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A review of ambiguity, timing, and the multiple-streams policy analysis framework

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Abstract

An important question that needs to be traced in research in the area of policy processes is why some issues are successfully added to the policy agenda while others may "fail". It is necessary to explore what influences policy makers to focus on certain issues. Kingdon's multiple streams framework of analysis provides valuable insights. Based on an analysis of the context and foundational elements of the multiple streams framework, this paper reviews the framework on the basis of an overview of the relevant theories, and responds to the problems of the theoretical model in terms of the independence of the three streams, the neglect of institutional, economic and cultural factors, and the lack of predictability of reality.

Keywords: Ambiguity; Timing; The Multi-Source Flow; Policy Analysis Framework

1. Introduction

Early research in the field of policy science revolved around the policy stage framework. Harold Lasswell initially organized the decision-making process into seven stages. Following this, his student Gary Brewer introduced a refined process known as the research agenda, which has been widely embraced by policy researchers since the 1970s. This research framework, delineating the sequential stages of initiation, pre-assessment, selection, implementation, evaluation, and termination, systematically characterizes the transient nature of the policy process. Subsequent studies have perpetuated and enriched this framework, yielding more comprehensive research outcomes.

Theorizing within the framework of policy stages has yielded numerous outcomes. However, upon revisiting the foundational aspects of the policy process study, a crucial question arises: why do certain real-world problems find a place on the policy agenda, while others remain "dysfunctional"? What factors shape policymakers' attention to particular issues? This question remained unaddressed in earlier studies. The multiple-streams policy analysis framework, introduced by Kingdon in his 1995 book "Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policy," elucidates this issue as a policy choice process unfolding amidst ambiguous conditions. Kingdon's focus lies on addressing three fundamental questions: how is policymakers' attention allocated? In what ways or through which channels do problems manifest? And, finally, how and where does the identification of problems and their corresponding solutions occur?

2. Context and Key to the Multiple-streams Policy Analysis Framework: Ambiguity and Timing

Incorporating insights from scholars such as James Mazie Robin and Herbert Simon, particularly within the realms of finite rationality and organization theory (Simon, 1947), the multi-source flow analysis approach regards the entire system as a unified unit of analysis. It views the decision-making system as an outcome of collective choices driven or influenced by various factors. This approach places specific emphasis on the influence of information on decision-making—a fundamental aspect rooted in early systems theory and political communication theory. Essentially, it revolves around the policy process and the substance of policy outputs.

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The disparity between the multiple-streams policy analysis framework and conventional policy process research lies in its focus on the "input" facet of policy, scrutinizing the intricacies of the policy black box. The multiple-streams policy analysis framework postulates that the system undergoes continual change and evolution, addressing the challenges of policymaking within the context of ambiguity. Here, the crux of decision-making resides in the judicious selection of the decision timing under conditions of ambiguity.

Ambiguity is defined as "the state of having multiple ways of thinking about the same environment or phenomenon," signifying a lack of clarity or coherence regarding reality, causality, or intentionality. Organizations characterized by ambiguity typically exhibit three fundamental traits. First, there is a high level of mobility among personnel. In such organizational settings, turnover is frequent, and this continual flux in personnel contributes to a dynamic decision-making process, resulting in shifts from one decision to another and fostering ambiguity in organizational decision-making. Second, ambiguity arises from the indistinct preferences within the policy system. Policymakers often make decisions under time constraints without a clear delineation of their objectives, leading to a lack of clarity about their needs. In such instances, decision-making tends to be characterized by "improvisation," resulting in instability. Thirdly, the technology is vague and subject to many uncertainties. Technical ambiguity leads to constant "trial and error" behaviors.

In the presence of ambiguity, the scope of rational behavior becomes constrained, as the uncertain nature of problems and preferences hinders decision-makers from selecting the method that would yield maximized returns. The primary challenge associated with ambiguity lies in the lack of a clear understanding of the problem; the problem's definition is nebulous and subject to change, complicating the identification of relevant and irrelevant information. This uncertainty may even give rise to errors or misinformation, exemplified by contradictory behaviors observed when government regulators are tasked with strengthening their regulatory functions while simultaneously facing significant reductions in financial budgets. Within this context, the multiple-streams policy analysis framework model introduces a novel logical framework centered on the concept of "timing." This model addresses the intricate challenges posed by ambiguity, providing a fresh perspective for navigating decision-making processes in dynamic and uncertain environments.

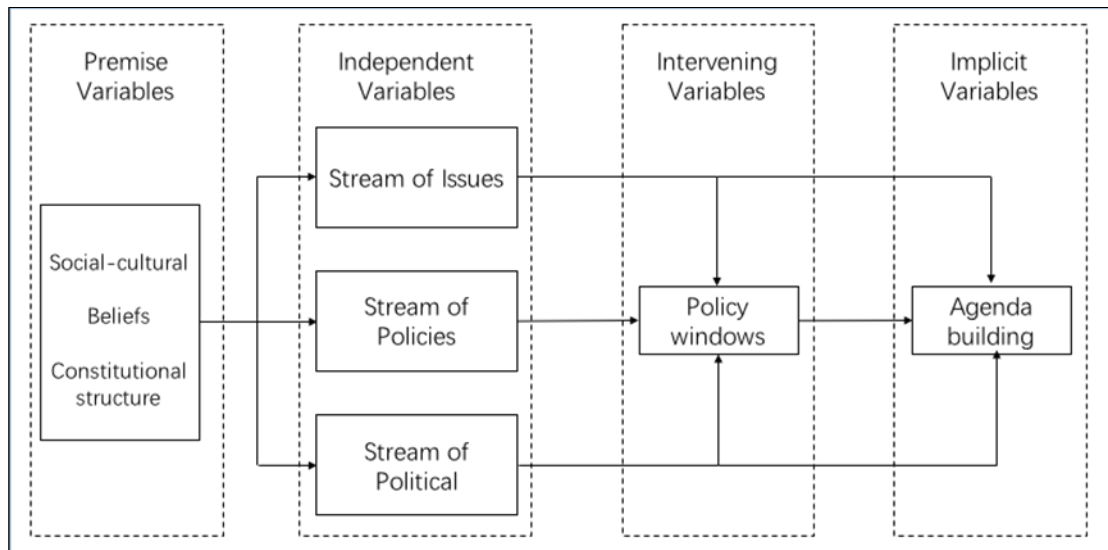


Figure 1 Analysis framework of Multi-source flow

The timing framework addresses the critical questions of when and who is involved in what activities. Timing, being a distinctive and limited resource, becomes a focal point for decision-makers navigating conditions of ambiguity. Rather than merely managing tasks, decision makers are primarily concerned with adeptly handling timing in ambiguous situations. The multiple-streams policy analysis framework offers a theoretical foundation centered on the pursuit of optimal timing, diverging from a conventional rationality-centric approach.

3. Theoretical overview of the multi-source flow analysis framework

Multiple-streams policy analysis framework encompass the three distinct streams within the policy system: the issue stream, the policy stream, and the political stream. According to Kingdon, these three streams operate independently,

each possessing its triggering mechanisms, dynamics, and operational principles. During pivotal decision-making moments, i.e., when the policy window opens, these three streams converge and interact. Policy activists strategically unite the problem with a proposed solution, presenting it in a manner that captures the attention of policymakers and compelling them to scrutinize the issue closely.

The first aspect is the problem stream. Policymakers' selective attention to specific issues, while overlooking others, is largely contingent on how the problem is defined, typically approached through three methods. Firstly, changes in indicators, such as alterations in project costs, infant birth rates, traffic fatalities, etc. Policymakers employ these metrics to gauge shifts in the actual situation, guiding their attention allocation. Secondly, the occurrence of focal events. Events that attract widespread social attention become influential drivers of an agenda. For instance, the Sun Zhigang incident sparked societal concern about the compulsory institutionalization mechanism, prompting its inclusion in the policy agenda and propelling the transition from compulsory institutionalization to uncompensated assistance. Thirdly, feedback from existing programs, including letters, visits, and the utilization of the mayor's hotline channel. Kingdon also emphasizes that issues capable of attracting attention must embody clear and perceptible factors. Only when these criteria are met can certain real-world situations gradually be framed as problems.

The second component involves the flow of policy sources. Individuals frequently generate numerous policy ideas related to an issue, proposed by experts. Through iterative testing and experimentation in various formats, such as hearings, seminars, and symposiums, certain ideas emerge as highly esteemed by policymakers. Empirical evidence suggests that ideas garnering significant attention from policymakers are often both technically feasible and align with prevailing values. Ideas that pose technical challenges or deviate from policymakers' perceptions are typically less likely to be adopted in practice.

Lastly, there is the flow of political sources. In Western countries, the political source flow encompasses several influential forces that can shape politics, including changes in government, the interactions among interest groups, and the will/sentiment of voters. Government officials, attuned to shifts in voter sentiment, typically incorporate relevant issues into their agenda setting or downplay voter expectations accordingly. The stance of pressure groups, whether supportive or opposing, often serves as a crucial metric in policy deliberations. Simultaneously, the advent of new leadership frequently results in shifts in policy priorities. Kingdon emphasizes in his book that the confluence of two factors—voter will/sentiment and government change—exerts the most critical and potent impact on the flow of political sources.

The paramount characteristic of the multiple-streams theory lies in the convergence of the three streams. At a pivotal moment, when these three streams align, the issue is elevated to the agenda, creating a "policy window" that opens. Subsequently, policy activists must promptly capitalize on this opportunity, leading to the inclusion of the issue in the policy agenda.

4. Review of the multi-source flow analysis framework

4.1. Controversy over the independence of the three source streams

Kingdon asserts the independence of the three streams through two primary considerations. Firstly, individuals engaged in the political stream and the policy stream typically differ. Political source streams evolve from interactions among politicians, while policy source streams emerge from policy communities. Secondly, each stream harbors distinct preferences.

However, subsequent research has witnessed numerous scholars challenging this perspective, contending that the three source streams are not wholly independent but rather interdependent. For instance, Mucciaroni posits that considering the political, policy, and issue streams as interdependent would enhance the meaningfulness of the research process. This viewpoint suggests that a change in any one stream could instigate changes in the others, reducing contingencies in the coupling process and rendering the policy process more strategic. In practice, fully disentangling the influencing factors among the three streams, such as problematic streams leading to political shifts, proves challenging. Consequently, many scholars have questioned the independence of the three streams as advocated by Kingdon, perpetuating ongoing controversy. In response to these critiques, Kingdon offered insights in the revised second edition of his book "Agenda, Alternatives, and Public Policy." He acknowledged that, besides the point where the policy window opens, the three streams can also interweave through various operations. Kingdon further emphasized that each stream could still possess a distinct "life" of its own, even if not entirely independent.

4.2. Neglect of institutional, economic, cultural and other factors

Rowe Cobb and Charles Elder propose the existence of two types of agendas: a systemic agenda within the public and a "formal agenda" within the government. The formal agenda is crafted by the government, not in response to popular opinion or interest groups, but through a process established by the government itself. This "formal agenda" signifies governmental initiative and underscores that policy results from the interaction between social systems and the social environment.

While the multiple-streams policy analysis framework model meticulously analyzes factors influencing policy agenda-setting at the micro level, it may be insufficient for examining the macro environment. Distinct countries exhibit variations in institutional, social, economic, and cultural environments, leading to diverse forms of policy agendas. The multiple-streams policy analysis framework aligns more closely with the policy agenda-setting situation under the separation of powers system in the United States and lacks a comparative perspective with countries operating under different systems.

4.3. The lack of predictability of reality

Theory ultimately serves reality, and one challenge facing the multiple-streams policy analysis framework is its lack of predictability. Since its introduction in China, domestic scholars have applied the framework to analyze the country's public policymaking process, demonstrating its robust theoretical explanatory power in diverse areas such as major regional public policies, social security, education, and food safety. Some scholars have also employed the multiple-streams policy analysis framework to explore disparities between Chinese and foreign policy processes. The utilization of the multiple streams framework can unveil the intricacies of policymaking, providing insight into how an issue transforms into a social concern, enters the policy agenda, and eventually materializes as public policy. However, concurrently, Kingdon notes that the multiple-streams policy analysis framework operates within a context of ambiguity, where the reasons issues from the three source streams make it onto the agenda, the selection of alternatives, and the formulation of policy are inherently random, and the political source streams are historically contingent. In the context of ambiguity and contingency inherent in the multiple-streams policy analysis framework, its predictability for the future is notably weak and obscured. Therefore, enhancing the theory's predictive capabilities is a pressing need to better align with the realities and future developments in policymaking.

5. Conclusion

The multiple-streams policy analysis framework model scrutinizes the intricacies of public policymaking in a context of ambiguity, unraveling the "black box" of how societal issues progress towards the policy agenda. Leveraging the multiple-streams policy analysis framework, the following three considerations can contribute to fostering the scientific and rationalization of the policy-making process: Firstly, there is a need to diversify channels for individuals to articulate their interests, thereby expanding the origins of problematic flows. Secondly, incorporating a diverse array of experts from pertinent policy-related fields can enhance the scientific basis of decision-making. Thirdly, mobilizing the involvement of a broader spectrum of policy stakeholders can democratize and rationalize the decision-making process. By implementing these strategies, challenges within the realm of public management can be more precisely and scientifically addressed, leading to the formulation of more evidence-based and rational public policies.

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