

How Problems Gain Importance and Become Contentious Issues through Agenda Setting¹

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Introduction

A significant number of problems face people in the world today. These problems include poverty, crime, and lack of resources. Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2013) defines a problem as “a question raised for inquiry with consideration for a solution” (“Problem,” 2013); therefore each problem identified should have a solution. Certain problems are more prominent in conversation, political debate, and media coverage, turning them into public issues (Kingdon, 2003). The amount of political attention given to public issues varies from issue to issue. Issues that receive more political attention are often associated with political agendas. There are interest groups and non-governmental groups that use special tactics to ensure that their positions gain visibility within the national agenda (Miller, 2001). This EDIS publication 1) discusses how a problem draws political attention through agenda setting and becomes a public issue, 2) discusses the role the media plays in agenda setting, and 3) provides a brief commentary on the influence of interest groups on public issues.

Overview of Agenda Setting

Agenda setting is the process by “which problems and alternative solutions gain or lose public and elite attention” (Birkland, 2004, p. 106). An agenda can be described as a collection of elements of public concerns to which public and governmental officials are attentive. Elements of an

agenda may include problems, understanding causal inferences, interpretations, solutions, and depictions of an issue. Agendas may be fleeting or can remain durable over time. Oftentimes an agenda may include a list of bills presented to the legislature or a series of written beliefs about the prevalence of problems and how problems need to be addressed by the government, the private sector, or nonprofit organizations (Birkland, 2004).

Agenda-setting theory details the progression of what the public interprets and believes to have importance (McQuail, 2008). The progression includes the creation of a story about a topic that media then uses to inform the public about specific issues (McQuail, 2008). Agenda setting is then directly influenced by the amount of exposure an individual has to various media and how they perceive the quality of that media (Lasorsa, 2008). Central to agenda setting is the public’s cognizance of an issue and the significance attributed to the issue (McQuail, 2008). The measurement of the condition is often divided into two levels: object and attribute salience. Object salience is defined as the connection between an issue in the media agenda and the public agenda (McCombs & Ghanem, 2004). In contrast, attribute salience is where aspects of media content concerning public issues are used to shape public opinion. Additionally, persuasive arguments link the attribute salience in the media agenda to the object salience on the public agenda.

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In addition, there are two factors that affect agenda setting: active participants and the process. Active participants are government officials including the President and members of Congress as well as appointed heads of agencies. Members of the government are generally the most active participants in agenda setting (Kiouisis, Mitrook, Wu, & Seltzer, 2006). As such, governmental officials may work to set the agenda with support from outside forces such as interests groups (Kingdon, 2003) or world news and natural disasters (Kingdon, 1995). The second factor affecting agenda setting, the process, consists of discussions leading up to the passing of new policies and problems related to current legislation. The agenda-setting policy process can be influenced by outside sources, and in many cases legislators make key policy decisions based on media coverage (Cook et al., 1983).

Election-Related Agenda Setting

New political officials often will interpret the political agenda and previous policy in a way that accommodates the direction they intend to head as political figures. (Birkland, 2004, p. 106). According to Evatt and Bell (1995), some politicians have a very strong impact on agenda setting, while others do not influence agendas quite as much.

The Secretary of Agriculture is a primary example of a political official working to set the political agenda. The Secretary of Agriculture works closely with the newly elected President of the United States to support the President's new agenda. Many issues that are important in the media today will not matter as much in the future (Sweetser, Golan, & Wanta, 2008). The key role in this process is the understanding that newly elected officials can alter the course of a political agenda and cause a significant and popular issue to lose political importance while a new agenda is being set. (Golan, Kiouisis, & McDaniel, 2007; Kiouisis et al., 2006).

One example of election-related agenda setting is the Farm Bill revision process. Every five years members of Congress discuss the Farm Bill, allowing them to express their political agendas by eliminating certain parts and adding their priorities to the bill (Dubinsky & Frank, 2012). The Farm Bill contains numerous provisions for farms, ranchers, fruit and vegetable growers, and nutrition assistance for the underprivileged.

Another example of election-related agenda setting is the process of food labeling and the effects it has on Genetically Modified (GM) food. In the state of California, voters were allowed to go to the polls to express their opinions about

requiring special labels for all GM foods (McLure, 2012). Agenda setting related to elected officials can be recognized in this situation through the powerful effect on legislative outcomes. For instance, newly elected governmental officials have extraordinary power to position policies to fit a political affiliation (e.g., less strict or more strict guidelines for food labeling) (Cox & McCubbins, 2005).

Influence of the Media

Agenda setting can occur through the media's ability to structure an issue (Bardes & Oldendick, 2012). The role of media in agenda setting focuses on news that informs the public on important issues. The media plays an important role in informing the public to give them the right amount of information to make informed decisions about current issues through their own conclusions (Lasorsa, 2009). In fact, the media is crucial in structuring communication surrounding critical issues (Brosius, 1991; Roessler, 1999). It is evident that certain public issues garner more media attention than others. According to Kingdon (2003), the media can serve as a catalyst for driving the importance of public issues by magnifying certain events. Framing an issue in the media can influence how the public regards certain issues (Iyengar & McGrady, 2007). According to Iyengar and McGrady (2007) having enough attention on a particular issue over a long period can alter the views of the public. In addition, the media can lower the impact of one issue to promote another (Sweetser et al., 2008). According to Hawkins (2008), preferential media attention, especially for conflicts, happens due to political significance and cultural and geographical proximity. Political issues that are significant, easily identifiable, and contain culture and geographic similarities to the audience are more likely to command media attention and become public issues (Hawkins, 2008; Roessler, 1999). On the other hand, Kingdon (2003) states "the media's tendency to give prominence to the most newsworthy or dramatic story actually diminishes their impact on governmental policy agendas because such stories tend to come toward the end of a policy-making process, rather than at the beginning" (p. 58). Whether positive or negative, the media is a powerful distributor of political views that clearly affects the opinions of the population (Kingdon, 2003).

Role of Interest Groups

Interest groups continue to play a significant role in agenda setting through their influential power and effect on the government (Kingdon, 1984). Interest groups are organizations composed of people with similar policy goals working to influence the political process by achieving

common goals (Edwards, Wattenberg, & Lineberry, 2006). There are several types of interest groups, including business, industry and government professionals, laborers, and public interest groups (Kingdon, 2003). Hundreds of interest groups exist with the purpose of influencing the political process at the local, state, and national level. Some examples of national interest groups include the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, the National Audubon Society, the Farmers and Ranchers Alliance, United Fresh, the Nature Conservancy, the American Farm Bureau, the Sierra Club, and the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA).

Interest groups are very important to the political process. According to Kingdon (2003), interest groups “have positive impact on the government’s agenda, and do so with considerable frequency” (p. 49). A primary purpose for many interest groups is adjusting the political agenda to meet their needs and concerns. (Kingdon, 2003). Some interest groups strive to block the agenda. Blocking the agenda is more prevalent now than ever before (Kingdon, 2003). Blocking the agenda occurs when interest groups want to maintain entitlements and benefits they are currently enjoying and therefore block initiatives that would reduce those benefits (Kingdon, 2003). Whether they choose to directly influence the political process or block the agenda, interest groups have a large impact on the political process.

Role of Extension/ Recommendations

Extension educators have a role to play when problems gain importance and become issues through agenda setting. The role of Extension is to offer research-based knowledge that is applicable to answer difficult questions and provide solutions (Gould, Steele, & Woodrum, 2014). One way for Extension educators to be seen as relevant to policymakers is through the development and implementation of Extension programs that use new research findings to address current problems/issues within a community (Kalamboikidis, 2004). As mentioned before, Extension programs can use public value to emphasize the significance of research results. Extension educators have a responsibility to instruct the public on all sides of a public issue. According to Boyle and Mulcahy (1993), Extension educators’ role is to support people in the development of a broadened perspective, so they are prepared to make reasoned judgments about the critical public issues we face today. Extension educators can also inform future policy decisions by presenting both sides

of a story to government officials so they are prepared to make informed decisions concerning policies.

Summary

This EDIS publication offers an explanation of how problems gain political importance and become public issues through agenda setting. The politicians, the media, and interest groups all influence the political agenda, driving the political process. Problems faced around the world tend to differ in their level of importance and the course of action taken by the media, politicians, and interest groups directly determines whether a problem will gain momentum and become a local, state, or national public issue. Despite efforts by media, politicians, and interest groups, political attention will continue to vary from issue to issue based upon the associated value of the issue to those in power positions. The political agenda will always have a demanding influence on policy and will continue to affect the ever-changing political climate. Different media outlets and interest groups will continue to exhibit passion for their political ideals in an effort to drive the political agenda while staying in good standing with government officials and constituents so they can promote their perspectives on the next problem that turns into a public issue. Extension educators can use research-based information to address current issues in communities and to educate policy makers so they are informed when making policy decisions about critical issues.

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