

A Revised Model

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We now adapt this general line of thought to understand agenda setting in the federal government. In this adaptation, we will bend the ideas to suit our purposes and add features of our own where it seems appropriate. The streams described here also differ from those in the Cohen-March-Olsen model. But the general logic is similar. The federal government is seen as an organized anarchy. We will find our emphasis being placed more on the "organized" than on the "anarchy," as we discover structures and patterns in the processes. But the properties of problematic preferences, unclear technology, and fluid participation are in evidence. Separate streams run through the organization, each with a

life of its own. These streams are coupled at critical junctures, and that coupling produces the greatest agenda change.

As I have observed them, there are three families of processes in federal government agenda setting: problems, policies, and politics. People recognize problems, they generate proposals for public policy changes, and they engage in such political activities as election campaigns and pressure group lobbying. In theory, each of the participants discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 could be involved in each of these processes. Members of Congress could both run for reelection and formulate proposals, for instance, and interest groups could both push for recognition of pet problems and for adoption of their solutions or proposals. In practice, while many participants do cut across the three process streams, there is also some specialization. Academics and researchers, for example, are more involved in generating policy proposals than in the electioneering or pressure activities that we label "political," and political parties are more involved in the political stream than in the detailed work of formulating proposals. Conceptually, however, any actor can be involved in any stream, and some of them actually are involved in several. In other words, we distinguish between participants and processes.

The three major process streams in the federal government are (1) problem recognition, (2) the formation and refining of policy proposals, and (3) politics. First, various problems come to capture the attention of people in and around government. In the health area, for instance, people could be worried about the cost of medical care and, within that problem, about the subproblems of cost to the government, cost to insurers, and cost to consumers. Or they could concentrate on the access to medical care, health habits in the population, biomedical research frontiers, or the latest epidemic. So we need to understand how and why one set of problems rather than another comes to occupy officials' attention; we will focus on that stream in Chapter 5.

Second, there is a policy community of specialists—bureaucrats, people in the planning and evaluation and in the budget offices, Hill staffers, academics, interest groups, researchers—which concentrates on generating proposals. They each have their pet ideas or axes to grind; they float their ideas up and the ideas bubble around in these policy communities. In a selection process, some ideas or proposals are taken seriously and others are discarded. These phenomena, akin to the garbage can model's stream of solutions, are discussed in Chapter 6.

Third, the political stream is composed of things like swings of national mood, vagaries of public opinion, election results, changes of administration, shifts in partisan or ideological distributions in Congress, and interest group pressure campaigns. Events in this stream occur independently of the streams of problems and proposals. Thus politicians discern a new mood among their constituents; election results bring a new administration to power; or an influx of new and different legislators changes the complexion of Capitol Hill. We concentrate on the political stream in Chapter 7.

Each of the actors and processes can operate either as an impetus or as a constraint. As an impetus, an interest group or a president can push for the in-

clusion of a given item on a governmental agenda, or the recognition of a problem or the development of a solution can prompt higher agenda status for a given item. But people in and around government also find themselves coming up against a series of constraints. If the costs of paying attention are too high, otherwise worthy items are prevented from becoming prominent. Thus the problems stream can push some items higher on the agenda, but it can also retard the upward movement of others, particularly through the budget constraint. Other items are not considered because there is a lot of public opposition, either from the general public or from activists of various descriptions. If an unacceptable political cost would have to be paid, the item is shunted aside. So the political forces we describe in Chapter 7 can operate either as an impetus or as a constraint.

These three streams of processes develop and operate largely independently of one another. Solutions are developed whether or not they respond to a problem. The political stream may change suddenly whether or not the policy community is ready or the problems facing the country have changed. The economy may go sour, affecting the budget constraint, which imposes a burden on both politicians and policy specialists that was not of their own making. The streams are not absolutely independent, however. The criteria for selecting ideas in the policy stream, for instance, are affected by specialists' anticipation of what the political or budgetary constraints might be. Or election outcomes in the political stream might be affected by the public's perception of the problems facing the country, connecting (to a degree) the political and problems streams. Despite these hints of connection, the streams still are largely separate from one another, largely governed by different forces, different considerations, and different styles.

Once we understand these streams taken separately, the key to understanding agenda and policy change is their coupling. The separate streams come together at critical times. A problem is recognized, a solution is available, the political climate makes the time right for change, and the constraints do not prohibit action. Advocates develop their proposals and then wait for problems to come along to which they can attach their solutions, or for a development in the political stream like a change of administration that makes their proposals more likely to be adopted. In Chapter 8 I label an opportunity for pushing one's proposals a "policy window"—open for a short time, when the conditions to push a given subject higher on the policy agenda are right. But the window is open for only a while, and then it closes. Enabling legislation comes up for renewal, for instance, and many potential changes in the program can be proposed only in the context of the renewal consideration. Or an unanticipated influx of new members of Congress makes action on certain items possible, but those legislators might not last beyond their first two-year term. Thus an item suddenly gets hot. Something is done about it, or nothing, but in either case, policy makers soon turn their attention to something else. So opportunities pass, and if policy entrepreneurs who were trying to couple a solution to the hot problem or the propitious political situation miss the chance, they must wait for the next opportunity. Chapter 8 discusses these policy windows and the coupling of the streams that takes place when they open.

This chapter has only sketched out the line of argument that we pursue in the remainder of the book. We turn now to a series of chapters that paint the more complete picture. The next three chapters consider each of the process streams in their turn. Chapter 8 then discusses the coupling of the streams that takes place when a policy window opens. Chapter 9 wraps up the argument of the book, and presents some reflections on the structure of the processes and the implications of our findings. Chapter 10, written for the second edition, adds new case studies and further reflections.