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Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies

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Ralph K. Huitt

and

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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 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.

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.

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?"

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-

[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.

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."

The Importance of the Available Alternative

In Chapter 1, we distinguished between governmental and decision agendas. Governmental agendas include subjects to which people in and around government are paying serious attention. Decision agendas include only those subjects that are moving into position for some sort of authoritative decision, such as legislative enactment or presidential action. Items are sometimes found on a governmental agenda without a solution attached to them. People might worry about a particular problem without having a solution to it, for instance, and forces in the political stream might prompt attention to an item even though there is no viable proposal connected to it.

But normally, before a subject can attain a solid position on a decision agenda, a viable alternative is available for decision makers to consider. It is not enough that there is a problem, even quite a pressing problem. There also is generally a solution ready to go, already softened up, already worked out. As Paul Light says in his study of the president's agenda, the subject with an "available alternative" is the one that rises on the agenda, crowding out equally worthy subjects that do not have a viable, worked-out proposal attached.[17] One congressional committee staffer told me, when asked how they choose the items they work on from the long list of items they could consider:

> It's partly a matter of what's ready. If there's a bill already drafted, we can go ahead with it fairly easily—tinker with it, amend it, and so forth. If we have to draft a bill, then sometimes it waits, and gets shoved aside in the press of things that *are* ready.

The availability of a viable alternative is not a sufficient condition for a high position on a decision agenda, since many good proposals kick around the system for a long time before the lightning strikes. But the chances for a problem to rise on the *governmental* agenda increase if a solution is attached to the problem. The chances for a problem to rise on the *decision* agenda are *dramatically* increased if a solution is attached.

[16]See Polsby, ed., *Congressional Behavior*, op. cit., p. 7.

[17]Paul C. Light, *The President's Agenda* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), pp. 147–149.

In the health area, for instance, long-term care, the desirability of getting people to alter their own health habits, and persuading physicians to settle in underserved areas are three subjects that could conceivably be prominent on the governmental agenda. But when asked why such major problems were not getting more attention, one bureaucrat replied, "Because we don't know what to do about them." As another health respondent said, "It's difficult to get mileage out of something that we don't have any approach to solving." The lack of a consensus proposal for national health insurance at the beginning of the Carter administration was a major reason for the stall in the first couple of years. Even genuine advocates disagreed fundamentally over how comprehensive the benefits should be, the extent of mandated private as opposed to governmental coverage, the acceptability of deductibles and copayment, and a host of other issues. The proposal, in other words, was not ready to go. In marked contrast, airline deregulation immediately took off. The Ford administration proposals had laid the groundwork, Senators Howard Cannon and Edward Kennedy had agreed on a proposal, and the administration simply adopted that bill wholesale as their own. The alternative was available, worked through, and ready to go.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has considered the processes by which proposals are generated, debated, redrafted, and accepted for serious consideration. Much of this process takes place in communities of specialists. These communities can be quite tightly knit or quite fragmented. Among the consequences of fragmentation are disjointed policy, lack of common orientations, and agenda instability.

We have portrayed the progress of ideas and policy proposals as a selection process in which a large number of possible policy initiatives is narrowed to a short list of proposals that are seriously considered. Getting the policy community receptive to a new idea takes a long period of softening up. Policy entrepreneurs—people who are willing to invest resources of various kinds in hopes of a future return in the form of policies they favor—push their ideas in many ways. They aim to soften up the general public, more specialized publics, and the policy community itself. Only after years of effort are proposals brought to the point where they can be seriously considered. During this consideration, recombinations of already-familiar elements are as important as fresh initiatives: There is nothing new under the sun at the same time that there is substantial change. Ideas themselves turn out to be as important as political pressure.

Proposals that meet several criteria enhance their chance of survival. They are technically feasible—worked out and capable of being implemented. They are acceptable in the light of the values held by members of the policy community. These values include not only notions of the proper role and size of government, but also concepts of equity and efficiency. Specialists in the policy

community also anticipate the constraints that their proposals will face. They tailor their proposals to an anticipated budget constraint, they consider whether their proposals will gain the acquiescence of the mass public and specialized publics, and they alter their proposals to gain the approval of elected officials.

The policy stream thus produces a short list of proposals. This short list is not necessarily a consensus in the policy community on the one proposal that meets their criteria; rather, it is an agreement that a few proposals are prominent. Having a viable alternative available for adoption facilitates the high placement of a subject on a governmental agenda, and dramatically increases the chances for placement on a decision agenda.

CHAPTER 7

The Political Stream

Flowing along independently of the problems and policy streams is the political stream, composed of such things as public mood, pressure group campaigns, election results, partisan or ideological distributions in Congress, and changes of administration. Quite apart from what happens in the community of specialists, and quite apart from bringing problems to the attention of people in and around government, such events as a new majority in Congress or a new administration occur. These developments in the political stream have a powerful effect on agendas, as new agenda items become prominent and others are shelved until a more propitious time. The new Reagan administration, for example, set agendas all over town, making some things possible that were impossible before, making other things out of the question, and creating a receptivity to some ideas but not to others.

Let us be clear of our language. When I use the word "political" in this context, I use the word in its colloquial Washington sense. Political science defines "political" very broadly, including just about any activity related to the authoritative allocation of values,[1] or to the distribution of benefits and costs.[2] The intra-Washington definition, implicitly, is more narrow. "Political" factors in such parlance are electoral, partisan, or pressure group factors. As one talks to practitioners of the art, they use "political" motivations, for example, to refer to politicians' attention to voter reactions, their skewering of members of the opposite political party, and their efforts to obtain the support of important interest group leaders. I employ this more narrow usage here.

[1]David Easton, *The Political System*, 2nd ed. (New York: Knopf, 1971), p. 129.

[2]For example, Harold Lasswell, *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1958).