

What factors in the policy-making process determine the priority given to a policy issue?

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Abstract

Agenda setting is the process by which problems and alternative solutions gain or lose public attention (Birkland T. (2007), p.63; Werner J. and Wegrich K. (2007), p.46.). The main factor that determine an issue that it could become a priority, drawing the attention of decision makers, the public, reaching for it to become part of the agenda are: "Window of Opportunity", which is a strategy used by less powerful groups, which are benefiting from the fact that powerful groups in certain situations may lose control of the agenda, they manage this circumstances to make their case to the priority. Another factor are the "Focus Event" that emphasizes the fact that unexpected events that shock the public opinion, as were the cases of corruption of officials, case "Snowden" or 11 September in the USA, affecting an issue that directly lead the decision-making agenda. Advocacy coalitions, is a form that use less powerful groups by joining on the basis of certain principles, values, beliefs they have about a particular issue. This alliance of values, resources and coordination of actions helps to advance the issue becoming a priority. "Venue shop" as a factor that aims to reach groups through institutions, be heard, be able to attract the attention of decision makers, also using the media as a very important factor nowadays for sensitizing public opinion on the issue and influence in order to become a priority issue. "Policy network" has come as a need of developing a relationship between government and the private sector, thus forming a power dependency relationship mainly the exchange of resources and thereby influencing the political agenda on particular issues.

Therefore in this article I will try to argue that these factors affect in various ways becoming determinant that the issue be the priority on the decision agenda.

Also, I can say that after the development of the analysis, I think that the two factors have a greater influence in policy-process "Advocacy coalitions" and "Focus Event".

Keywords: *window of opportunity, policy-making process, policy issue.*

"Window of opportunity"

Diversity of issues and the existence of powerful groups that have influence in the decision-making agenda will form monopolies Policy (Birkland T. (2007) p.67; Werner J. and Wegrich K. (2007), p.47). But despite this situation Bamagartner and Jones argue the fact that "when powerful groups lose their control of the agenda, less powerful groups can enter policy debate and gain attention to their issue. Hence, this increase in attention towards the problem can change the behavior of people towards these powerful groups, making that break up monopolies Policy (Birkland T. 2007) p.68). This leads to less disadvantaged groups to exploit this situation to advance their case in the agenda. One of the most successful strategies is what the Kingdom (1995) would call the "Window of Opportunity", which would make it possible for disadvantaged groups to attract the

attention of decision making when one or more streams-Political, problem, or policy streams are coupled (Brikland T. (2007) p.68; Werner J. and Wegrich K. (2007), p.47). Concerning Political Stream mainly occurs at the time of change of governments, because the new government could protect issues that belong to vulnerable or disadvantaged groups such as: attack Poverty, poor health, rational discrimination, etc. These issues can be part of the electoral program of the opposition during the parliamentary elections, so with its arrival in power these issues become part of its program (Brikland T. (2007) p.68). Another moment, is the public perception of the problem which makes the issues that until recently were unimportant by the public, over time they turn into serious problems that attract his attention. The typical case is the environment, which more and more is becoming a serious problem to which people are aware and sensitized to the need for intervention and concrete measures by the government to solve it (Brikland T. (2007) p.68; Werner J. and Wegrich K. (2007), p.48). On the other hand, obviously changes in the Policy Stream can influence the opening of the window of opportunity. For examples In the 1996, Poverty and Racism were neither seen or problems, but what were also couple with no or a new and more effective policies to solve these problems, Such as The Right Vote for Women, The Voting Right Acts, The Civil right Act, The War on Poverty (Brikland T. (2007) p.68).

So all these factors serve to make a priority issue attracting the attention of decision makers and its involvement in the government agenda. Therefore we can say that, although some groups are disadvantaged against other groups in terms of influence they have on the decision agenda, they always have Windows of Opportunity, as an effective strategy that makes their case to be a priority and part of the agenda.

Focus Event

Certain events that happen suddenly become trigger the issue to draw attention Leaders of government, the news media, policy entrepreneurs, and all public opinion, making the required as soon as possible to find a solution (Brikland T. (2007) p.74). So are government corruption scandals, which opens a whole debate in the media, the legal and institutional framework where the government put under a lot of pressure to give solution to this problem. Airplane accidents makes the issue of safety to take priority in the government agenda and concrete measures, for the avoidance of accidents in the future (Brikland T. (2007), p.74; John P. (1999) p.1), or the recent case "Snowden issue" that has raised the hypothesis that the U.S. government may have spied on thousands of world citizens by telephone including leaders of Germany, France, Italy. This issue has put a priority of the international agenda the right to privacy as a fundamental human right. As a result of this the German government is making and drafting the relevant legislation and measures for the observance of this right, which will become part of the International law¹. Also, a recent case in Albania, where a student killed his friend inside a school, has made the entire public opinion, the government, the opposition, the media focus on this issue. The problem of I illegal weapons possession was one of the causes of the tragedy which

¹Josh Voorhees, *The Guardian*, 2013.

brought immediate reaction of the government.

Through a bill presented to Parliament, the government aims to strengthen even more legislation in support of solving the problem². September 11 in USA is a typical case where an event bring an extraordinary focus of the government, state, national and international media about the dangers that threatened the world from terrorism. This brought the response and immediate measures to fight terrorism and increase security in the country. Such measures would be: increase border security that draft legislation on the issue and concrete military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan in the name of peace and security.

So some issues that sit in silence for a long time at a certain moment, because of a situation, event or certain conditions may become a priority of the political agenda. Unexpected events can do that disadvantaged groups may advance the issue on the agenda, which in normal conditions would be very difficult to advance. In such cases are issues that lead the government, the media, public opinion for finding a solution.

Advocacy coalitions

The fight that occurs between groups in order that one issue could become part of the decision agenda occurs mainly among powerful socio economic groups. Such as within industries, vicious battles over markets and public policy can result as in the ongoing legal and economic battles between Microsoft and its rivals, or between major airlines and discount carries, or when broadcasters battle powerful values interests over the content of music, movies or television, or when producers of raw materials, such as oil and steel, want to raise prices and producers of goods that use these inputs, such as automobile markets, seek to keep raw material cost low (Brikland T. (2007), p.69). In this situation, the less disadvantaged groups but with human resource and bright leader can collaborate to meet and exceed their power deficiencies, forming what is called advocacy coalitions.

Advocacy Coalitions is a coalition of groups that come together based on a shared set of beliefs about a principal issue or problem (Brikland T. (2007), p.69). This is a format where groups can work together to break down the power of the dominant interests thus creating what social scientists call countervailing power against the most powerful elites. Such coalitions and movements are like protection of human rights as Labor Unions, women's groups, antipoverty workers and other groups share the same principles and values against discrimination and racial equality. In this way, by joining together, make it possible for their voice becomes stronger, increasing their chances for the issue to become part of the agenda (Brikland T. (2007), p.69-70). On the other hand, in order that an issue becomes a priority, it is not enough just to identify it, but also giving a concrete alternative solution. Therefore an important role in these groups play resources, experts that make it possible to turn the problem in concrete policies to be taken, they often exploit official statistics showing indicators for specific areas. Such as unemployment rates, inflation rates, pollution levels, crimes, student achievement on standardized tests, birth and death rate, domestic violence levels.

They use these numbers, publish them to show that the problem exists and offer concrete

²Online Editorial, Shqiptarja.com, 5.12.2013.

policy on how to solve the problem, making their case to go forward. If we take the example of indicators of education in the USA, will see that they have an impact on governance agenda by bringing periodic application of reforms in this sector. This thanks to a more efficient engagement and activation of the teacher 's Unions, Parent - Teacher Associations and Other groups, that use this indicator to put pressure on the government as a result to increase investment in education (Brikland T. (2007), p.73-74). Also these groups use symbols, images, different movies to make their case visible, to make it attractive to the media and in this way to attract the attention of the public and decision makers (Brikland T. (2007), p.72). This approach has proven successful, especially now that we live in the world of information technology and social networks that helps to attract public attention. May mention here the realization of an documentary by James Belong, a British researcher in environmental issues and part of this environment groups. He through a documentary titled "Chasing Ice" showed shocking view of the consequences that are coming from the soil environmental pollution and global warming. This film was shown in cinemas in London and beyond, making people even more sensitized to the issue. Another issue that until some time ago were marginal in the international arena, as Land mines, today has achieved considerable success.

This above all thanks to a NGO like International Campaign Ban Landmines (ICBL), playing the role of pressure groups to governments for implementation of the Ottawa Convention. NGOs as ICBL, ICRC (The International Committee of the Red Cross), VVAF (The Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation), Human Right Watch, Mine Awareness Group etc., belonging to civil society of Antipersonnel Mine, are authorized by the States Parties to the Convention to participate actively in Coordinating Committee of the Convention, Convention intercessional meeting, Meetings of States Parties to the Convention. And although it does not have the right decision, they actively participate through suggestions, comments during these meetings, which are taken into consideration by the States Parties. On the other hand, representatives of the ICBL can perform bilateral meetings with governing states of the Convention Standing Committees to give their suggestions for the direction of affairs of these Committees (Short N. (1999), p.483-488; Rutherford K. (2000), p.99-105).

Therefore advocacy coalitions through their organization and permanently activated, reach to make their case priority and include it in decision agenda. Today they have become indispensable asset, becoming part of the decision tables.

Venue Shop

Venue shopping describes the efforts groups undertake to gain a hearing for their ideas and grievances against existing policy (e.g., Pralle 2003). A venue is a level of government or institution in which the group is likely to gain the most favorable hearing. Venues is in institutional terms-legislative, executive or judicial, or in vertical terms-federal, state, local government. The news media are also a venue that can help groups to attract the attention of public opinion and decision making for their case (Brikland T. (2007), p.69; Werner, J. and Wegrich, K. (2007), p.46). Through this strategy less powerful groups try to use the institutions so that their issue be heard and to get attention of decision makers.

For this reason they may require first to be heard in legislative committees and MPs in spaces that are offered, this requires a willingness, open minded MP to listen and to have the possibility to advance their issue.

Then, if not heard by the legislature, they may seek to appeal their case to the executive, which by exploiting the fact that different agencies may have sympathy with the issue, and can receive support enabling so to going forward the issue, and here I am referring to environmental issues. On the other hand, these groups turn to the courts thus initiating a trial in order to put the issue on the political agenda. Another means that these groups can use, is the demand for policy change at the local level or the state level before appeal issue in the federal government (Brikland T. (2007), p.70). This is because depending on the issue they are obliged to address local or state government, as they have constitutional responsibility for many functions which are not in the competence of the federal government, such as education.

On the other hand, these groups always beg to be “Expanding the Scope of Conflict” as a strategy where groups through expanding conflict to a broader level, from the local level to the state level or from the state to federal level to increase the chances that their issue be heard (Brikland T. (2007), p.70). To achieve this goal an important role plays the media coverage as an effective opportunity to raise awareness and mobilize public opinion for their cause. This tactic have used in many movements for human rights in the exposure of the images of violence during their protests that have attracted the attention of decision makers and the public (Majone, G. (2008), p.235). If we analyzed the effect of the media in agenda setting, we will see that in many moments, it has contributed in establishing certain priority issues.

In a study conducted in the USA which analyzed the degree of impact of media on various issues that resulted in the 19 cases studied, almost half established a strong media impact on the Political agenda, four resulted in considerable impact conclusions, three found only a weak impact and four recorded hardly any impact (Walgrave S. and Van Aelst P. (2006), p.91).

So there are many scholars who defend the thesis of the existence of a strong influence of the media on the Political Agenda. Cobb and Elder (1971, p.90) argue that “The media can also play a role in elevating very important issue to the systemic agenda and increasing the chances of the receiving their consideration on institutional agendas”. Trumbo (1995) analyzes the growth of the global warming issue from 1985 to 1992 and concludes by saying that the media has played a key role in the growth of policy attention for the issue (Walgrave S. and Van Aelst P. (2006), p.91). Also Baumgartner Jones and Leech (1997) found a firm relationship between media attention and US congressional attention for four domestic issue and concluded “that the media help create situations that make increased government attention almost unavoidable”. Cook et al. (1983) drawing upon an innovative experimental design and found that policy makers were influenced by watching TV news and considered the cover topic to be more important and thought that government action was more urgent after watching the news (Walgrave S. and Van Aelst P. (2006), p.91-93).

As a result, we can say that disadvantaged groups by exploiting institutions, judicial levels and the impact that media has on mobilizing, sensitizing the population and its impact on the political agenda, make it possible to advance their issue, be heard and be done part of the decision agenda.

Policy Network

Policy network is a set of relatively stable relationships which are of non-hierarchical and interdependent nature linking a variety of actors, who share common interests with regard to policy and who exchange resources to pursue these shared interests acknowledging that co-operation is the best way to achieve common goals (Borzel T. (1997), p.1; Rhodes R. (2008), p.431-433). Network comes as a necessity and need for the development of a relationship between government and the private sector to form a power dependency relationship, influencing the political agenda. Network concept draws attention to the interaction of many separate but interdependent organizations which co-ordinate their action through interdependencies of resources and interests. So these “governance – structure” of a network determine in turn of exchange of resources between actors (Borzel T. (1997), p.5).

Today modern political systems are conceived that policy networks is a particular form of governance, because the modern societies are characterized by social differentiation, sectoralisation and policy growth which lead to political overload “governance under pressure” (Jordan and Richardson 1983). On the other hand the modern governance is characterized by decision system in which territorial and functional differentiation disaggregate effective problem-solving capacity into a collection of sub-systems actors with specialized tasks and limited competence and resources (Hanf and O’Toole (1992), p.166). As a result of this situation to modern society and government is creating a functional interdependency between public and private actors in policy making. Also, this situation has favored that policy network to become a new form of governance, because the governments have become increasingly dependent upon the co-operation and joint resource mobilization of policy actors outside their hierarchical control.

Thus, government is allows to mobilize political resource in situation where these resource are widely dispersed between public and private actors (Kenis and Scheider 1991; Marin and Mayntz 1991; Kooiman 1993; Mayntz 1994; Le Gales 1995). So, network reflects the changes that exist today between the state and society, because there is not a strict separation between them. We have to accept that, in politics, private organizations dispose of important resources and have therefore become increasingly relevant for the formulation and the implementation of public policies. Public and private actors form networks to exchange their resources on which they are mutually dependent for the realization of common gains (Martin 1990; Kenis and Schneider 1991; Myntz 1993/1994; cf Rhodes 1988; 1996). For policy network have great importance, ideas, beliefs, value, identity and trust that help this interaction between the public and private to strengthen and consolidate over time (Borzel T. (1997), p.9). Scholars like Scharpf and Benz argue that policy networks offer a solution to problems of collective action by non-Enabling Strategic communication and action based on mutual trust, making this interaction more efficient. If we analyze the European Union, it is characterized as a “set of networks” or: networks from organization (Bressand and Nicolaidis 1990; Keohane and Hoffmann 1991, P.13; Wallace 1990, p.19; Metacafle 1992). This is because European governance is characterized by a multiplicity of lineages and interactions connecting a large number and a wide variety of actors from all Levels of Government and Society. Policy-making

power is not monopolized by the national governments but, widely dispread between a large number of actors. Also, it is not based on hierarchical co-ordination (Borzel T. (1997), p.10-11; Rhodes R. (2008), p.434-435). On the other hand European governance proceeds through negotiations in policy networks linking public and private actors of different levels and dimensions of government.

This system of governance is perceived by some authors as a “transformation of the state” in terms of the emergence of a new form or architecture of the modern state in Europe (Grande 1994; Heritier, Mingers, Knill and Becka 1994; Kohler-Koch 1996). In this situation, policy networks provides a most efficient form of governance at the European as well as at the national level (Borzel T. (1997), p.12).

It seems quite clear that today the network policy not only influences agenda governance, but plays an important role for policy process and policy outcomes. This brings the connection between the state and society to advance as the best way to be efficient decision making policies and lengthen the time. Once both need each other and at the same time are dependent between them.

Conclusion

To influence the agenda setting process is obviously a difficult, but not impossible. Above factors best shown that less powerful groups by using these strategies appear to influence the policy making process, making the issue a priority. Among these factors I would be singled out: “Advocacy coalitions” and “Focus Event” as factors that have the greatest impact on agenda setting. This is because the Coalition advocacy as a strategy well organized, with human resources that serve to identify the problem, but also to provide alternative for resolving it. They are a necessity for decision makers return for expertise and professionalism they provide are essential for policy making. In today’s democracy leaders, media, analysts are talking about inclusion of civil society or disadvantaged groups in policy making processes. They as a real contributor through suggestions, advice, evidence that they provide, and often run away draft policy on the issue.

On the other hand, “Focus Event” remain crucial in attracting the attention of policy makers, public opinion on a particular issue which is neglected and in a normal situation would not be able to enter the agenda. Here the media plays big role, which at the time that we live has become the fourth power. The event covered by them, because of the great public sensitivity their cause, force the decision makers to take action, to react urgently solving the problem.

In conclusion, I think that the more civil society and the issues they advocate be included in the policy-making process, thus affecting the decision-making agenda priorities, the better it makes the consolidation of democracy, and the more motivated people to view decision not to dominance of a few, but as an asset of all. It definitely serves as policy-making more efficient and to resist for long.

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