

advantage of politically propitious moments but also claim that their proposal is a solution to a pressing problem. Likewise, entrepreneurs concerned about a particular problem search for solutions in the policy stream to couple to their problem, then try to take advantage of political receptivity at certain points in time to push the package of problem and solution. At points along the way there are partial couplings: solutions to problems, but without a receptive political climate; politics to proposals, but without a sense that a compelling problem is being solved; politics and problems both calling for action, but without an available alternative to advocate. But the complete joining of all three streams dramatically enhances the odds that a subject will become firmly fixed on a decision agenda.

Governmental agendas, lists of subjects to which governmental officials are paying serious attention, can be set solely in either problems or political streams, and solely by visible actors. Officials can pay attention to an important problem, for instance, without having a solution to it. Or politics may highlight a subject, even in the absence of either problem or solution. A decision agenda, a list of subjects that is moving into position for an authoritative decision, such as legislative enactment or presidential choice, is set somewhat differently. The probability of an item rising on a decision agenda is dramatically increased if all three elements—problem, policy proposal, and political receptivity—are linked in a single package. Conversely, partial couplings are less likely to rise on decision agendas. Problems that come to decisions without solutions attached, for instance, are not as likely to move into position for an authoritative choice as if they did have solutions attached. And proposals that lack political backing are less likely to move into position for a decision than ones that do have that backing.

A return to our case studies in Chapter 1 illustrates these points. With aviation deregulation, awareness of problems, development of proposals, and swings of national mood all proceeded separately in their own streams. Increasingly through the late 1960s and early 1970s, people became convinced that the economy contained substantial inefficiencies to which the burdens of government regulation contributed. Proposals for deregulation were formed among academics and other specialists, through a softening-up process that included journal articles, testimony, conferences, and other forums. In the 1970s, politicians sensed a change in national mood toward increasing hostility to government size and intrusiveness. All three of the components, therefore, came together at about the same time. The key to movement was the coupling of the policy stream's literature on deregulation with the political incentive to rein in government growth, and those two elements with the sense that there was a real, important, and increasing problem with economic inefficiency.

The waterway user charge case illustrates a similar coupling. A proposal, some form of user charge, had been debated among transportation specialists for years. The political stream produced an administration receptive to imposing a user charge. This combination of policy and politics was coupled with a problem—the necessity, in a time of budget stringency, to repair or replace aging facilities like Lock and Dam 26. Thus did the joining of problem, policy, and politics push the waterway user charge into position on a decision agenda.

By contrast, national health insurance during the Carter years did not have all three components joined. Proponents could argue that there were real problems of medical access, though opponents countered that many of the most severe problems were being addressed through Medicare, Medicaid, and private insurance. The political stream did produce a heavily Democratic Congress and an administration that favored some sort of health insurance initiative. It seemed for a time that serious movement was under way. But the policy stream had not settled on a single, worked-up, viable alternative from among the many proposals floating around. The budget constraint, itself a severe problem, and politicians' reading of the national mood, which seemed to be against costly new initiatives, also proved to be too much to overcome. The coupling was incomplete, and the rise of national health insurance on the agenda proved fleeting. Then the election of Ronald Reagan sealed its fate, at least for the time being.

Success in one area contributes to success in adjacent areas. Once aviation deregulation passed, for instance, government turned with a vengeance to other deregulation proposals, and passed several in short order. These spillovers, as we have called them, occur because politicians sense the payoff in repeating a successful formula in a similar area, because the winning coalition can be transferred, and because advocates can argue from successful precedent. These spillovers are extremely powerful agenda setters, seemingly bowling over even formidable opposition that stands in the way.

Policy Windows

An open policy window is an opportunity for advocates to push their pet solutions or to push attention to their special problems. Indeed, advocates in and around government keep their proposals and their problems at hand, waiting for these opportunities to occur. They have pet solutions, for instance, and wait for problems to float by to which they can attach their solutions, or for developments in the political stream that they can use to their advantage. Or they wait for similar opportunities to bring their special problems to the fore, such as the appearance of a new administration that would be concerned with these problems. That administration opens a window for them to bring greater attention to the problems about which they are concerned.

Windows are opened by events in either the problems or political streams. Thus there are problems windows and political windows. A new problem appears, for instance, creating an opportunity to attach a solution to it. Or such events in the political stream as turnover of elected officials, swings of national mood, or vigorous lobbying might create opportunities to push some problems and proposals to the fore and dampen the chances to highlight other problems and proposals.

Sometimes, windows open quite predictably. Legislation comes up for renewal on a schedule, for instance, creating opportunities to change, expand, or abolish certain programs. At other times, windows open quite unpredictably, as when an airliner crashes or a fluky election produces an unexpected turnover in

key decision makers. Predictable or unpredictable, open windows are small and scarce. Opportunities come, but they also pass. Windows do not stay open long. If a chance is missed, another must be awaited.

The scarcity and the short duration of the opening of a policy window create a powerful magnet for problems and proposals. When a window opens, problems and proposals flock to it. People concerned with particular problems see the open window as their opportunity to address or even solve these problems. Advocates of particular proposals see the open window as the opportunity to enact them. As a result, the system comes to be loaded down with problems and proposals. If participants are willing to invest sufficient resources, some of the problems can be resolved and some of the proposals enacted. Other problems and proposals drift away because insufficient resources are mobilized.

Open windows present opportunities for the complete linkage of problems, proposals, and politics, and hence opportunities to move packages of the three joined elements up on decision agendas. One particularly crucial coupling is the link of a solution to something else. Advocates of pet proposals watch for developments in the political stream that they can take advantage of, or try to couple their solution to whatever problems are floating by at the moment. Once they have made the partial coupling of proposal to either problem or politics, they attempt to join all three elements, knowing that the chances for enactment are considerably enhanced if they can complete the circle. Thus they try to hook packages of problems and solutions to political forces, packages of proposals and political incentives to perceived problems, or packages of problems and politics to some proposal taken from the policy stream.

ENTREPRENEURS

Policy entrepreneurs are people willing to invest their resources in return for future policies they favor. They are motivated by combinations of several things: their straightforward concern about certain problems, their pursuit of such self-serving benefits as protecting or expanding their bureaucracy's budget or claiming credit for accomplishment, their promotion of their policy values, and their simple pleasure in participating. We have encountered them at three junctures: pushing their concerns about certain problems higher on the agenda, pushing their pet proposals during a process of softening up the system, and making the couplings we just discussed. These entrepreneurs are found at many locations; they might be elected officials, career civil servants, lobbyists, academics, or journalists. No one type of participant dominates the pool of entrepreneurs.

As to problems, entrepreneurs try to highlight the indicators that so importantly dramatize their problems. They push for one kind of problem definition rather than another. Because they know that focusing events can move subjects higher on the agenda, entrepreneurs push to create such things as personal viewings of problems by policy makers and the diffusion of a symbol that captures their problem in a nutshell. They also may prompt the kinds of feedback

about current governmental performance that affect agendas: letters, complaints, and visits to officials.

As to proposals, entrepreneurs are central to the softening-up process. They write papers, give testimony, hold hearings, try to get press coverage, and meet endlessly with important and not-so-important people. They float their ideas as trial balloons, get reactions, revise their proposals in the light of reactions, and float them again. They aim to soften up the mass public, specialized publics, and the policy community itself. The process takes years of effort.

As to coupling, entrepreneurs once again appear when windows open. They have their pet proposals or their concerns about problems ready, and push them at the propitious moments. In the pursuit of their own goals, they perform the function for the system of coupling solutions to problems, problems to political forces, and political forces to proposals. The joining of the separate streams described earlier depends heavily on the appearance of the right entrepreneur at the right time. In our case study of Health Maintenance Organizations in Chapter 1, Paul Ellwood appeared on the scene to link his pet proposal (HMOs) to the problem of medical care costs and to the political receptivity created by the Nixon administration casting about for health initiatives. The problems and political streams had opened a window, and Ellwood cleverly took advantage of that opportunity to push his HMO proposal, joining all three streams in the process.

The appearance of entrepreneurs when windows are open, as well as their more enduring activities of trying to push their problems and proposals into prominence, are central to our story. They bring several key resources into the fray: their claims to a hearing, their political connections and negotiating skills, and their sheer persistence. An item's chances for moving up on an agenda are enhanced considerably by the presence of a skillful entrepreneur, and dampened considerably if no entrepreneur takes on the cause, pushes it, and makes the critical couplings when policy windows open.

CONCLUSION

The ideas we have explored in the pages of this book have a few important properties which it is appropriate to highlight as we draw to a close. These properties fall into two general categories: the differences between our model of these processes and other notions, and the places of randomness and pattern.

Other Notions

The ideas developed in this book are quite unlike many other theories that could have captured our attention. For example, events do not proceed neatly in stages, steps, or phases. Instead, independent streams that flow through the system all at once, each with a life of its own and equal with one another, become coupled when a window opens. Thus participants do not first identify problems and then seek solutions for them; indeed, advocacy of solutions often precedes

the highlighting of problems to which they become attached. Agendas are not first set and then alternatives generated; instead, alternatives must be advocated for a long period before a short-run opportunity presents itself on an agenda. Events do not necessarily proceed in similar order in several different case studies; instead, many things happen separately in each case, and become coupled at critical points.

Other notions have elements of truth, and do describe parts of the processes, but they are incomplete. A pressure model, for instance, does describe parts of the political stream, but ideas are as important as pressure in other parts of the processes. Agenda items do not necessarily start in a larger systemic or public arena and transfer to a formal or governmental agenda; indeed, the flow is just as often in the reverse direction. As we argued in Chapter 4, a concentration on origins does not take us very far because ideas come from many locations, not only has a monopoly on leadership or prescience, and tracing origins involves an infinite regress. We were drawn to the importance of combinations rather than single origins, and to a climate of receptivity that allows ideas to take off. Also in Chapter 4, we portrayed comprehensive-rational and incremental models as incomplete. Participants sometimes do approach their decisions quite comprehensively and decide quite rationally, but the larger process is less tidy. Incrementalism does describe the slow process of generating alternatives, and often does describe small legislative and bureaucratic changes stretching over many years, but does not describe agenda change well. Thus, in addition to arguing for one way of looking at the policy formation world, we have argued what the world does *not* look like.

On Randomness and Pattern

We still encounter considerable doses of messiness, accident, fortuitous coupling, and dumb luck. Subjects sometimes rise on agendas without our understanding completely why. We are sometimes surprised by the couplings that take place. The fortuitous appearance or absence of key participants affect outcomes. There remains some degree of unpredictability.

Yet it would be a grave mistake to conclude that the processes explored in this book are essentially random. Some degree of pattern is evident in the fundamental sources: processes within each stream, processes that structure couplings, and general constraints on the system.

First, processes operating within each stream limit randomness. Within the problems stream, not every problem has an equal chance of surfacing. The conditions that are not highlighted by indicators, focusing events, or feedback are less likely to be brought to the attention of governmental officials than conditions that do have those advantages. Furthermore, not all conditions are defined as problems. Conditions that do not conflict with important values or are placed in an inappropriate category are less likely to be translated into problems than conditions that are evaluated or categorized appropriately. In the policy stream, not every proposal surfaces. Selection criteria make participants of initial noise. Proposals that meet such standards as technical feasibility

value acceptability, public acquiescence, politicians' receptivity, and budgetary stringency are more likely to survive than those that fail to meet such standards. In the political stream, not every environment or event is equally likely. Some groups lack the resources that others have, some swings of national mood (e.g., to socialism) are unlikely, and some types of turnover of elected officials are more likely than others.

Second, some couplings are more likely than others. Everything cannot interact with everything else. For one thing, the timing of an item's arrival in its stream affects its ability to be joined to items in other streams. A window may open, for instance, but a solution may not be available at that time in the policy stream, so the window closes without a coupling of solution to problem or politics. Or a proposal may be ready in the policy stream, but the political conditions are not right for it to be pushed, again limiting the coupling possibilities. In addition to timing, germaneness limits the coupling possibilities. Not all solutions have an equal possibility of being discussed with all problems. Instead, participants have some sense of what would constitute an appropriate solution to a problem. There is some room for different solutions being hooked to a given problem or different problems being hooked to a given solution, but participants also set some limits on the appropriate couplings. Finally, the appearance of a skillful entrepreneur enhances the probability of a coupling. Potential couplings without entrepreneurs are less likely because they fail for lack of someone willing to invest resources in them.

Third, there are various constraints on the system, limits that provide a basic structure within which the participants play the games we have described.¹ The political stream provides many of these constraints. Participants sense some boundaries that are set on their actions by the mood of the mass public, and narrower boundaries set by the preferences of specialized publics and elected politicians. As I have argued elsewhere, governmental officials sense these limits and believe they must operate within them.² The budget imposes constraints as well. Costly proposals are not likely to be addressed in times of economic contraction or budget stringency, but might be more likely to receive attention in more robust times. Various rules of procedure, including the constitution, statutes, prescribed jurisdictions, precedents, customary decision-making modes, and other legal requirements, all impose structures on the participants. Finally, the scarcity of open windows constrains participants. They compete for limited space on agendas, and queue up for their turn. Even the selection criteria used by specialists in the policy stream anticipate these constraints.

These various types of pattern—dynamics internal to each stream, limits on coupling possibilities, and more general constraints—help us understand why some items never rise on policy agendas. Chapter 1 set forth several such items

¹For a good discussion of constraints, see Roger W. Cobb and Charles D. Elder, "Communications and Public Policy," in Dan Nimmo and Keith Saunders, eds., *Handbook of Political Communications* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1981), pp. 402-408.

²John W. Kingdon, *Congressman's Voting Decisions*, 3rd ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), Chapter 12.

in health and transportation in the late 1970s. Some of them, such as long-term care and mental health, remained low, not because participants would not recognize real problems there but because they had little sense for alternatives that might be available as solutions. Some agenda items, such as buses, did not have powerful constituencies behind them in the political stream and failed to receive attention for lack of such advocates. Items such as rail nationalization failed because of powerful opposition. Others were not prominent on health and transportation agendas because systems of specialization and jurisdiction limited their movement. Items like direct delivery of medical care and food and drug regulation were indeed high on certain specialized agendas, but not on the larger health agenda. Finally, some items like environmental impact and transportation safety had been prominent earlier, but were played out by the time of these interviews, according to dynamics we explored when examining why problems fade. Thus this study helps to understand not only the appearance of some items on agendas, but also the failure of other items to appear.

Finally, it should be noted that all of our ideas are probabilistic. I have tried to adhere to such formulations as "the chances are improved or lessened" and "these events are more likely than others." In describing these processes, hard-and-fast rules and the specification of conditions that *must* be met seem less fruitful than a quotation of odds. Constraints, for instance, are not absolute. Instead, they are conditions that make some events highly unlikely and other events more likely to occur. They do impose structure on the system, but its structure that still allows room for some gray areas and some unpredictability. A budget constraint, for instance, is subject to some interpretation in the light of knowledge gaps and participants' values, but its operation still does make attention to some proposals at some points in time highly unlikely.

Thus we have made some progress in understanding the vague and imprecise phenomena we wanted to understand at the beginning of our journey. To the extent that our vision is still obscured, the world itself may be somewhat opaque. But further research and thinking beyond what is presented in this book may also allow us to see more clearly.

CHAPTER 10

Some Further Reflections

Now that we have wrapped up the central arguments in the book, let us see how those arguments stand the test of time. This chapter, added for the second edition, does two things. First, I describe some events in the 1980s and 1990s to show that the concepts developed to understand agenda setting and alternative specification are not relevant simply to the time period I originally studied, but remain useful in understanding policy formation. Second, I discuss the original arguments and theories in the light of the literature and commentaries about the book since it first appeared, and present some of my reflections on the picture of agenda setting presented here and on the more general enterprise of modeling these sorts of processes.

NEW CASE STUDIES

This book began with four brief case studies—health maintenance organizations; national health insurance during the Carter administration; deregulation in aviation, trucking, and railroads; and waterway user charges. Throughout the book, we have returned to those case studies to show how the general concepts and theories can be used to understand particular real-world events. Now we come full circle, by presenting three new case studies drawn from the period since the original research was completed.

We concentrate here on the "Reagan revolution" in the federal budget which took place during the first ten months of 1981, the tax reform act of 1986, and the health care initiative of the Clinton administration in 1993. Most observers will recognize these three cases as among the major public policy events of the post-Carter administration years. I will not retell these familiar stories in great detail. Instead, I intend to sketch the events in each case with an eye to using