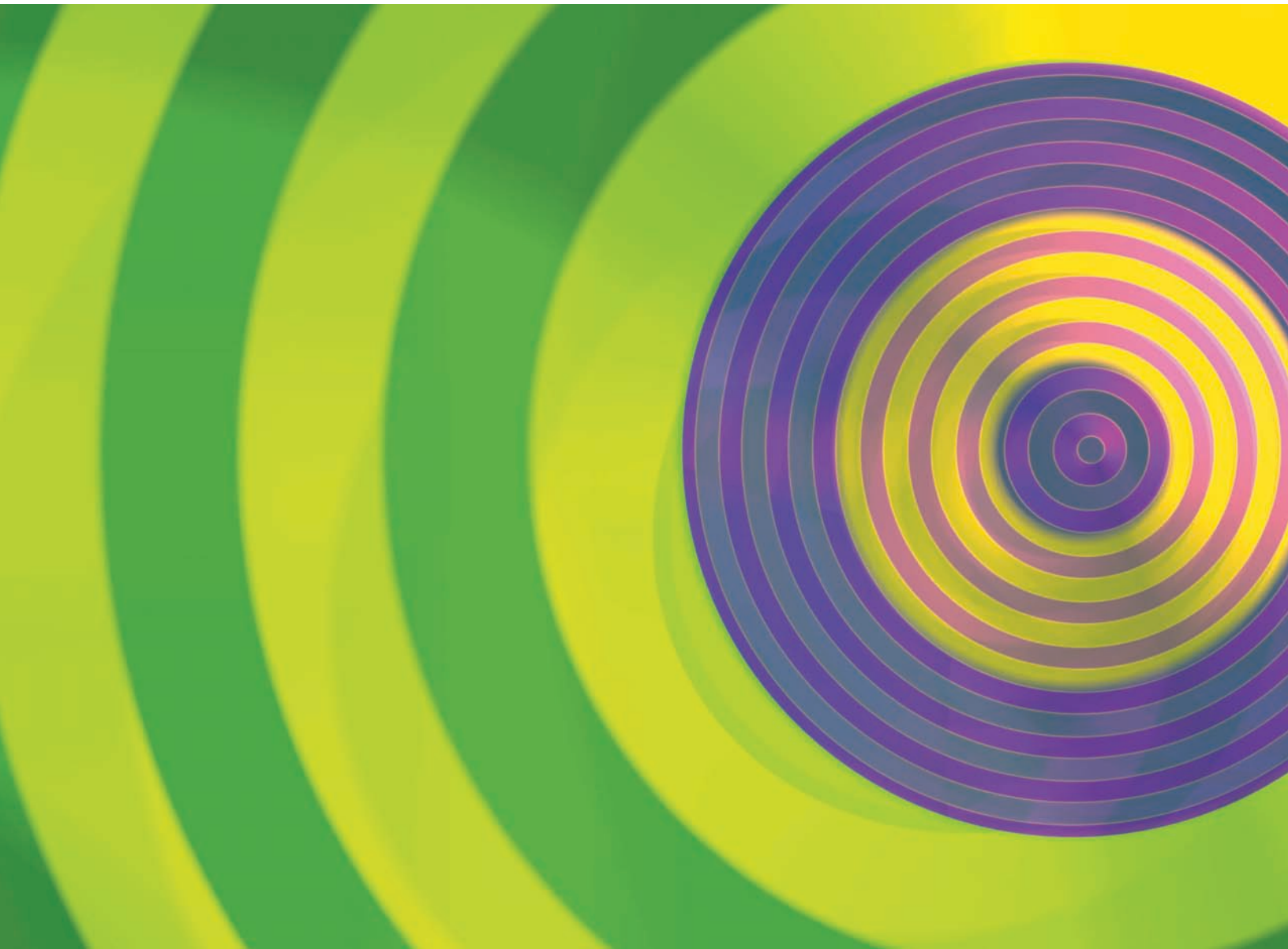**Pearson New International Edition**

**Agendas, Alternatives,
and Public Policies
John W. Kingdon
Second Edition**

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people really want national health insurance. I'm inclined to think that it goes the other way, actually. Well-known politicians make an issue, and 'the people' come aboard." A well-known advocate of national health insurance agreed: "People often talk in terms of the public clamor, but in my experience, the public clamor follows the activities of a circle of experts, rather than the other way around." As we noticed when we were discussing the mass media, the agenda of items the public thinks is the most important is strongly affected by media content. To the extent that media are reporting the activities of political leaders, which we also noticed happened frequently, the public opinion agenda is being affected by the governmental agenda.

Thus models of agenda setting that rely on some form of translation of public preferences into government seem incomplete. For instance, some authors discuss ways items are taken from a public agenda and placed on a governmental agenda.[30] Quite often, items on a governmental agenda never were on a public agenda, or they were on a public agenda in a form so inchoate as to have only minimal impact on governmental officials.[31] People like presidents, senators, and cabinet secretaries have their own goals, their own proposals, their own agendas. These officials may attempt to mobilize the public in support of their objectives, but on many occasions they will choose not to. When they do mobilize expanded publics, furthermore, it may be more in pursuit of passage than for agenda setting. Presidents sometimes set the agenda, for instance, then mobilize the public to pass their legislative proposals.[32]

CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined the importance of various participants outside of government. Interest groups are among the most important. Because they are often concerned with protecting current benefits and prerogatives, they affect the governmental agenda more by blocking potential items than by promoting them. Rather than structuring a governmental agenda, interest groups often try to insert their preferred alternatives into a discussion once the agenda is already set by some other process or participant. Groups with electoral clout, the ability to affect the economy, cohesion, and organization have better initial resources

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[30]For instance, see Roger Cobb and Charles Elder, *Participation in American Politics* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1972), Chapter 7; and Robert Eyestone, *From Social Issues to Public Policy* (New York: Wiley, 1978).

[31]For example, Nelson says that child abuse was on the Children's Bureau agenda *before* it made a public opinion agenda. See Nelson, *Making an Issue of Child Abuse,* op. cit., Chapter 3.

[32]Van der Eijk and Kok, after a most interesting review of the relationship between public and governmental agendas which largely employs a basic "public input and government output" model, end by questioning the assumption that the public affects governments, rather than the other way around. See C. van der Eijk and W. J. P. Kok, "Nondecisions Reconsidered," *Acta Politica* 10 (July 1975): 277–301.

than those lacking in such respects. But even groups with excellent initial resources do not always carry the day.

Academics, researchers, and consultants affect the alternatives more than the agenda, and affect long-term directions more than short-term outcomes. Mass media turn out to be less important than anticipated. They seem to report events more than influence governmental agendas. But media's indirect impacts include affecting public opinion, which affects politicians, and magnifying events as opposed to originating them. Specialized media, followed by those particularly involved in a given policy area, serve to communicate within policy communities, and thus may have more impact on agendas and alternatives than mass media.

Elections-related participants and public opinion both affect governmental agendas more than the alternatives. Elections result in changes of administration and congressional turnover, both of which have powerful effects on agendas. But campaign promises and party platforms are not generally a very detailed guide to public policy. They set general themes, thus affecting agendas, but are not specific enough to feed much into the debate over alternatives. But the politicians' perceptions of a "national mood" do affect agendas. Public opinion acts more as a constraint on what is possible than as a promoter of a particular item.

Visible and Hidden Clusters of Participants

There is a fair body of writing that concentrates on each of the various participants separately. Thus one author portrays the president as central to an understanding of agenda setting and develops an executive-led model. Another scholar, possibly reacting to the first, argues that initiative often comes from Congress, that policy is legislative-led. Yet another maintains that ideas have their origins in professional communities composed of researchers, bureaucrats, and other specialists, some of them with vested interests and others relatively disinterested. Then another will concentrate on party realignment and other elections-related phenomena, tracing the effects of partisan and electoral change on public policy agendas. A preoccupation with the fit between public opinion and government policy becomes a representation model. A final writer will concentrate on the effects of the mass media. Each of these accounts of agenda setting grasps a part of reality; none are unimportant, but all are incomplete.

Actually, there are two general groupings of the participants: a visible cluster of actors and a hidden cluster. These clusters are not absolutely different from one another, but they are distinct enough to be meaningful. The visible cluster—those participants who receive a lot of press and public attention—includes the president and his high-level appointees, prominent members of Congress, the media, and such elections-related actors as political parties and campaigns. The relatively hidden cluster includes such specialists as academics and researchers, career bureaucrats, congressional staffers, and administration appointees below the top level. Interest groups travel between the two clusters, with some of their activities very public and others hardly visible at all.

One way to clarify the roles of the various participants is to return to our distinction between the agenda and the alternatives. We repeatedly found in Chapters 2 and 3 that agenda setting is affected by the visible cluster of participants, while the generation of alternatives occurs more in the hidden cluster. The administration, probably the most prominent visible actor, is a powerful agenda setter. When a president and his top appointees decide to place a high priority on a given item, agendas are set all over town. Members of Congress, bureaucrats, and lobbyists all pay attention to that priority item. Conversely, by virtue of such an administration decision, other subjects that could be prominent agenda items in different administrations are put on the shelf for the time being. This blocking of issues is at least as important an agenda-setting effect as positively promoting an item. Despite the administration's power in agenda setting, however, we also discovered that they do not necessarily control the alternatives among which authoritative choices might be made.

Prominent members of Congress can also affect a public policy agenda. A key Senate committee chairman, for instance, can move an item into prominence by scheduling hearings or markup sessions dealing with that subject. We found a similar pattern with other relatively visible actors. Mass media, elections, parties, campaigns, and changes in mass public opinion or national mood were all found to affect the agenda more than the alternatives.

The less visible actors, on the other hand, were repeatedly described as affecting the alternatives but not the agenda. The work of researchers of various descriptions, for instance, might well feed into the design of alternative proposals, but would only rarely be responsible for altering officials' attention to one subject rather than another. Career civil servants are more frequently generators of alternatives than agenda setters. The same goes for lower-visibility appointed people—congressional staffers, White House staff, and political appointees in departments and bureaus below the very top appointees. The process of generating alternatives is less visible than the agenda-setting process.

Obviously, these distinctions are tendencies; they are not iron-clad absolutes. Presidents do sometimes wade into the details of proposals, for instance, and a scientific discovery by a previously obscure researcher might affect a public policy agenda. Some actors, particularly interest groups and members of Congress, are involved in both agenda setting and alternative specification. But even with those actors, the distinction between visible and hidden activities is useful. If legislators want to affect agendas, for instance, they "go public" with hearings, speeches, and bill introductions. As they affect alternatives, however, they meet with staffers, lobbyists, and experts outside of government to hear views, air options, and eventually devise proposals. Similarly, interest groups are often involved with the alternatives: drafting proposals, attaching their solutions to problems already on an agenda, bending a preexisting debate in their direction if they can, and, particularly, trying to block proposals they regard as antithetical to their interests. When they try to affect agendas, however, they depend heavily on the visible activities and actors: persuading a congressional committee chairman to schedule hearings, for instance, or getting their point of view aired in a speech by a high administration official.

Why does agenda setting tend to be identified with a visible cluster of activities and actors, and alternative specification with a hidden cluster? The answer lies in the resources that are needed to perform each task and the incentives that draw people to each task. To generate alternatives, some degree of expertise and willingness to concern oneself with minute details is required. As we will see in Chapter 6, much of the discussion in policy communities of specialists is highly technical, specialized, and detailed. One cannot draft credible proposals without such attention. This fact makes a party platform or a campaign statement, for instance, not the best forum for presenting a thoroughly worked-out proposal. What the platform or the campaign can do to contribute to a policy agenda, however, is bring attention to a general subject, leaving the detailed alternatives to be worked through in other contexts.

The incentives in the visible arena are quite different. Senators and representatives are not known for being shrinking violets. Publicity gives them a boost, in terms of their reelection and in terms of any ambitions for higher office they might harbor. It is a very rare member of Congress who delves deeply into policy detail. Rather, the member is more likely to set the general direction and leave details to the staffers, who then consult with bureaucrats, interest group representatives, researchers, and other specialists. Similarly, presidents are involved in the highly public arena from the beginning. The broad-brush approach of such actors—presidents, cabinet secretaries, prominent members of Congress, parties, and media—is much better suited to agenda setting than to the generation of policy alternatives. The appeals in the visible cluster would be made to such desiderata as the potential for public support, electoral consequences of doing one thing rather than another, and incentives for political career advancement, rather than things like the technical quality of a proposal. Due to their authoritative governmental positions, elected officials also have several constitutional and legal prerogatives that enhance their ability to affect agendas.

So the visible participants try to affect agendas, and then they turn to specialists in the less visible policy community like bureaucrats, staffers, researchers, and interest groups for the alternatives from which an authoritative choice can be made.

CHAPTER 4

Processes: Origins, Rationality, Incrementalism, and Garbage Cans

We turn now from participants, the subjects of Chapters 2 and 3, to processes. First, we consider three common approaches: tracing the origins of initiatives; comprehensive, rational decision making; and incrementalism. Each of these is familiar, and each does describe *parts* of policy formation. We discuss the contributions of each approach to our understanding, but also note the limitations of each. A later part of this chapter then sketches a set of concepts that gives us a more comprehensive understanding, and subsequent chapters fill out that sketch.

ORIGINS

A concentration on the origins of initiatives does not make for very complete theory about agenda setting or alternative specification. I reach that conclusion for three reasons: (1) ideas can come from anywhere; (2) tracing origins involves one in an infinite regress; and (3) nobody leads anybody else.[1]

Ideas Can Come from Anywhere

Even a brief examination of public policy case studies would lead a researcher to despair of ever finding a given source of initiative that seems to be important across several cases. One case shows that one source is important; the next case shows something different. Public policy is not one single actor's brainchild. Across case

[1]For a general discussion of related problems, see George D. Greenberg, Jeffrey A. Miller, Lawrence B. Mohr, and Bruce C. Vladek, "Developing Public Policy Theory," *American Political Science Review* 71 (December 1977): 1532–1543.

studies, the proximate origin of the policy change varies from one case to the next. Even within a case study, it is often difficult to pinpoint who was responsible for movement. Ideas come from anywhere, actually, and the critical factor that explains the prominence of an item on the agenda is not its source, but instead the climate in government or the receptivity to ideas of a given type, regardless of source.

A brief look at several health initiatives illustrates the generalization that the proximate origins—the sources of initiative close in time to enactment—vary a great deal from one case to the next. First, the initiative for Health Maintenance Organizations was the brainchild of Paul Ellwood, the head of a group in Minneapolis called InterStudy, as we noticed in Chapter 1. Second, the Professional Standards Review Organization (PSRO) program was enacted in 1972 at the initiative of Senator Wallace Bennett (R-Utah), the ranking Republican on the Finance Committee. PSROs were to be physician organizations in each locality designed to monitor the hospital care that Medicare and Medicaid patients were receiving, to dampen unnecessary utilization, and to assure quality. Third, health planning started in two separate tracks, on the Hill and downtown. Several programs that dealt in one way or another with facilities planning—including Hill-Burton, Regional Medical Programs, and Comprehensive Health Planning—were all coming up for renewal at roughly the same time. Staffers on the Hill and people in the executive branch independently had the idea of combining the programs and adding provisions for planning organizations in each locality (which came to be called Health Systems Agencies). Our fourth case, a federal blood policy, was confined to the career civil service. To cut down on hepatitis in the blood used for transfusions, an HEW task force, using threats of government regulation and legislative proposals, pressured the blood banks and other interested organizations into voluntarily cutting down on the use of paid blood donors. Finally, the federal reimbursement for kidney dialysis depended in the first instance on the development of a technological advance, the shunt that would allow patients with end-stage renal disease to be hooked up to a dialysis machine.

Clearly, these cases are distinguished by the extraordinary variety of origins. Sometimes it's the administration or the Hill; at other times, it's civil servants, an outside analyst, the scientific community, or a lobby. Many times, there are several origins at once. At other times, a single proximate source of the idea can be quite readily identified. But nobody has a monopoly on ideas. They come from a plethora of different sources. Thus the key to understanding policy change is not where the idea came from but what made it take hold and grow. It *is* critical that an idea starts somewhere, and that it becomes diffused in the community of people who deal with a given policy domain, a process we discuss in Chapter 6. But as to the origins, as one Hill staffer put it, "Ideas come from anywhere."

Infinite Regress

We have discovered that as we move from one case to another, we have difficulty discerning a pattern to the origins. It is also true that within a given case,