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Kingdon, J.W. (1984). *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*. Little, Brown, and Company.

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Abstract

In *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, John W. Kingdon presented the results of a study that focuses on why some agenda items and alternatives are prominent and others are overlooked. In addition, he looked into how problems are recognized and defined, how policy proposals are developed, how political events enter in, and how these factors are linked at critical moments in the policy process.

During a four year span, Kingdon gathered two kinds of data for the study. First, he interviewed people in and around the United States federal government, who dealt with health and transportation policy. Second, he developed a series of case studies from publicly available sources such as government documents, party platforms, press coverage, and public opinion surveys. Through Kingdon's empirical observations, he attempted to answer the questions above and he provided several explanations of how some subjects rise on agendas while others are ignored. The assessment piece will discuss how much power the president and his appointees have in setting the agenda. By understanding their powers and limitations, people outside of government can have a better opportunity to affect the agenda and influence alternatives.

Key Concepts

- Governmental Agenda- is the list of subjects or problems to which governmental officials, and people outside of government closely associated with those officials, are paying some serious attention at any given time (Kingdon, p.3).
- Alternatives- apart from the set of subjects or problems that are on the agenda, a set of alternatives for governmental action is seriously considered by governmental officials and those closely associated with them (Kingdon, p. 4).
- There are four set of processes for public policy making: (1) the setting of the agenda, (2) the specification of alternatives from which a choice is to be made, (3) an authoritative choice among those specified alternatives, as in a legislative vote or a presidential decisions, and (4) the implementation of the decision (Kingdon, p. 3).

Book Summary

Many individuals are looking for a way to take action and affect public policy either in a community or at a national level. However, in order to affect governmental agendas and alternatives, it is important to know how problems are recognized, who sets the agenda, and understand why some agenda items are included while others are neglected. According to John Kingdon, there are three kinds of processes necessary to set agendas: problems, politics, and visible participants. In addition to setting the agenda, the policy stream is the process where prominent proposals are produced and alternatives are considered. Through out his book, Kingdon explained and provided insight for each of the processes.

Initially, we need to understand how problems are recognized and defined before any other actions can take place in the policy making process. Kingdon mentioned that problems come to the attention of governmental decision makers through systematic indicators. These indicators bring to light the problems that are present by having both governmental and nongovernmental agencies frequently monitoring various activities and events, such as drunk driving accidents, child abuse incidents, homelessness rates, college tuition rates and many others. Kingdon focused his research in the areas of health and transportation policy and provided several examples of how indicators can help identify problems. He explained that “administrators of health manpower programs monitor the number of physicians being produced by medical schools, by specialty and by location of employment” (Kingdon, 1984, p. 95). In this situation, health administrators use this information to asses the degree of shortage or oversupply, which helps them provide specific recommendations for adjustments in manpower policy to solve this problem.

Another routine monitoring activity commonly used by people in and outside government is following the pattern of federal expenditures and budgetary impacts. For example, Kingdon stated that “people in government know when their budgets are rising or falling, and problems directly affect them through the budget process” (Kingdon, 1984, p.96). Kingdon learned in one of his health interviews that medical care cost was high on the agenda because governmental decision makers realized that this issue affects many people in the United States. In addition to federal expenditures and budget, researchers from government agencies or nongovernmental agencies also help to determine whether or not a problem exists. These studies are primarily used to learn about a particular problem at a given point in time, but they are also used to interpret a social problem. For example, Kingdon mentioned that there are “highways and bridges that need repair, some kind of systematic engineering study would be useful in estimating the magnitude of the deterioration” (Kingdon, 1984, p.96). Therefore, governmental decision makers rely on indicators to help them recognize the problem and understand the magnitude of them, so that they can create effective policy to solve the problem.

Indicators help problems get publicly noticed; however, there are times when problems are not self-evident by the indicators. In situations, when a problem is not straightforwardly recognized, then a little push is needed to get the attention of people in and around government. Kingdon stated that a “push is sometimes provided by a focusing event like a crisis or disaster that comes to call attention to the problem, a powerful symbol that catches on, or the personal experience of a policy maker” (Kingdon, 1984, p.100). A recent example is hurricane Katrina, which caused human death and severe property damages in New Orleans, Louisiana. The main reason why the city was under water was because the levee system in that region failed. This natural disaster stimulated a national concern about the infrastructure of many levee systems in

the United States. In one of Kingdon's interviews, a respondent comment that, "The whole legislative process is putting out brush fires, not building a good fire department" (Kingdon, 1984, p.100). There were probably many indicators trying to warn different levels of the government about the potential risk of the levee systems in New Orleans, yet nothing was done until disaster struck.

What are the barriers for our government to build a good fire department? One possible explanation could be politics. Kingdon defined the political stream as public mood, pressure group, campaigns, election results, partisan, or ideological distributions in Congress and changes of administration. He stated that "these developments in the political stream have a powerful effect on agendas, as new agenda items become prominent and others shelved until a more propitious time" (Kingdon, 1984, p. 152). A new administration, for instance, can change the agendas for many state and local governments because they are the ones who decide what problems will get on the agenda. Kingdon mentioned that a change in administration causes "people all over town to hold their breath in anticipation, waiting to see what the new administration's priorities will be, what its policy agendas will look like" (Kingdon, 1984, p.161). In addition, a national mood that is perceived to be extremely conservative makes it difficult for a costly new proposal to get on the agenda. Therefore, since the political stream has a powerful effect on agendas, how can nongovernmental participants influence the agenda?

Kingdom mentioned several times in his book that agenda setting is affected by the visible cluster of participants and not by the hidden cluster. The administration is part of the visible cluster because the president and his top appointees can decide what items goes on the agenda and which ones are placed on the backburner. According to Kingdon, the administration is primarily the one that can set the agenda; however, the hidden cluster of participants can

control the alternatives. The hidden cluster of participants includes academics, researchers, advocates, consultants, career bureaucrats, congressional staffers, and analysts who work for interest groups. Kingdon mentioned that interest groups use their energy and resources to influence alternatives by drafting proposals, attaching their solutions to problems already on an agenda, participating in debates to influence public opinion if possible, and trying to block proposals that do not match their interests. Kingdon also stated that the “process of generating alternatives is less visible than the agenda-setting process” (Kingdon, 1984, p. 73). However, when interest groups try to affect the agenda, they rely greatly on the visible activities and actors. Interest groups, for instance, need to have access to speak to a congressional committee chairman to schedule hearings, or they need a high administration official to help them publicly present their point of view. In general, this process can be viewed as the top-down model, which means that elected officials are at the top and other participants are below. This model seems to give more credibility to those who are on the higher level than those on the lower level.

At this point, it would be significant to address why participants in the visible cluster deal with certain issues and neglect others. According to Kingdon, the policy stream is considered to be the selection process. He calls this specific process the “policy primeval soup,” which means that many ideas float around, bumping into one another, encountering new ideas, and forming combinations and recombinations. It is difficult to know the origin of a policy because many ideas float around in the policy community and are combined. During this process, many ideas become prominent and others fade away because a long process is involved, such as “ideas are floated, bills introduced, speeches made, proposal are drafted, then amended in response to reaction and floated again” (Kingdon, 1984, p.123). In some cases, there are proposals that are quickly rejected because they are irrelevant; however, others are taken more seriously and

survive the long process in some altered form. The government does not act on an idea right away because much preconditioning has to occur before any proposal can be taken seriously. Kingdon mentioned that “many people have proposals they would like to see considered seriously, alternatives they would like to see become part of the set from which choices are eventually made” (Kingdon, 1984, p.128). The reality is that policymakers can not accept all of the proposals; therefore, only a short list of proposal’s are seriously considered.

Kingdon concluded that all four processes come together at certain critical times during the policy making process. For example, the levee system failure in New Orleans demanded attention, which meant that several proposals were attached to this problem as its solution. The budget is another example because if a proposal is too costly then there is a great chance for the idea to be dropped. Lastly, a change of administration can mean that a new agenda may be established. Participants from the hidden cluster need to create proposals that fit with the new administrations ideologies. Furthermore, participants in and around government must take into consideration all of the above factors, but most important they must take advantage when a policy window opens because it is their chance to move their pet solutions or special problems higher up on the agenda. Overall, Kingdon did an excellent job in explaining how the national agenda gets set and provides insightful information about the rise and fall of domestic issues on the governmental agenda. As a final point, further research and thinking beyond what Kingdon presented in his book may also paint a clearer picture of how today’s agendas are set.

Assessment

Kingdon’s fundamental message appears to fit with other class readings regarding how problems are recognized and defined, how policy proposals are developed, how political events enter, and how these areas are linked at critical moments in the policy process. The general

messages that appeared in Stella Z. Theodoulou's articles and of other authors were that governmental and nongovernmental participants play various roles in the policy making process. Theodoulou's pointed out that, "one must look not only at the dynamics of the process but also at the interactions and roles of the various governmental and nongovernmental participants" (Theodoulou & Cahn, 1995, p.88). It is important to see the distinction between governmental and nongovernmental participants because people in government have formal authority, and those higher in government have access to the president, his appointees, and members of Congress. In contrast, nongovernmental participants do not have this direct privilege, which makes it difficult for them to affect the agenda and influence alternatives. In "Issues and Agendas," Cobb and Elder mentioned that "for an issue to attain agenda status, it must command the support of at least some key decision-makers, for they are the ultimate guardians of the formal agenda" (Theodoulou & Cahn, 1995, p.101). It is not surprising to hear that our policy process is controlled by political elites; unfortunately, people outside of government do not get an equal chance to affect the agenda as others.

According to Kingdon, the president is the only individual who may be able to dominate and even determine the policy agenda. Through numerous interviews that Kingdon conducted, he confirmed that "the president can single-handedly set the agendas, not only of people in the executive branch, but also of people in Congress and outside government" (Kingdon, 1984, p. 25). Norman Infusino defined the classical elite theory as, "some people have more political power than others; they are the political elite" (Infusino, 2007, p. 5). For example, the president is part of the political elite and his appointees are individuals who are responsive to his ideologies. Kingdon mentioned that if the president "discovers that his appointees are not responsive concerning items of major importance to him, they usually don't last long in the job"

(Kingdon, 1984, p. 26). The president overall is considered to be a powerful individual, but his power has some limitations and it is important to know what those are before anyone outside of the government decides to challenge his agenda or policy.

In *The Art of the Game*, Theodoulou's and Kofinis explained how much power the president truly has in domestic and foreign policy. They both claim that "the policy power of the president emerges from a unique mixture of constitutional and perceptual power" (Theodoulou & Kofinis, 1995, p. 60). In other words, the president is perceived to be a powerful individual from people inside and outside of the government. However, in domestic policy the president's power is constrained by the Constitution and Congress. Theodoulou's and Kofinis mentioned that the Constitution and Congress provides the "checks and balances to ensure that negotiation, even compromise, will likely mark most discussions of domestic policy that involve the president and Congress" (Theodoulou & Kofinis, 1995, p. 61). As far as foreign policy goes, the presidential powers are perceived to be significant regarding the nation's foreign and national security affairs. Theodoulou's and Kofinis stated that "the powers as commander and chief, receiving ambassadors, and negotiating treaties have established the president as the predominant actor within foreign and national security affairs" (Theodoulou & Kofinis, 1995, p. 61). Generally speaking, it is comforting to know that the president does not completely dominate the policy making process, which gives others the hope to push their problems to the top of the agenda.

Kingdon raised the question, "Why does agenda setting tend to be identified with a visible cluster of activities and actors?" The answer is resources. Policy making is often an expensive process, which makes it difficult for people outside of government to participate competitively in the process. People in government usually have more resources and have access to higher governmental officials compared to people working outside from it. For example,

interest groups and advocates invest much of personal time, energy and money to create credible proposals. Mills in "The Power Elite" indicated that "the wealthy find it easier than the poor to gain power; those with status find it easier than those without it to control opportunities for wealth" (Theodoulou & Cahn, 1995, p. 78). In other words, people with wealth or resources have a greater chance to influence the political and policy stream. Moreover, Alma Elizondo mentioned that "those with money, power, and means to access information will be the ones affecting policy" (Elizondo, 2007, p. 3). A large amount of money is required to affect agenda and policy, but unfortunately it becomes a disadvantage for those who can not cover the cost of accessing political information.

In general, the messages from Kingdon's book and of the other authors can be applied to other braches of government such as the judicial branch. The president appoints a Supreme Court Justice, but the Supreme Court Justice must be approved by the Senate before becoming a Justice. In these types of situations, the president is responsible to appoint a Justice and he usually selects individuals who have the same ideologies as him. As Kingdon mentioned previously, the president appoints individuals who are responsive concerning items of major importance to him. It is important to highlight that when a President chooses a Justice, he is giving someone the authority and majesty of the law. Many people tend to forget that the decision of the Supreme Court affects the lives of every American. As Theodoulou's and Kofinis stated before, the Constitution and Congress provided the checks and balances for our country, which is important to avoid the risk of dictatorship or tyranny.

Kingdon's message can definitely be applied to a current and controversial topic such as immigration reform. In fact, the issue of securing our borders is on top of President Bush's agenda. His current plan is to increase border security by December 2008. Most notably,

immigration reform will provide an increase in visas for family and employment based immigration. However, the reform does not contain a solution for the undocumented population in the United States; as a result, members of the immigrant community are voicing their opinion on the issue. The immigrant community has been an active participant in the policy process and has been using their energy and resources to influence alternatives by drafting proposals, attaching their solutions to the problem already on the agenda, participating in debates to influence public opinion, and blocking proposals that do not match their interests. On this issue, the national mood is perceived to be conservative, which makes it difficult for the immigrant community to affect the agenda and influence alternatives. Since we are approaching a presidential election this political climate can drastically change; thus, opening the window of opportunity for immigration reform to take place.

Kingdon did an outstanding job in describing our policy process from the beginning to the end. He had no reservations in sharing the real issues of why certain agenda items rise and others fall. Personally, I have experienced some challenges in trying to affect the agenda in my local community. I work on a domestic violence initiative in Santa Clara County, and in the spring, my colleagues and I were trying to request more funding for our project. We presented our proposal to the board of supervisors, but during that time they were dealing with the budget deficit. My colleagues and I realized that our proposal did not have a chance because the local mood was focused on cutting local public programs. As an advocate, the greatest lesson that I have learned was definitely to pay attention to the political and policy stream. Therefore, I believe that Kingdon would like to end on this note, “people who are trying to advocate for change are like surfers waiting for the big wave. If you’re not ready to paddle when the big wave comes along, you’re not going to ride it in” (Kingdon, 1984, p. 173).

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