must also remember that state and local governments are often far ahead of the federal government in addressing issues. Historically that was the case for issues such as social security and environmental regulation, and it is true at present for a number of more inclusive programs of health care. At least a dozen states have investigated implementing broader programs to address the health care needs of their citizens. For example, in 2006 Massachusetts enacted a health care reform law that mandated health insurance for all its residents and provided subsidies for those who could not afford to purchase it. State innovations like this one helped pave the way for the emergence of health care reform as a major point on President Obama's agenda.

Which approach to policymaking and agenda formation is most descriptive of the process in the United States? The answer is probably all of them, for the proponents of each can muster a great deal of evidence for their position. More important, one approach rather than another might better describe policymaking for particular kinds of problems and issues. For example, we would expect policies that are very much the concern of government itself (e.g., civil service laws or perhaps even foreign affairs) to be more heavily influenced by state-centric policymaking than other kinds of issues. Certain kinds of problems that directly affect powerful economic interests would be best understood through elite analysis. Energy policy and its relationship to the major oil companies might fit into that category. Finally, policy areas with a great deal of interest group activity and relatively high levels of group involvement by both clients and producers—education is a good example—might be best understood through the pluralist approach. Unfortunately, these categorizations are largely speculative, for political scientists have only begun to produce the kind of detailed analysis required to track issues as they move on and off agendas.³⁵

From Problem to Issue: How to Get Problems on the Agenda

Problems do not move themselves on and off agendas. Nevertheless, a number of their characteristics can affect their chances of becoming a part of an active, systemic, or institutional agenda. We should remember, however, that most problems do not come with these characteristics clearly visible to most citizens or even to most political actors. Agendas must be constructed and the issues defined by a social and political process in a manner that will make them most amenable to political action.³⁶ Furthermore, it usually requires an active policy entrepreneur to do the political packaging that can make an issue appear on an agenda.³⁷

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1960s as incremental, but the process of 1969–1970, which culminated in the passage of the Clean Air Act, was speculative augmentation.

PUBLIC CHOICE

Another common approach to decision making is called public choice. **Public choice theory** applies assumptions about the market or economic models to public decision making. Market models assume that decision makers in government and individual citizens pursue their own self-interest. Elected officials strive to get reelected, bureaucrats strive to advance their careers, and citizens strive to advance their positions. Public choice theory assumes that government operates more efficiently when it is decentralized and maximizes the choices of individual citizens. Public choice theory has been challenged on empirical grounds; that is, critics have demonstrated that citizens do not necessarily favor public policies more consistent with their self-interest and that decentralized governments are not necessarily the most efficient.

ELITIST AND PLURALIST THEORY

For a long time elitist and pluralist theories dominated the debate over policy making. Each theory focused on a different aspect of political power. Advocates of **elitist theory** assumed that power was concentrated in a small group of economic or corporate elites directly involved in making public policies. Proponents of **pluralist theory** assumed that power was dispersed among competing, organized interest groups and that new policies arose from a process of bargaining, negotiation, and compromise.

The Elitist Perspective

Sociologist C. Wright Mills expressed elitist theory in his classic book, *The Power Elite* (1973). He identified several types and levels of elites: the corporate and military elites at the national level of government and the economic elites at the local level. Contemporary elite theorists include Thomas Dye and William Domhoff. Dye has written a series of studies of federal policy making that focus on presidents from Nixon to Clinton, and on the extent to which government officials are drawn from the corporate sector.

Domhoff (2009; 1996) studied policy making from an elitist perspective. Although he agreed with a number of the assumptions of the pluralist and state-centered explanations of policy change, he insisted that these theories grossly underestimate the extent to which leaders from the corporate sector dominate the government and the policy-making process. Summarizing his study of the enactment of Social Security, Domhoff wrote:

The main work on the program was done by experts from a private organization called Industrial Relations Counselors, Inc., which had been founded in 1921 by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., to search for ways to deal with labor unrest and avoid unionization. The organization was closely linked to both the family's main oil companies (today no longer controlled by the family) and charitable foundations . . .

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The legislation that went before Congress had the backing of several major industrialists of the time, who were serving on an advisory commission. These supporters included the chief executive officers of Standard Oil of New Jersey, General Electric, and Filene's Department Store of Boston, all prominent figures in the policy-formation network. (2009, 271)

Domhoff concluded that a rival faction of the dominant class developed Social Security policy. Among this faction were liberal corporate leaders. Other more conservative corporate leaders, the National Association of Manufacturers, and southern plantation owners opposed federal social policies. Domhoff argued that members of the dominant class also influence the policy-making process through their direct involvement in policy-making networks, their support for policy-making foundations and research institutes, their presence in policy-making positions in government, their complex connections with the media, their influence in the electoral process, and their ability to launch public relations campaigns.

Group/Pluralist Theory

Group theory is based on three assumptions about society and government. First, people are social beings and exist in a social or organizational context. They belong to a religious organization (church, synagogue, or mosque), professional association, labor union, block club, social club, sorority or fraternity, or some other form of organization. Even the family is a form of organization.

Second, political interests are expressed in the context of political organizations. As individuals are impacted by issues, they either mobilize the organizations they are a part of or form new organizations. For example, when educational issues impact parents, they get involved in an existing parent organization or they form a new one (Truman 1993).

Finally, group theorists assume that government is responsive to organized political interests that pressure government to respond to their concerns. Sometimes interest groups have mutually exclusive concerns. In these cases, government mediates among the different groups. For example, environmental groups are concerned with the long-term results of the loss of the rainforest. Logging companies are concerned with what they perceive to be excessive regulations that threaten their industry. Proponents of group theory envision government being concerned with both groups, acting as a mediator, and engaging in a process of bargaining and compromise.

Pluralists are group theorists who see the interest group process as an alternative to majority-based democracy. They argue that most people are concerned only with issues that impact them directly, or when they have a stake in the outcome. For example, if a major corporation decides to build a new production facility in a city, then those who may gain jobs or job security from the facility may actively support the project. Restaurant owners who are likely to profit from an increase in business may organize and support the project. Those who might lose their homes or have a stake in preserving the status quo may organize in opposition to the project. Homeowners can go to court to secure a more acceptable price for their homes. Labor unions, business associations, local chambers of commerce, and neighborhood and community organizations may all participate in shaping public policies surrounding the project. As mentioned, pluralists insist that people become

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involved in the political process when issues affect them directly. Public policy change is explained in terms of the interest group process. The process is democratic so long as people have a right to organize and participate in the policy-making process, and so long as government officials respond to the people's interests (Cobb and Elder 1983; Dahl 1970).

Critiques of Elitist and Pluralist Theories

THE PLURALIST CRITIQUE OF ELITISM

Pluralists are critical of elitists. They maintain that elitists confuse corporate leaders who have a reputation for power with political leaders who actually have a direct influence on the policy-making process. Corporate leaders or economic elites may have little or no interest in most policy areas such as education, forestry, transportation, or highway safety. Pluralists argue that elitists falsely assume that power is fixed and concentrated among the economic elite, when in fact it is fluid, changing from time to time and from one policy area to another.

THE BIAS OF PLURALISM

A few scholars have criticized the **bias of pluralism**. These critics have identified two types of biases in the model. The pluralists favor organized groups. E. S. Schattschneider noted, "The range of organized, identifiably known groups is amazingly narrow" (1975, 32). There are many advocacy organizations, such as the Children's Defense Fund or the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP). However, many interests are unorganized and shut out of the interest-group arena. They will be ineffective as long as no organizations are present to represent their interests. For example, undocumented workers, homeless people, pregnant teenagers, prison inmates, and food stamp and Medicaid users are rarely organized and, thus, are often excluded from the policy-making process.

Another type of bias is socioeconomic. In this case bias favors upper-strata interests. Schattschneider commented:

The vice of the group theory is that it conceals the most significant aspect of the system. The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper class accent. (1975, 34-35)

William Hudson (2012) expands on Schattschneider's point. He noted that about 70 percent of lobbying groups operating in Washington, DC, represent business interests, whereas citizen groups account for 4.1 percent and labor unions 1.7 percent. He identified three types of business organizations:

- General business organizations such as the US Chamber of Commerce, with about 250,000 members nationally; the National Association of Manufacturers, representing the country's largest industrial firms; and the Business Roundtable, consisting of about 200 corporate leaders.
- Trade organizations consisting of groups such as the American Bankers Association and the National Association of Home Builders.
- Lobbyists representing individual corporations or conglomerates such as General Electric and General Motors.

The point is that business and corporate interests tend to dominate the pluralist arena.

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Charles Lindblom (1978), a proponent of pluralism, acknowledged the bias and attributed it to the importance of businesses in maintaining a stable economy and generating resources essential for the support of government. Because of the role and function of businesses in a market economy, Lindblom concluded that they have a privileged position in relation to government.

In the eyes of government officials, therefore, businessmen do not appear simply as the representatives of a special interest, as representatives of interest groups do. They appear as functionaries performing functions that government officials regard as indispensable. . . . Any government official who understands the requirements of his position and the responsibilities that market-oriented systems throw on businessmen will therefore grant them a privileged position. (1978, 175)

Businesses employ people and provide the economic base for the taxable revenue that supports government. Moreover, businesses have more resources to mobilize against elected officials who support policies hostile to their interests. For these reasons, the interest group or pluralist process suffers from a business or corporate interest bias.

CYCLICAL THEORIES

There are many cyclical theories of policy change. This section examines two of them: the liberal-conservative cycle and the policy cycle. Both assume that policy making is an ongoing, cyclical process.

Liberal-Conservative Cycle Theory

The liberal-conservative theory assumes that public policies change from liberal to conservative and back to liberal again. The theory applies to long-term policy changes occurring over several generations and focuses on the pattern of policy change and less on the factors contributing to the change. Liberal-conservative theory is used in Chapter 3 to discuss the pattern of policy change in the twentieth century. The liberal periods are the 1930s, 1960s, and 1990s; the conservative periods include the 1920s, 1950s, and 1980s. The first decade of this century, the 2000s, was clearly a conservative period. This decade ended with the rise of the Tea Party movement. It is difficult to predict the outcome of the current decade. However, this decade has witnessed both a conservative (Tea Party) and a liberal movement, the Occupy movement.

There are four reasons why policies oscillate from liberal to conservative and back. First, grassroots organizations that produce liberal policies have difficulty sustaining themselves over time. After a liberal policy is established, members of these organizations often lose interest. Membership declines. This happened to environmental groups after the passage of the Clean Air Acts of 1970 and 1990. For another example, the late 1960s saw an expansion of Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), an income support program for poor families with children. However, welfare rights organizations that had supported the expansion disappeared by the late 1970s, giving rise to cuts in the program in the early 1980s.