



How do Problems get on to the Political Agenda and get Taken Seriously by Policymakers? An Analysis of Climate Change Policy in the US

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Abstract

The issue of climate change is not of the recent past. However, it was late in the nineteenth century in the US that the phenomenon was defined and framed as an issue of public interest by those who say it mattered. The reason was the occurrence of indicators such as a rise in earth temperature and prolonged summer season. The mass displacement of people from their places of inhabits and damages to their properties forced the government to take the issue seriously. A change in the administration in the federal capital, along with pressure from civil society and demand from various groups to resolve the issue of climate change, proved to be something that ultimately led to the resolution of the issue and taken seriously by the government of the day. While answering the question of how the issue of climate change made its way to the agenda-setting stage of policymaking, Jhon Kingdon model of agenda-setting has been applied, which is more relevant and acceptable in terms of conceptual logics and the issue at hand.

Key Words: Political Agenda, Policy Makers, Climate Change, US

Introduction

In any country, no matter how well-administered it is, there originate and emerge thousands of problems in different forms and shapes that merit the government's consideration and response for resolution. As governments have limited capacity to attend to subjects and address them, only 'highly salient issues are more likely to move onto the decision agendas of governmental institutions' (Pralle, 2009). But the question is how and why policymakers choose some issues for consideration and remedial measures while neglecting others (Kingdon, 2014)? Moreover, it is also important to understand how and why issues on the agenda change from one time to another and why an alternative solution is given more serious attention than the other? These questions matter heavily because what happens at this stage of the policy making cycle has an enormous impact on the subsequent policy process and its outcomes (Howlett, Ramesh, & Perl, 2009). It is here where the fate of an issue is decided whether it should receive more or lesser attention from decision-makers.

This essay argues about the process of how an issue becomes prominent on the policy agenda for serious remedial consideration. My analysis is that at first, an unwanted situation is defined and recognized as a public issue. Next, various solutions proposed by policy experts are attached to the problem. Changes in the political landscape of the country further provide a fertile ground for the issue to rise on the agenda. Though all these three conditions may exist at a time, a policy change occurs only when a window of opportunity opens. While making my argument, this essay employs John Kingdon Multiple Streams Model in the American context of climate change policies. The reason to choose the Kingdon model is that it best suits to explain American's climate change policy. The first part of the essay will draw the limits of the essay by defining some basic terms. The second part will have a detailed analysis of Kingdon's model of agenda-setting by its application to climate change policies in the US.

Pralle (2009) draws three categories of agenda. Public agenda is about issues most important to voters and citizens. Governmental agenda is a set of issues raised for discussion in government institutions. Decision agenda is a limited number of issues about the government that is ready to make a decision. Though this categorization

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is useful, the distinction is too blur and confusing. Instead, this essay will argue that ‘agenda is the list of problems to which governmental officials, and people associated with those officials, are paying some serious attention while ignoring others at any given time’ (Kingdon, 2014). This definition gives a broader picture of what agenda setting is all about.

The puzzle of how, when and why some issues find their way to the policy agenda for corrective measures has long attracted the attention of those involved with the subject of public policy. In this regard, John Kingdon’s Streams model has greatly increased our understanding of the intricacies of the pre-decision policy process. ‘The rise and fall of issues on the agenda is the product of the interplay of three streams: problems, policies and politics’ (Pralle, 2009). According to Kingdon (2001), these streams run separately from each other. Every stream has a life of its own and is managed under its own rules. However, they all get connected at some stage which Kingdon calls ‘policy window’. This is the point where a problem is placed on the table by concerned authorities to make a policy about its resolution (Kingdon, 2001).

Problem Stream

The policy process begins with problem identification and recognition. The problem stream is about the question of why policymakers pay attention to some problems at one particular time but ignore others (Kingdon, 2014). Because issues are not objective in nature to be self-evident, this essay argues that they win attention from policymakers through the appearance of problem indicators, the occurrence of focusing events and feedback on the existing policies to suggest that an undesirable situation exists and so, must be considered for redressal.

Indicators are persuasive observable symptoms that point to an issue (Burgess, 2010). These indicators can come to the notice of decision-makers through routine and special studies, monitoring mechanisms and authentic media reports (Kingdon, 2014). Indicators not only recognize the existence of an issue but are also helpful to gauge the magnitude and severity of an issue under consideration.

In the US’s case, many influential studies have been conducted to indicate a consistent rise in the earth’s temperature. One study suggests that in the United States, the average temperature has risen since 1901, resulting in increased warming rates over the past 30 years (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency., 2014). Another study concludes that the emission of Carbon Dioxide, one of the greenhouse gases, has increased by 35 percent since 1850 (National Research Council, 2008). These indicators are warning alerts about an unfolding issue. What this essay argues is that an issue may be in existence for a long time but might have escaped the attention of policymakers. An issue becomes visible once its indicators are highlighted through systematic and authentic studies by experts in that area. However, the power of these indicators to win attention depends on how they are portrayed and presented by important people. Importantly, as indicators often lack objectivity, they are often interpreted by policymakers in a way to advance their own preferred issues and solutions by decision-makers.

Focusing events, often sudden and dramatic, spark more media and public attention because of their sheer magnitude and harm they reveal (Birkland, 2015). Such events are rare but put new life into dormant issues that have failed to catch attention from policymakers for sometimes. Focusing events are more striking in nature and simultaneously provides a push to an issue to progress to policy agenda immediately (Kingdon, 2014). Events like a disaster provoke the need for attention to the crisis nature of a public issue.

Two instances that illustrate the deadly results of climate change were experienced during the 1995 Chicago heatwave that resulted in the death of some more than 750 people and the 2006 California heatwave that caused more than 333 people to die (Jr, 2015). These and many other disastrous events like floods in New Orleans demonstrated how horrible the issue of global warming could be if it is not addressed in time effectively. This essay argues that though focus events may not be the chief reason for a problem to advance on the agenda, they certainly reinforce attention on an issue already in existence sometimes in people’s mind. Moreover, issues are more forcefully raised to policy agenda when influential people in society personally experience the consequences or their interests are damaged by these focusing events (Birkland, 2015).

Feedback, either positive or negative from experts, stakeholders and concerned citizens, brings problems to policy makers’ attention (Kingdon, 2014). Feedback is important, for it may highlight the (in)effectiveness of existing policies, point out weaknesses in them, if any and make recommendations for improvement. The

increasing role of media coupled with democratic norms in modern times, where people have greater freedom to criticize existing policies, can play a significant role in deciding the subject matter of policy agenda.

In March 2001, when President Bush repudiated a plan to cut carbon emission because he thought it would hurt the American economy and workers, experts and environmental nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) heavily criticized President's decision for being ill-founded and without merit. Given the influence of this negative feedback, the President requested the National Academy of Sciences for its expert opinion and feedback and set up a Climate Change Research Initiative (Rosencranz, 2002). This essay argues that feedback functions as an effective force to guide the government in situations where it is confusing and cannot decide on its own. The decision-makers turn their ears to what people have got to recommend on a public issue. However, the feature of feedback is more functional in democracies where there is greater readiness on the part of policymakers to give consideration to expert opinion and feedback.

One more important aspect of the problem stream is how policymakers define and frame an issue. Problems and difficulties don't have inherent properties to categorize them as issues (Kingdon, 2014). Rather political forces would portray them to the public in a way to win support for their side. They try to invoke the government's attention by composing stories about problems to describe their harms and ill consequences (cited in Eustis, 2000). Highlighting the serious nature of an unwanted situation would mean raising the salience of an issue.

Though it was in the late 19th century that scientists warned the world of rising temperature, it was the Keeling Curve, 'a saw-toothed curve of rising CO₂ concentrations in the 1950s, that defined the issue in a way to provoke people's worries about global warming. Moreover, between 1985 and 1988, more concrete efforts were made to present the climate change issue from 'a speculative theory into a real-world possibility (Bodansky, 2001). These convincing definitions were influential in persuading policymakers to pay due attention to the burning issue of rising earth temperature. This essay argues that by problem definition, political actors apply considerable efforts to frame problems in such a way they think they can best sell to the public and win their support and recognition.

Policy Stream

In the policy stream, policy experts propose alternative solutions to be applied to the 'salient problems of the day (Pralle, 2009). Though solutions may be quite large in number, only a select few are picked up and implemented (2009). This is an incremental process in which a certain combination of ideas have the potential to evolve into a policy because they meet some basic criteria for consideration while other don't (Farley, et al., 2007). This essay argues that the salience of an issue goes hand in hand with proposing and selling solutions to the government and decision-makers. A problem with proposed viable solutions is more expected to rise to the policy agenda. On the other hand, a problem without attached practical proposals fails to win attention from policymakers.

In the wake of increasing ecological and economic threats posed by global warming, American climate experts have proposed a number of long and short term proposals. Anthony Leiserowitz conducted a survey on the issue of rising temperature and came up with the following emission-based solutions. The country should reduce the emission of greenhouse gases and should invest in renewable sources of energy by introducing subsidies on these sources; carbon dioxide should be regulated as a pollutant by the government; the government should pledge to the Kyoto Protocol irrespective of what other countries do (Leiserowitz, 2003). There are energy-based solutions to cash on people's concerns about the rising costs of fossil fuels. A great majority of Americans think that people's concerns about the energy crisis are ripe; policy communities should capitalize on these sentiments by proposing energy-based solutions (Abbasi, 2006). Some suggest forestry solutions to 'increase opportunities for storing carbon in trees and forest soils' (Union of Concerned Scientists, 2007). In short, there are as many solutions as one can count to address the issue of climate change.

As there are more than one solutions to an issue, the question is why decision-makers choose one solution instead of another? Kingdon (2014) opines that proposals are more expected to win the attention of authorities if they are technically feasible and compatible with the thinking patterns of the policy community.

The technical feasibility of a proposed solution tries to answer the fundamental question if a proposed solution can be carried out now and here (ISET International, 2012)? This essay suggests that for a proposal to be

technically feasible, it must fall within the existing legal boundaries and administrative capacity of the government and must be compatible with the available techniques and technologies. Moreover, a proposal is expected to be taken seriously by decision-makers if it is all worked out technically and is ready to launch. The government prefers to choose proposals whose technicalities have been worked out against those who just present a generalized idea (Kingdon, 2014). Perhaps, it is because of these technical knowledges that solutions proposals are monopolized by policy experts.

According to Kingdon (2014), proposed solutions in line with national culture and dominant ideology have greater chances of survival on policy agenda than those that don't. A proposed solution may get rejected if it does not conform to the prevailing value system and mainstream thinking in the community of experts and policymakers. Studies suggest that the underlying values significantly condition the way American policymakers think about policy options to tackle global climate change. Experts associated with pro-egalitarian values support many policy initiatives on climate change, while most climate change policies are opposed by those under the influence of pro-individualist and pro-hierarchical values (Leiserowitz, 2006). This essay argues that proposals compatible with dominant political values are more expected to be considered seriously because mainstream experts put their weight behind it to give it a push.

People are sometimes reluctant to accept a change, especially in a situation where stakeholders expect a policy to threaten their interests in the short-run or introduces radical changes whose outcomes may not be predicted or calculated. In such a situation, a policy should go through a process of 'softening up' (Kingdon, 2014). By this process is meant to educate other policy communities or the larger public in the hope to make them receptive to their policy concepts (Król, 2014). Softening up may be a lengthy process, often extending over years, but it is certainly helpful in building up a broad-based consensus on a policy. Many times policy experts have been seen appearing on talk shows pleading in favor of their proposed solutions to deal with climate change. This is a persuasive technique to enlighten people on a policy initiative and gradually soften up the hardcore masses for a policy change. This is softening up process has also the benefit to gauge people's initial reaction and improve proposals after objections.

Politics Stream

Political stream not only determines when it is an issue but also creates the momentum necessary to place an issue on the policy agenda. It is primarily composed of the public mood, pressure groups, legislators and changes in political administration (Kingdon, 2014). These factors in the political arena have powerful effects in determining subjects to be on and off the political agenda. The political stream is perhaps the most powerful of the three streams in elevating subjects to policy agenda, for the actors involved here have greater influence in state affairs, especially in democracies.

The national mood is the notion that a significant majority of people in a country think about an issue along the common lines (Król, 2014). In democracies, elected governments are more responsive to how people perceive and rank issues around them, and so any shift in national mood influences a policy agenda heavily. This essay argues that policymakers not only can sense the public mood but can also discern any change in it through informal meetings in their constituencies, media reports and opinion polls.

Studies indicate that successive governments in America gradually realized the vitality of climate change when they noticed a shift in the public's perceptions and apprehensions about the issue (Borick, Lachapelle, & Rabe, 2011). Survey (2013) concludes that between 2007 and 2008, public concerns about global warming touched historic highs. Gauging these public concerns, Barack Obama campaigned primarily on the importance of the climate change issue. After winning the election, he passed the first-ever bill on climate change from the House of Representatives in June 2009 to respond to what people had demanded (Leiserowitz, Maibach, Renouf, Smith, & Dawson, 2013). As elected representatives consider themselves responsible for electorates, they keep a close watch on the nation's pulse and try to be responsive to build credibility. Resultantly, the government prioritize those issues on the policy agenda that are rated more pressing by the people.

It is a truism that organized political forces and interest groups in a country influence policy agenda in many ways (Eustis, 2000). If these organized political forces are in consensus and look in the same direction on a policy issue, it provides an impetus to the policymakers to move in the same direction. However, if these organized

groups are in conflict, the government tries to strike a balanced compromise between them (Kingdon, 2014). These nongovernmental organizations influence policy agenda because they are expert in the art of mobilizing public opinion to pressure the government and lobbying tactics to pursue a policy change.

The role of NGOs and interest groups in America has increased immensely over the last thirty years as environmental advocacy groups. One could see the rise of environmental issues on the government agenda between 1960 and 1980 because of the efforts of these groups (Kraft, 2001). During this time, many environmental protection acts were passed through the parliament because of the pressure from environmental NGOs. Those NGOs helped to educate the public, mobilized citizens to action through advocacy campaigns, and persuaded policymakers forcefully to adopt and implement strong environmental protection policies (2001). This essay argues that these actors may be dormant but turn active once they see an issue hurting their organizational interests or getting acute. Their role is more prominent in defining and framing an issue. However, a group can be influential in affecting the course of government agenda only if it is more resourceful and active in the national mainstream.

Changes within the government bring changes in policy agenda (Kingdon, 2014). New elections may change the composition of Congressional membership, or they may result in changes in the administrative heads of respective departments. These changes on the political horizon often affect agenda-setting by creating opportunities to push forward some proposals at the cost of others. This essay argues that new faces are expected to bring forth new problems, for these people may cherish changed preferences and priorities.

With the election of Bill Clinton as President and Al Gore as his Vice President in 1992, one could see a significant shift of emphasis from research to policy response on climate change (1999). In the first instance, the Clinton administration prioritized and raised funding for the development of science policy tools. The new administration, unlike its predecessors, was more eager to co-operate with other countries to achieve binding targets of emissions reduction. By 1996, the President had agreed in principle to sign the Kyoto Protocol (Edwards & Lahsen, 1999). The rise in the salience of an issue with the change of government can be for various reasons like ideological commitment, elections and party manifesto, or to win credibility and reputation with masses.

Policy Window

The policy window opens an opportunity for policy advocates to push their proposed solutions to issues onto the political agenda (Kingdon, 2014). As said earlier, the three streams run parallel but separate from each other. The three streams may join each other together at some point to increase the possibility of raising an issue on the agenda. It is at this point, though not necessarily because sometimes opportunities are missed, that a policy change takes place. This essay argues that the chances of policy change are high if the opportunity is predictable and vice versa. Moreover, the window of opportunity opens either in the politics of the problem stream. For instance, the occurrence of a disaster like floods, draughts may boost the need for a policy change towards climate change. Similarly, the election of a new administration can come up with new problems and policies' priorities on their political agenda (Farley, et al., 2007).

The election of Barack Obama in 2008 is considered to be a turning point in American policy to deal with the climate change issue. "It will be as different as night from the day, is how Senator John Kerry described the impact of Barack Obama's election victory on America's stance on climate politics' (Falkner, 2010). One can see Obama's deep commitment to the issue of climate change by making it a top priority of his political agenda. In the first instance, the American Clean Energy and Security Act of 2009 were introduced and passed through the House of Representative (Kronlund, 2013). In December 2009, the US President made a commitment to reduce emission by 17 percent by 2020 in light of the Kyoto Protocol (Falkner, 2010).

Policy entrepreneurs are key to coupling the three streams who invest in policy proposals for recognition and future incentives (Kingdon, 2014). They may be within and outside the government and maybe policy experts and politicians (Eustis, 2000). They take advantage of the policy window when it opens and pushes the government for action. What this essay argues is that though policy entrepreneurs are engaged in softening up the process too by educating the public and convincing the government of the usefulness of a policy alternative, they play a more leading role in joining the three structural streams at an opportune time (Pralle, 2009). What

makes them so influential is that they have proposals already worked out, they know the nature of the problem and have already educated the public on it to win their favor and then wait and are watchful of any opportunity to strike.

Conclusion

This essay has analyzed in detail the process of how the issue of climate change in America rises to the agenda for remedial actions from government authorities and policymakers in various departments. The matter under discussion was addressed by applying the Jhon Kingdon model of multiple streams of agenda-setting. The three streams, which include problem, policy and political streams, are instrumental in highlighting an issue to bring it to the notice of policymakers and create conducive grounds for a policy change. In the case of America, this almost took more than a century for the government to take the issue seriously and then address it by making climate change policies to respond to it. Initially, the issue went unnoticed, but as the indicators of the issue started appearing at regular intervals, the government was moved by such indicators. The government hardly could afford to remain silent once the focusing events like sudden and mass scale floods that resulted in the displacement of large number people as well as the destruction of property, and so thought of doing something about the issue at hand. A change in the administration with a progressive political mindset taking a seat in Washington DC helped the issue going up to the agenda-setting stage. Various policy options were discussed in the party meeting and then floated in the congress as the issue could no more be ignored. Now every stream was ready that had matured in the course of time. However, a policy change could only take place only after the occurrence of a policy window. This policy window is an opportunity that strongly reinforces the need for paying serious attention to an issue and consider it for policy formulation. In the case of the US, this window of opportunity was provided by the election of Barack Obama to the office of a president whose election manifesto primarily revolved around the issue of climate change that helped people's sentiments to rise, and so ultimately the issue of climate change made its way to agenda setting ladder of the policymaking.

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