Issue Framing, Agenda-Setting, and Environmental Discourse

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PART V

THE ROLE OF INFORMAL POLITICAL ACTORS

CHAPTER 20

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ISSUE FRAMING, AGENDA SETTING, AND ENVIRONMENTAL DISCOURSE

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In 1922, in a classic book with the deceptively simple and unassuming title *Public Opinion*, Walter Lippmann proposed that people form a "picture of the world outside" from "pictures in their heads." Thus, while citizens "live in the same world," they "think and feel in different ones" based on subjective and necessarily abridged images that they construct and that are created for them by others (Lippmann 1922, 20). In an age between two world wars, with fear of propaganda on the rise, this was an influential if not wholly original idea. As Lippmann reminded his readers, Plato had used the allegory of a cave in *The Republic* to show how human beings, in their quest for understanding, were akin to prisoners who saw not the objects of reality but, rather, in the dim firelight, the shadows they cast as puppets on the wall; the marionettes themselves and the source of their strings were hidden and undiscovered (Plato 1968).

For Lippmann—a pragmatic and largely pessimistic journalist and public intellectual—cognitive shortcuts were as lamentable as they were natural and instinctive, aiding in what he called "the manufacture of consent" (1922, 248).

Average citizens are distracted and inattentive to public affairs, he acknowledged. However, in all fairness, the world about them is a vast place, "altogether too big, too complex, too fleeting for direct acquaintance." Their brains and their dispositions are "not equipped to deal with so much subtlety, so much variety, so many permutations and combinations," so they manage by reconstructing that world on a more modest scale. He believed that to "traverse the world, men must have maps of the world," even if the mental roads and highways on which they rely are but crude representations, drawn in by others with, at times, an intent to mislead and misdirect (Lippmann 1922, 16).

Lippmann had no formal training in the social sciences and no incentive to use or coin the terminology that would later dominate an entire field of academic inquiry. It was Harold Lasswell (1948) who connected the pieces more formally—reimaging them as a sequence of communications in which scholars might identify who said what, to whom, in what channel, and with what effect. Others would settle on the more precise labels of *issue framing* (Goffman 1974) and *agenda setting* (McCombs and Shaw 1972). But at the root of it all are Lippmann's views on cognition. If news media and other political actors could "powerfully direct the play of our attention," he observed, their impacts would be felt both within our heads and in the real world where action and indecision take place, and would become policy (Lippmann 1922, 30).

Today, scholars recognize that difficult conditions become public problems only after citizens and leaders come to see them not as the product of accident or fate, but as something "caused by human actions and amenable to human intervention" (Stone 1989, 281), a process that is often itself an act of social construction (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Perhaps above all, it is this standard that makes the emergence of the U.S. environmental movement in the twentieth century so impressive. Based on intuition and vicarious experience, people tend to accept that events in the natural world—even extreme ones, like droughts, blizzards, and hurricanes—are undirected and largely uncontrollable (Bostrom and Lashof 2007; Goffman 1974; Moser and Dilling 2004). For the environment to generate public concern, and for that concern to move onto the policy agenda, an entirely different "causal story" is required, one that has been both revolutionary and transformative (Gottlieb 2005; Rubin 1994; Stone 1989).

In *Silent Spring* (1962), Rachel Carson argued that the damage she observed to plant and animal species was not an accidental occurrence. Rather, it was human-made, the result of pollution and the overuse of chemical insecticides. At Love Canal in Niagara Falls, New York, activists in the late 1970s insisted that birth defects and other health problems found among local residents were not random chance but, rather, the result of exposure to corroding barrels of toxic waste buried in the landfill on which their homes had been constructed (Brown 1980). More recently, scientists and meteorologists explain rising global temperatures and melting polar ice caps not as mere weather events but as symptoms of a larger, more complex pattern of climate change caused by an accumulation of greenhouses gases released by humans in the daily course of modern life (Weart 2008).

In these cases and more, there are conclusions based on statistical and scientific fact, but their traction and momentum in the political realm owe more to the deliberate use of language and symbols (Edelman 1964). As Stone (1989, 282) points out:

> Problem definition is a process of image making....Conditions, difficulties, or issues thus do not have inherent properties that make them more or less likely to be seen as problems or to be expanded. Rather, political actors *deliberately portray* them in ways calculated to gain support for their side. And political actors, in turn, do not simply accept causal models that are given from science or popular culture or any other source. They compose stories that describe harms and difficulties, attribute them to actions of other individuals or organizations, and thereby claim the right to invoke government power to stop the harm.

For Stone, and for generations of scholars at work since Lippmann's day, politics and policy making are made up of an amalgam of experiences, motivations, and mediated interactions that push and pull against each other. Nowhere is this struggle more clearly observed than in the field of environmental policy.

To identify a problem, diagnose its cause, attribute blame, and propose a solution is to engage in a long and complex chain of events that lie at the very heart of political life and public affairs. The goal of our chapter—like others in this volume—is to identify key scholarship in the field. We do so by connecting two broad interdisciplinary threads. First, we tackle the subject of *issue framing*, which focuses on the formation of public attitudes and the way in which issues are packaged and presented for mass consumption. Second, we address *agenda setting*, which centers on political elites and the decisions that are made—or deferred—within the policy making process. Finally, we draw on both to suggest productive avenues for future research.

1. The Pictures in Our Heads

When Lippmann (1922) wrote of the "pictures in our heads," his insight into the selective and malleable qualities of public opinion was little more than conjecture (Berinsky and Kinder 2006). Decades later, there is ample evidence of its power across the social sciences, within disciplines as diverse as cognitive psychology, linguistics, sociology, media and communication studies, behavioral economics, and political science. Experiments, surveys, and case studies, to say nothing of real-world events, all demonstrate the ubiquity of *frames*—the modern term scholars use for a concept that can trace its lineage back to Lippmann.

Frames are variously described as "mental boxes" and "interpretative storylines" (Nisbet 2009, 22). When captured by a "deft metaphor, catchphrase, or other symbolic device," frames are thought to give meaning and organization to "an unfolding strip of events," weaving an intricate web of cause and effect that

can be used to define problems, diagnose causes, attribute blame and responsibility, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies (Gamson and Modigliani 1989, 3, 143; Entman 1993; Kuypers 2009; Stone 1989). Hence, when politicians defend oil exploration in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge by reference to national security and energy independence, they promote a frame that supports a particular policy prescription (Guber and Bosso 2007), just as those who emphasize uncertainty and a lack of scientific consensus in the debate over global warming seek to obstruct one (Luntz 2002; McCright and Dunlap 2000; Nisbet 2009). Simply put, issue framing involves the selection of a particular attribute and an effort to make it more salient in the minds of average citizens relative to a host of other considerations that might come to mind (Entman 1993).

Yet despite nearly a century of scholarship, progress on the subject has been slow, much to the frustration of researchers who complain about its fragmentation across the disciplines (Chong and Druckman 2007; Druckman 2001a; Entman 1993). On the one hand, frames are seen as essential to the way individuals come to understand complex issues and events; on the other, there is fear that frames are easily manipulated by elites for political gain. In short, there is both a cognitive process and a communications strategy to uncover and reconnect (Berinsky and Kinder 2006; Druckman 2001a; Kinder and Nelson 2005).

1.1. Frames as Mental Structures

Scientists believe that frames are embedded deep in the synapses of the brain (Lakoff 2004, 2008). Since average citizens can never fully comprehend the world around them, and are often disinterested and discouraged by the effort, they become "cognitive misers" both of choice and of necessity (Fiske and Taylor 1984), dependent on frames, schemas, and other heuristic devices that allow them to process information efficiently and ease its recall from stores of short- and long-term memory (Chong and Druckman 2007; Conover and Feldman 1984; Entman 1993; Goffman 1974; Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007). Indeed, a multitude of studies show that when facts fail to fit existing frames, it is the frames that are stubbornly maintained, while inconvenient facts go ignored (Lakoff 2004).

Zaller and Feldman (1992) believe that on a wide range of issues, people hold in their heads opposing considerations, which under varied circumstances might lead them to one decision or another. When interviewed by pollsters, they call to mind a sample of those ideas: some made salient by recent experiences or events, and others that they have been primed to consider by the questionnaire itself. Most respondents are ambivalent about most issues most of the time, so their answers are particularly vulnerable to framing effects that are created—intentionally or not—by the order in which questions are posed, the language used, the mental associations that are prompted, or the response categories that are offered. In other words, since attitudes are not securely anchored (Converse 1964), they can be "readily blown" from one side of an issue to another, with effects that are both powerful and wide-ranging

(Sniderman and Theriault 2004, 133; see also Citrin, Reingold, and Green 1990; Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Nelson and Kinder 1996; Zaller 1992).

In a classic example of prospect theory for which Kahneman would later win a Nobel Prize in economics, respondents were given a hypothetical scenario involving the outbreak of disease. Defining the issue in terms of lives gained versus lives lost altered the degree of risk people were willing to accept (Kahneman and Tversky 1984; Tversky and Kahneman 1981). Scholars have also discovered framing effects on a host of other issues, from government spending in general (Jacoby 2000), to more specific policy decisions on the war in Iraq (Kull, Ramsay, and Lewis, 2003–2004), poverty and social welfare (Feldman and Zaller 1992; Iyengar 1990), trade and globalization (Hiscox 2006), freedom of speech for hate groups (Druckman 2001b; Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997), affirmative action (Kinder and Sanders 1990, 1996), mandatory AIDS testing (Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991), and gay marriage (Pan, Meng, and Zhou 2010), to name but a few.

The environment figures prominently within this growing body of literature (Gray 2003) because it is a topic that connects to—and conflicts with—so many other policy arenas, from health and welfare, to national security, to jobs and the economy (Sharp 2008). Polling is difficult when such issues intertwine because Americans genuinely value both sides of the debate (Ladd 1982). Under ideal conditions, they want to preserve and protect sensitive areas like the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) from large-scale human intervention and development. At the same time, they express a desire to strengthen energy security at home, even if it means increasing domestic oil production in regions like ANWR (Guber and Bosso 2007). In struggling through a period of rising gas prices, consumers desire higher fuel economy for their cars, but they also value highway safety and vehicle performance, which some see as compromised by the current generation of hybrids (Noland 2004). They favor the development of alternative energy sources in principle but worry about higher utility bills and about the aesthetic impact of new technologies, such as wind turbines (Farhar 1994). In short, Americans are endlessly conflicted when asked to make hard choices between goals they value equally (Hochschild 1981). Frames, therefore, play a vital role in directing attention and in easing the process of decision making.

1.2. Frames as Narrative Devices

If frames are cognitive structures that help citizens make sense of politics, they also lead "double lives" in that they are equally important components of elite discourse and political rhetoric (Callaghan and Schnell 2005; Kinder and Nelson 2005; Kuypers 2009). As Berinsky and Kinder (2006, 642) remind us, a "good frame is at its heart a good story," so it is no surprise that frames are used by mass media to craft news reports and to develop compelling narratives (Boykoff and Boykoff 2004; Iyengar 1991; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; McComas and Shanahan 1999; Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007). But frames are also employed by political

parties, candidates, and consultants to win elections (Lakoff 2004; Luntz 2007), by policy makers to define options and make programmatic decisions (Nisbet 2009), by interest groups and corporations to lobby government officials and manipulate consumer behavior (Guber and Bosso 2007; Pettenger and Plec 2010), and by scientists, even, to simplify and communicate technical details to a lay public (Brittle 2009; Nisbet 2009; Nisbet and Mooney 2007).

In short, the ability to frame an issue for others is one of the most important tools these actors and interests have at their disposal (Jacoby 2000). Yet, observers quickly add, the process is ripe with "nefarious possibilities," since frames can become "freewheeling exercises in pure manipulation" (Kinder and Herzog 1993, 363; Chong and Druckman 2007; Sniderman and Theriault 2004). For example, the George W. Bush administration's touted "Clear Skies" and "Healthy Forests" initiatives of 2003 were derided by environmental activists as little more than cynical efforts to mislead and misdirect voters with soft language and comforting words while quietly catering to the interests of industry (Kennedy 2004; Vaughn and Cortner 2005).

Still, even the most politically motivated frames operate within certain conventional limits. Not all issues are equally susceptible to manipulation from the start. Framing effects are most powerful when directed toward "hard" issues that are unfamiliar and technically difficult to understand, as opposed to "easy" ones made stable by years of familiarity and instinct (Carmines and Stimson 1980; Lau and Redlawsk 2001; Lee and Chang 2010). Frames also falter when they fail to resonate with existing beliefs and cultural values (Chong and Druckman 2007; Gamson and Modigliani 1987), and, at least among the politically aware, conflict with ideological commitments and partisan ties (Lee and Chang 2010). Finally, when measuring audience response, the credibility of a frame's source, its message, and its delivery matter (Callaghan and Schnell 2009; Druckman 2001; Lee and Chang 2010), and the presence of an active and appealing counterframe can do much to neutralize a frame's persuasive impact (Callaghan and Schnell 2005; Druckman 2001a, 2004; Sniderman and Theriault 2004).

When considering the increasingly diverse list of problems environmental activists face—from air and water pollution to the protection of endangered species and the conservation of energy and other natural resources—it is understandable that the choice of a particular frame breeds controversy (Shellenberger and Nordhaus 2004) and that its effects, once communicated, are often messy and unpredictable. Perhaps the evolution of global warming as a public issue illustrates this best of all.

1.3. Framing Global Climate Change

In 2002, Frank Luntz, a pollster and Republican Party strategist, was hired to help the GOP improve its image in time for the upcoming midterm congressional elections. In a lengthy memorandum, later leaked to the media, he advised candidates

to assure voters they were committed to "preserving and protecting" the environment but that it could be done "more wisely and effectively" (Luntz 2002, 107; Luntz 2007). The way to win the global warming debate, he said, was to use language that emphasized scientific uncertainty—even where none existed. It was important to make the *right* decision, he said, not simply a quick decision that might harm the economy unnecessarily or put the United States in an unfair position relative to its trading partners worldwide. In the convenient script he provided, if candidates were challenged on the Kyoto Protocol or some similar proposal, they were told to say this:

> We must not rush to judgment before all the facts are in. We need to ask more questions. We deserve more answers. And until we learn more, we should not commit America to any international document that handcuffs us either now or into the future. (Luntz 2002, 138)

While the editors of the *New York Times* mocked the strategy as an "environmental word game" and a "recipe for cynicism and political manipulation," it nevertheless played well within the mainstream media's own bias toward providing "balanced" coverage (Boykoff and Boykoff 2004, 2007). By reinforcing partisan divisions and undermining public confidence in the science (Nisbet and Scheufele 2010), there is little doubt that Luntz contributed to Republican gains in Congress in 2002 (Bosso and Guber 2005; Editorial 2003, A16; McCright and Dunlap 2003).

In the years to follow, environmentalists could point to polls showing widespread support for their proposals, yet time and again found themselves losing politically to savvier opponents who were better at framing issues to their tactical advantage (Shellenberger and Nordhaus 2004, 11–12, 32). What Luntz instinctively understood was that while "global warming" had captured the public's imagination and generated concern (Whitmarsh 2009), under the right circumstances it could also "turn people off, fostering images of shaggy-haired liberals, economic sacrifice and complex scientific disputes" (Broder 2009). Equally important, doomsday scenarios offered by environmentalists too often created "feelings of helplessness and isolation among would-be supporters" (Louv 2005: E1). In contrast to the dire warnings by so-called global warming "alarmists," Luntz (2002, 137) crafted a message focused on "American superiority in technology and innovation," a reassuring frame long used to support nuclear power (Gamson and Modigliani 1987). It was persuasive in its new context because it affirmed—rather than challenged—a long-standing American worldview that valued prosperity, independence, economic development, and self-sufficiency (Smerecnik and Dionisopoulos 2009).

As a matter of public interest and government policy, the issue of global warming stumbled for another reason as well. Since average citizens were likely to estimate its dangers by reference to anecdotal changes in the weather, it became easy to dismiss the problem as temporary, nonurgent, or at the very least intractable (Immerwahr 1999). Even the term itself was problematic (Montenegro 2009), because it seemed to ensure a rise in global temperatures that was "easily discredited" by the next cold spell, including the record snowfalls that fell across the

eastern United States during the winters of 2010 and 2011 (Schuldt, Konrath, and Schwarz 2011, 122). During one particularly nasty blizzard that buried the city of Washington, Senator James Inhofe (R-OK) encouraged his grandchildren to build an igloo on Capitol Hill, christening it "Al Gore's new home," while on the social networking site Twitter, Senator Jim De Mint (R-SC) posted, "It's going to keep snowing in D.C. until Al Gore cries 'uncle'" (Milbank 2010, A21). Since people tend to take cues from elites they trust most (Callaghan and Schnell 2009; Krosnick et al. 2006), both efforts were intended to undermine the credibility of global warming's most prominent messenger (see Nisbet 2011).

Still, few frames succeed unfettered without viable and persuasive counterframes (Chong and Druckman 2007; Druckman 2004, 2010; Gamson and Modigliani 1987; Sniderman and Theriault 2004), and climate change is no exception. While the term has long provided an "appealing frame for those who favor the status quo in climate policy," activists have increasingly preferred the phrase "climate change," in part because it can more "easily accommodate unseasonably cold temperatures and record snowfalls" (Schuldt, Konrath, and Schwarz 2011, 116). Some have also begun to emphasize the environmental component of climate policy *less*—for example, by drawing attention to economic opportunities or health effects that may do more to attract and sustain a sympathetic audience (Maibach et al. 2010; Nordhaus and Shellenberger 2007; Rabe 2004; Shellenberger and Nordhaus 2004).

It is tempting to malign any political strategy built around issue frames as based on craven opportunity, not principle. As Zaller (1992, 95) explains, framing by elites is still "discussed in conspiratorial tones, as if, in a healthy democratic polity, [it] would not occur." However, the fact that it regularly occurs means that the impacts of such efforts on the timing and the longevity of policy windows cannot be ignored (Kingdon 1995). In the end, says Luntz, people want to hear about energy independence and job creation, not just "melting glaciers or polar bears" (Zwick 2010). If he is correct—and shifting rhetoric in Washington under the Obama administration suggests as much (Nisbet and Scheufele 2010)—it is a strategy with the potential to build bipartisan support for climate policy and move it onto the public agenda.

2. Setting the Agenda

As the struggle over framing global warming suggests, the process by which problems are defined and get onto the agenda of attention and action powerfully shapes policy making. As Schattschneider (1960, 68) reminds us in *The Semi-Sovereign People*, "The definition of the alternatives is the supreme instrument of power. He who determines what politics is about runs the country, because the definition of alternatives is the choice of conflicts, and the choice of conflicts allocates power."

Within this observation lie profoundly important dynamics that define our politics, our policies, and even democracy itself.

2.1. Conditions versus Problems

What do scholars mean when they refer to a "problem" in the first place? The very notion of problem *definition* suggests its contested nature. There may be an "objective condition"—such as the buildup of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere—that can be observed, measured, and even understood as "bad" in the abstract, without citizens, governments, and vested interests perceiving that it poses undesirable consequences. Insofar as those beliefs hold, there is no "problem" that merits attention, much less action (Jones 1975, 20). There is only a "condition" with which we choose to live (Pralle 2009).

As noted above, Lippmann's (1922, 20) observation about "the pictures in our heads" speaks to a perceptual gap in which many environmental problems reside. In developed countries, at least, comparatively few people have felt the direct impacts of the conditions that characterize different eras in environmentalism. Even first-generation conservation battles reflected an imbalance in incentives between those seeking to exploit a natural resource for material gain and others determined to manage it for use by future generations, or to preserve it entirely for aesthetic or normative reasons (Hays 1959). In this regard, John Muir's fight to protect the Sierra Nevada range in the late nineteenth century, the way Greenpeace mobilized opposition to whaling in the 1970s, and the success of those struggling to keep ANWR free of oil exploration today all depend on their respective abilities to evoke potent images of pristine wilderness or threatened species to sympathetic individuals who may never get to Yosemite, much less to the Arctic, or who may never see a whale.

In the same vein, the power of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), which to many sparked contemporary environmentalism, lay in her ability to paint a chilling image of paradise lost through the rampant use of chemicals, communicated to an attentive public increasingly sensitized to the potential ill effects of post–World War II science and technology. Carson's alarms about pesticides, magnified visually by the increasingly important medium of television, also resonated because she was able to extrapolate harm to birds to potential harm to human health. Other second-generation environmental problems—whether fixed in the public mind by Love Canal or by Chernobyl—reflected growing concerns about possibly irreversible effects of chemicals and radioactivity on ourselves and our children.

Third-generation environmental problems such as climate change pose the greatest challenges for those seeking to define conditions as problems amenable to action (Shellenberger and Nordhaus 2004). Even presuming widespread acceptance of the scientific consensus about the facts of climate change, many in the developed world may have only indirect or peripheral experience with its impacts.

Moreover, those impacts might be decades away, while the costs to stave them off are immediate and tangible.

So not all conditions become *problems*. Factors that play a role in this equation include the *degree of issue saliency* (Downs 1972; Cobb and Elder 1972; Schattschneider 1960); *degree of perceived novelty* (Downs 1972); *degree of perceived complexity* (Nelkin and Pollack 1982); *perceived distribution of costs and benefits* (Wilson 1973); *images of affected populations* (Cobb and Elder 1972; Bosso 1989; Baumgartner 1989; Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Rochefort 1986; Katz 1990); and *values about the proper role of government* (Mucciaroni 1990). In the main, perception that a condition constitutes a "problem" and the probability of its "solution" depends on whether there is consensus that the condition merits attention, that a solution exists, and, more centrally, that the solution lies within the accepted purview of government action.

For example, the classic "moon/ghetto" conundrum of the Great Society Era of the 1960s—"If we can put a man on the moon, why can't we solve the problems of the ghetto?"—stems from divergent views about the goals themselves. Going to the moon was an easy *policy* problem: success was readily judged (i.e., getting there and returning safely), and the goal meshed with dominant social values (e.g., technological innovation, the frontier spirit, competing with the Soviets) and, as Nelson argues, "had the advantage of not threatening significant interests and of promising something to several" (1977, 14). By contrast, solving the "problem" of "environmental justice" (Bullard 1990) is far less consensual because many don't agree that lower-income or racial minority populations suffer disproportionately from environmental harms or, if they admit to such effects, resist acting because solutions require resource redistribution (Ripley and Franklin 1984) or the imposition of new costs on others (Wilson 1973).

So *types of problems* matter (Bosso 1987). Some are "simple" less because of any intrinsic quality but because there exists consensus on ends *and* means. Such problems are rare, as the Apollo project example suggests. Other problems are "technical," characterized by conflict over means. For example, few Americans question the value of economic growth; instead, they argue over means—whether government should boost spending, manipulate the money supply, cut taxes, or do nothing and let the invisible hand of the market operate. While the nascent field of sustainable economics offers a countervailing intellectual paradigm to the standard growth model (Daly 1977), orthodoxy is difficult to dislodge, and most arguments over economic policy still focus on means, not ends.

Other conflicts are more "morally complex." For example, debates over genetically modified organisms typically focus less on technical feasibility than on a fundamental moral question: is it right to "play with nature"? To moral philosophers like Bill McKibben (2003), the central concern is at what point we lose our "human-ness" in our quest to engineer nature, or ourselves. In this view, problems like food availability or species diversity are not "solved" by technology. Instead, they require a profound, perhaps unsettling discussion about the kind of world in which we wish to live.

The most intractable problems lack consensus on goals *or* means, as Bosso suggests in the debate over chemical pesticides:

> With respect to pesticides, it is almost impossible to find agreement on ends because the ends themselves often are clearly incompatible: environmentalists may seek to rid the earth of pesticides at any cost; chemical firms may seek to maximize profits; farmers want inexpensive and effective pesticides to maintain high crop yields at lower costs; public health officials want to eradicate disease. Consumers…want cheap food, which might lead them to support the wide use of pesticides, but they also fear the possibly carcinogenic effects of pesticides residues in that food or in the environment. (1987, xiii)

Most contemporary environmental problems reside within this contested realm. It is one thing to generate support to remediate obvious air pollutants—and even then it is difficult to do so if solutions impose costs that affect local jobs and economies—a far different matter to get consensus on conditions like climate change, endocrine disruptors, loss of biodiversity, or the impacts of emerging technologies. On climate change, for example, success is neither clearly defined nor immediately attainable, and "solving" the problem may require individual and collective sacrifices that clash with long-held beliefs about the "American way of life." As a result, for political leaders inaction on climate is a rational default strategy, at least until some framing event catalyzes popular opinion enough to push it onto the agenda of action. And that is only the start.

2.2. Agendas and Action

Visible framing events like the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill are the exception, not the rule, in political life. Most of the time, as Charles Lindblom argues, policy makers "have to identify and formulate the problem" (1966, 13). Lindblom's observation speaks to a constant struggle among organized interests, political elites, and citizens to get their respective problems onto the agenda of action and, alternatively, keep *other* problems *off* the agenda. Sometimes these struggles reflect the classic pluralist conception of "active and interested interests" openly vying over the agenda (Dahl 1956). At other times, problems never seem to be discussed, perhaps because they are judged to contravene prevailing social values, dominant ideologies, and powerful cultural norms (Bachrach and Baratz 1970; Crenson 1971) or are crowded out by what Cobb and Elder call the "systemic" agenda, those issues "that are commonly perceived by the members of the political community as meriting public attention and…involving matters within the legitimate jurisdiction of existing governmental authority" (1972, 85).

In short, the choices that confront policy makers are situated within broader societal values and priorities. As a result, even deeply felt concerns about the environment compete with other problems. Some, such as the overall state of the economy, dominate the public mind and persistently top the list of "most important

problems" in any public opinion poll (Dunlap 1991). The "environment," by contrast, only seems to top the agenda of attention after some framing event, and often only momentarily as more powerfully embedded issue concerns reassert their primacy. For example, for all its potent imagery, the Deepwater Horizon oil spill had no demonstrable impact on U.S. energy policy (Fahrenthold and Eilperin 2010). Instead, the dominant narrative focused on ensuring that British Petroleum cleaned up the spill and indemnified Gulf residents hurt by its immediate effects. Any potential for reframing U.S. energy policy away from environmentally harmful petroleum quickly dissipated amid fears that higher oil prices would exacerbate the lingering economic recession. Indeed, within the year the Obama administration reinstated deepwater drilling in the Gulf of Mexico (Broder and Krauss 2011).

The fleeting attention to and impacts of the Deepwater Horizon incident on energy and environmental policy agendas aptly illustrates the "issue-attention cycle" identified by Anthony Downs, a "systematic cycle of heightening public interest and then increasing boredom with major issues" that is "rooted both in the nature of certain domestic problems and in the way major communications media interact with the public" (1972, 39). Mass public attention to environmental problems is cyclical, Downs argues. Thus, a dire condition may exist long before public attention gets focused on it through some type of "alarmed discovery." What follows is "euphoric" public enthusiasm for problem solution, which wanes with time and with public recognition of the true costs involved. Public boredom or discouragement about the problem's apparent intractability remands the issue into a "limbo" of low saliency and the reassertion of "normal" politics dominated by organized interests with clear economic stakes in the status quo. The issue may reemerge spasmodically, but it is no longer so "new" (Downs 1972, 39–40).

The type of condition likely to go through this cycle, Downs argues, does not affect a majority, emerges out of social conditions providing "significant benefits to a majority or a powerful minority of the population," and no longer has any "intrinsically exciting" quality (1972, 41). Thus, most of us are not affected directly, to solve the problem (or even to address its symptoms) requires a significant redistribution of resources, and it invariably fades from view with continued exposure. Most environmental problems, in particular those affecting low-income communities or people in far-off nations, fit this equation, underscoring the challenge facing environmental advocates on problems of environmental justice, depletion of tropical rainforests, or, most telling, the effects of climate change (Duffy 2003).

2.3. Institutions and Agendas

To focus on agenda setting also prompts us to affirm the essentiality of formal institutions, rules, procedures, and organizational hierarchies. In assessing Kingdon's (1995) pathbreaking work on agendas, Gary Mucciaroni observes that the scholarship at that time failed to appreciate the impacts of system structure on agendas. "Political institutions are structures with perhaps the greatest impact on policy,"

says Mucciaroni (1992, 466). "[They] make up the topography, the banks and riverbeds that channel and shape participants' behavior." Or, as Schattschneider observed decades earlier, "The function of institutions is to channel conflict; institutions do not treat all forms of conflict impartially" (1960, 71).

Even so, until recently there was little focus in political science on how structural features of the political system independently affected how problems get on the agenda and are addressed by government. Policy entrepreneurs may compete for advantage within respective decision arenas (Cohen 1995; Layzer 2002), and they may even "shop around" for the most sympathetic venues (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Pralle 2006), but their capacity to maneuver is constrained in part by the system's overall structure. To be sure, the formal design of the political system does not determine agenda setting—the story of environmentalism itself is testimony to the power of ideas (Shabecoff 2000)—but it does induce patterns in how agendas get set.

For example, a defining feature of the U.S. system is federalism, the constitutional apportionment of governing authority among the national government and the respective state governments, each of them dealing with problems within their particular jurisdictions. In a federalist system, problems traditionally seen as within the purview of state government will not automatically migrate to the national agenda. For example, as Charles O. Jones (1975) points out, air pollution policy was a state (if not local) function until the late 1960s, when more expansive interpretations of the Constitution's interstate commerce clause and growing recognition of pollution as a national matter moved the problem onto the agenda of Congress. Indeed, one can argue that the spate of federal environmental laws to erupt between 1967 and 1974 reflected pent-up frustration with the inability and unwillingness of states to act. More recently, as Rabe (2004) shows in studying climate change policy formation, activists are focusing on state agendas out of frustration with inaction at the federal level. While recent decades have witnessed a blurring of jurisdictional lines and creation of many vertical linkages among federal, state, and local officials, the reality of federalism remains, with independent effects on agenda dynamics.

The constitutional separation of powers embedded in the U.S. system also shape how problems are drawn to and dealt with by the national government. The system in many ways is a centrifuge of divided institutional power and fractionated representation that is directed at dissipating temporary policy majorities before they produce rapid and possibly destabilizing change (Nicholas 1981). The already fleeting nature of Downs's "issue attention cycle" is further blunted by a system that makes it hard to translate majority opinion into action. Yet that same system, particularly through a legislature based on geographical representation, grants to smaller and more localized economic interests a great deal of access. It thus is no surprise, as Mucciaroni suggests, that Kingdon's model of agenda setting—with its focus on the converging "streams" of ideas, actors, and political contexts—is most useful "for describing policy-making in the United States, where the institutional structure is fragmented and permeable, where participation is particularistic and fluid, and coalitions are often temporary and *ad hoc*" (Mucciaroni 1992, 466).

Finally, the constitutional array of checks and balances also means that Congress and the presidency as institutions openly vie for primacy over problem definition and agenda setting in ways rarely seen in more unitary systems. For example, as Harrison and Hoberg find in comparing regulatory styles in the United States and Canada, "conflict between legislative and executive branches in the U.S. often publicizes the regulatory agenda. In contrast, Canadian regulatory agencies and ministers exercise greater discretion with respect to publicizing their agenda" (1991, 6). In Canada, as in parliamentary systems generally, the party in power can typically shape both legislative and executive agendas (see also Montpetit 2003). In the United States, the constitutionally rooted tension between separate and nearly autonomous branches produces fluid agenda dynamics. In the absence of cohesive parties, conflicts between the executive and a bicameral legislature, where divided partisan control is a fact of life, makes agenda dynamics livelier and less predictable.

System structure thus affects agenda formation. In the United States, the competing centers of authority and multiple routes for issue representation provide many venues into which demands can flow (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Bosso 1987), a permeability that in many ways gives the system resiliency and legitimacy. In a system of fragmented authority, however, problems may never get to the national government, may bounce around within the layers of federalism, or may get mired in conflicts between the branches of government. The system's design militates against a broadly arrayed problem (e.g., climate change) being addressed by the national government unless societal forces can "boost" it with a velocity sufficient to overcome the system's intrinsic inertia. Seen from this perspective, the U.S. system displays tremendous structural friction, such that momentarily important problems can dissipate as they run up against institutional features designed to do as the framers of the Constitution intended: cool the "passions" of the moment and slow down change enough to ensure overall system stability. As such, to echo Downs, any "alarmed enthusiasm" about climate change, or about the nation's reliance on oil in the wake of the Deepwater Horizon accident, can easily fade in the face of structurally induced inertia.

That same systemic inertia also makes it possible to retain gains already made despite concerted efforts by opponents. As students of American political development (e.g., Orren and Skowronek 2004) make clear, policy choices made decades ago—and embedded into laws, regulatory agencies, and webs of organized interests— have profound impacts on the shape and direction of contemporary policy, and even on the choices we argue. This is nowhere more evident than in U.S. environmental politics and policy, both of which continue to be shaped fundamentally by the dramatic policy breakthroughs made during the "environmental era" of the mid-1960s to late 1970s. Klyza and Sousa note the enduring impacts of this American "green state," which go beyond the boundaries imposed by existing laws and agencies:

> When the recent layer of the green state were laid down in the years 1964–1980, it was accompanied by fundamental changes in society that continue—namely the development of a highly professional and relatively well-funded issue advocacy community and widespread—though admittedly shallow public support. This

> combination of strong interest groups and broad public support has helped to
> prevent the kind of rollbacks that occurred in other liberal and progressive policy
> realms. (2008, 296)

The institutional inertia of the U.S. system, momentarily dislodged, reasserted itself, but along a new axis of discourse that continues to shape environmental politics. As GOP pollster Frank Luntz well understood as he sought to devise conservative talking points on environmental policy, the environmental "frame" had come to be part of the systemic agenda, imposing its constraints on what was deemed legitimate.

2.4. Images, Venues, and Actors

If the intrinsic nature of problems and the formal structure of the political system have independent impacts on agenda formation, such "predecision" factors are not deterministic. *Politics* still matters. In the United States, at least, the standard picture is of multiple actors and interests competing for access and influence from a variety of strategic positions. Given the features of the system and diversity within the nation itself, it is no wonder that studies of agenda setting in the United States tend to take as their points of departure the pluralist image of competition among organized interests in and out of government (Dahl 1956; Walker 1991).

Such competition has a shape. "In a system like the U.S.," argue Milward and Laird, "there are many different access points and one institution or jurisdiction rarely controls a given policy domain. *Policy communities* serve to knit this fragmented system of governance together" (1991, 3). Whether such a community is a "subgovernment" (Freeman 1955), "issue network" (Heclo 1978), or "advocacy coalition" (Sabatier 1988), within each there are, as Sabatier argues, "actors from a variety of public and private organizations at all levels of government who share a set of basic beliefs (policy goals plus causal and other perceptions) and who seek to manipulate the rules of various government institutions in order to achieve those goals over time" (1991, 279). This depiction echoes Schattschneider's (1960) observation that at the core of politics is a conflict between those seeking to expand (or socialize) participation in a policy debate and those working to minimize (or privatize) it. Such a struggle is over both the definition of problems and control over the processes and arenas within which the debates occur.

Longitudinal studies of policy formation bear out this point. Bosso, in examining four decades of U.S. policy toward chemical pesticides, concluded that perhaps "the most powerful change in the pesticides policy case was its being redefined as an environmental matter; *loss of the power to define the issue* was probably the most critical factor causing the decline of the pesticides subgovernment" (1987, 256; emphasis added). Duffy notes similar shifts in U.S. nuclear power policy making: members of the "nuclear subgovernment" have found it increasingly difficult "to maintain their influence within the more open political environment" (1997, 122).

Such single case studies get critical comparative and empirical support in the work of Baumgartner and Jones (1990, 1993), who examine a range of policy areas (e.g., smoking, pesticides, and nuclear power) over time and conclude that "failure to control the images associated with a policy can lead to loss of control over the policy itself, even when it appears to be firmly within the institutional jurisdiction of influential groups all of whom favor the current direction of public policy" (1990, 5).

Taken together, as Baumgartner and Jones (1993) show, these studies reveal similar agenda dynamics. In most cases, policies were formulated originally under conditions of limited participation and mostly positive public perceptions of the issue's "image." The result is subgovernment dominance, often for decades. Over time, however, defenders of the status quo would struggle to maintain their preferred definition of the problem and to control the venues for policy formation as more and ever-diverse interests in and outside government demand to have a say on an increasingly controversial issue (Pralle 2006). In each case, the formerly tight "iron triangle" (Cater 1964) defending the status quo crumbles, replaced by a broader and more permeable "sloppy hexagon" (Jones 1979), "issue network" (Heclo 1978), "policy community" (Milward and Laird 1991), or "advocacy coalition" (Sabatier 1988). The resulting socialization of conflict produces more contested problem definition, greater policy fluidity, and even stalemate, at least until a new consensus emerges (Bosso 1987; Downs 1972; Duffy 1997; Hoberg 1992; Jones 1975; Mucciaroni 1990). Whether it is the "intrusion" of environmental perspectives into the debate over pesticides or nuclear power, the policy community that can define a problem's image also has the edge in setting the agenda of action.

One notes that these studies share a focus on configurations of shared policy interests, not on mass opinion. As Sabatier argues, "Understanding the policy process requires looking at the intergovernmental policy community or subsystem—composed of bureaucrats, legislative personnel, interest group leaders, researchers, and specialist reporters within a substantive policy area—as the basic unit of study" (1991, 269). This perspective has practical and normative implications. For one thing, it helps us to understand why generalized public support for environmental values does not automatically translate into action on problems like energy efficiency, or even climate change. It also explains why policy change nonetheless occurs, and much more than one might assume by looking at class structure, ideologies, or institutions alone. There *is* change amid seeming stability (see also Klyza and Sousa 2008; Layzer 2002). At its core, as Schattschneider (1960) understood, is the capacity to define what politics means.

3. CONCLUSION

"The environment" was not a problem when Lippmann (1922) penned the observation that opens this chapter. Indeed, "the environment" itself is a value frame that

emerged in the middle of the twentieth century out of growing scientific under-standing of and concern for the causal connections between the side effects of the techno-industrial age on nature and, perhaps more important, on human health. That frame took root in the overall social upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s and today takes its place as a potent, if diffuse, set of economic, social, and cultural values. In many ways, as Klyza and Sousa (2008) argue, the endurance of the American "green state" itself exemplifies the potency of the environmental frame in the public mind.

Even so, within the "green state" reside an array of meanings, and "the environment" as such will always remain a contested value system, subject to disputes between "deep greens" at one end of the ideological spectrum to "free-market environmentalists" at the other—and everyone in between. The absence of consensus values underscores the centrality of problem definition and agenda setting in environmental politics and reminds us that whoever can define what "the environment" means has the advantage, even if the room for maneuver is constrained by decades of policy choices.

The absence of consensus about "the environment" also reminds us that environmental conditions are always refracted through diverse perceptual lenses and accompanied by competing immediate needs. Broad if diffuse general support for the environment will not keep local constituencies from supporting short-term economic interests in pursuit of jobs, or from voting for candidates with poor environmental records. If, as Dunlap observes, few candidates want to be painted as openly anti-environment, "there is as yet little evidence of a 'green bloc' of single-issue voters comparable to the anti-abortion or anti–gun control blocs" (1991, 33). "The environment" still competes with other, often more momentarily pressing priorities. Even in the face of disasters like Deepwater Horizon, generalized public concern for environmental protection will not translate automatically into support for specific policies. It translates only into *opportunities* to frame problems in ways that propel them onto the agenda of action.

Yet, as seems clear from the endurance of the environmental frame over the past half century, those same debates take place within a systemic agenda of discourse (Cobb and Elder 1972) where "the environment" is embedded as a legitimate matter of public concern. As Luntz for one recognized, we are all environmentalists now. Our debates are about how—not whether—to translate environmental values into action. Amid laments of the "death" of environmentalism (Shellenberger and Nordhaus 2004), the often-overlooked potency of the environmental frame in American politics merits greater reflection.

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