

Comment / Commentaire

Policy Agenda-Setting Theory Revisited: A Critique of Howlett on Downs, Baumgartner and Jones, and Kingdon*

STUART SOROKA *University of British Columbia*

Michael Howlett has published two articles in this JOURNAL, both of which test policy agenda-setting theories using Canadian data. In the first article, Howlett examines hypotheses by Anthony Downs as well as Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones; in the second article, some hypotheses suggested by John Kingdon are examined.¹ While both articles present some interesting points using unique Canadian data, each suffers from a number of related flaws.

The argument that follows will outline the difficulties—both theoretical and methodological—with Howlett's arguments. Problems with Howlett's analysis include the lack of a proper measure of public

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1 Michael Howlett, "Issue-Attention and Punctuated Equilibria Models Reconsidered: An Empirical Examination of the Dynamics of Agenda-Setting in Canada," this JOURNAL 30 (1997), 3-30; and "Predictable and Unpredictable Policy Windows: Institutional and Exogenous Correlates of Canadian Federal Agenda-Setting," this JOURNAL 31 (1998), 495-524. The sources of the three theories Howlett analyzes are as follows: Anthony Downs, "Up and Down With Ecology: The 'Issue Attention Cycle,'" *The Public Interest* 28 (1972), 38-50; Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones, *Agendas and Instability in American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); and John W. Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies* (New York: Harper Collins, 1984).

Stuart Soroka, Department of Political Science, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia V6T 1Z1. E-mail: snsoroka@interchange.ubc.ca

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opinion, the use of a “thin” content analysis and a misrepresentation of the theories themselves. Howlett’s evidence is significant in and of itself—indeed, it should be considered further evidence of policy agenda-setting in general, and a contribution to discussions of specific agenda-setting effects and dynamics in particular. His evidence cannot, however, be regarded as the series of tests that he suggests.

Howlett’s efforts at empirically testing policy agenda-setting theories are further hampered by the fact that the original authors were only passingly concerned with creating testable theory. Consequently, the most significant difficulties with Howlett’s research may largely be a product of the original theories themselves. While Howlett’s analysis has its own difficulties, then, there may also be flaws in each of these well-known policy agenda-setting hypotheses.

The discussion below deals with the three policy agenda-setting theories individually. The theories themselves are described briefly, as are Howlett’s research strategies and conclusions. Specific difficulties with Howlett’s analysis are pointed out, and the review concludes with a more general critique of current policy agenda-setting theory.

Downs’s “Issue Attention Cycle”

According to Downs, public attention to problems follows an “issue attention cycle,” through which the public becomes suddenly aware of a problem and then gradually loses interest. This cycle, Downs suggests, applies principally to unexciting problems that directly affect a minority of the population. His description of the issue attention cycle deals almost exclusively with trends in public opinion, although he includes the suggestion that policy makers are affected by the public, and briefly mentions the potential leading role of the media.

Howlett tests Downs by comparing longitudinal data on media content with data on government activity (Hansard and committee reports of the House of Commons). If Downs is correct, according to Howlett, issue salience for the media should lead to issue salience for policy makers. Using cross-correlation functions (CCFs),² Howlett does not find adequate evidence to support his interpretation of Downs.

At best, Howlett’s test is only tangentially related to Downs’s original hypotheses. It does not address the crux of Downs’s model—the idea that attention to issues rises suddenly, and is followed by a slow decline. The fundamental problem with Howlett’s analysis, how-

2 Cross-correlation functions (CCFs) are a product of correlations between two series at various lags and leads. They are usually used to help identify causal links between two time series. For a more detailed description of CCFs and their uses, see C. Chatfield, *The Analysis of Time Series: An Introduction* (4th ed.; London: Chapman and Hall, 1989).

Abstract. The author critiques two articles by Michael Howlett published recently by this JOURNAL, and comments on policy agenda-setting theory. Howlett's articles use Canadian data to test three different policy agenda-setting theories forwarded by Anthony Downs, by Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones and by John Kingdon. This commentary suggests that the tests have several major flaws. These flaws are a product of several factors: Howlett's dataset and use of statistics, his interpretation of the theories at hand and empirical problems with the policy agenda-setting theories themselves.

Résumé. Ce texte critique deux articles de Michael Howlett publiés récemment dans cette REVUE et les théories portant sur la gestion de l'agenda politique. Les articles de Howlett testent, à l'aide de données canadiennes, trois différentes théories avancées par Anthony Downs, par Frank Baumgartner et Bryan Jones et par John Kingdon. Cette analyse montre que ce test comporte plusieurs lacunes majeures qui tiennent d'une part, à la nature des données de Howlett, à son utilisation des statistiques et à son interprétation des théories précitées et, d'autre part, aux problèmes empiriques découlant des théories portant sur la gestion de l'agenda politique.

ever, is the use of a media content analysis as a surrogate for the public agenda. This methodology is fundamentally flawed.

Howlett's use of a media content analysis rests on the assumption that there is little difference between the media and public agenda—a fact that is seriously in doubt considering the findings of public agenda-setting research. The large body of research sorting through the relationship between the media and the public serves in and of itself as testament to the complexity of the media-public relationship. Moreover, the magnitude of aggregate public agenda-setting effects varies among agenda-setting analyses, and research suggests that the connection between media and public agendas varies widely depending on the type of issue, both in terms of the magnitude and the timing of the effect.³ These findings suggest that the media and public agendas are not as similar as Howlett's test requires. It follows that Howlett's assumption that the media agenda can act as a substitute for the public agenda is unsustainable.

- 3 For suggestions regarding ways in which public agenda-setting effects might be affected by the nature of the issue, see Aileen Yagade and David M. Dozier, "The Media Agenda-Setting Effect of Concrete Versus Abstract Issues," *Journalism Quarterly* 67 (1990), 3-10; and Harold G. Zucker, "The Variable Nature of News Media Influence," in B. D. Ruben, ed., *Communication Yearbook*, Vol. 2 (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1978), 225-45. Theories discussed in the preceding articles have been considered and tested, with varied results, by Roy L. Behr and Shanto Iyengar, "Television News, Real-World Cues, and Changes in the Public Agenda," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 49 (1985), 38-57; David P. Demers, Dennis Craff, Yang-Ho Choi and Beth M. Pession, "Issue Obtrusiveness and the Agenda-Setting Effects of National Network News," *Communication Research* 16 (1989), 793-812; Wayne Wanta and Yu-Wei Hu, "The Agenda-Setting Effects of International News Coverage: An Examination of Differing News Frames," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 5 (1993), 250-64; and James P. Winter, Chaim H. Eyal and Ann H. Rogers, "Issue Specific Agenda-Setting: The Whole Is Less than the Sum of the Parts," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 8 (1982), 1-10.

The use of a media content analysis in place of a true measure of public opinion may be motivated by the difficulty in finding a useful measure of public opinion outside the United States.⁴ Howlett, however, justifies his use of a media content analysis by alluding to Downs's own theorizing. Unfortunately, Downs wrote only briefly (and vaguely) about the media in his discussion of the issue attention cycle. Downs's theory is based almost entirely on what he saw as an identifiable trend in public opinion, coupled with his "rational behaviour" notion of the relationship between the public and policy makers. Downs acknowledges that the media operate somewhere in between these two and real-world phenomena, but he never defines the exact role of the media. In fact, the rather short shrift Downs gives to the media represents a flaw in his work. What is most germane to the present discussion, however, is simply that Downs never equates the public and media agendas.

The assumption that the media agenda can be a reasonable surrogate for the public agenda is discounted both on the grounds of evidence to the contrary, and on the basis that it is never clear that Downs suggested it. Howlett's information is useful as an analysis of the relationship between the media and policy makers, but it cannot be interpreted as an empirical test of Downs's theory. A true test of the issue attention cycle would, at a minimum, require a qualitative discussion (and perhaps a quantitative measure) of issue types, an analysis of the dynamics surrounding rises in issue salience and a direct longitudinal measure of public opinion.

Baumgartner and Jones's "Punctuated Equilibrium"

The punctuated equilibrium model suggests that "Issue definition and institutional control combine to make possible the alternation between stability and rapid change that characterizes political systems."⁵ The result, according to Baumgartner and Jones, is a system characterized by sudden shifts in policy development. To support this argument, the authors present an historical description of US policy development in

4 There are no countries with an accumulated body of public opinion data comparable to that in the US. One well-suited dataset was collected in Germany, and this generated a number of fascinating agenda-setting articles (see, for example, Hans-Bernd Brosius and Hans Mathias Kepplinger, "The Agenda-Setting Function of Television News: Static and Dynamic Views," *Communication Research* 17 [1990], 183-211; Hans Bernd Brosius and Hans Mathias Kepplinger, "Beyond Agenda-Setting: The Influence of Partisanship and Television Reporting on the Electorate's Voting Intentions," *Journalism Quarterly* 69 [1992] 893-901). For the most part, however, useful longitudinal public opinion data for agenda-setting researchers outside the US remains slight at best.

5 Baumgartner and Jones, *Agendas and Instability*, 16.

several areas. Their description is largely qualitative, backed up regularly with quantitative evidence.

Howlett asserts that the punctuated equilibrium model can be tested by searching for patterns in policy making—the existence of anything other than “white noise,” he suggests, disproves Baumgartner and Jones’s chaotic theory of the policy process. Using CCFs and spectral analysis, Howlett finds evidence that Hansard mentions for nuclear issues and acid rain are not purely random. Rather, they are both strongly autocorrelated and tend to emerge repetitively, in cycles. He concludes that the punctuated equilibrium model does not apply in Canada.

Howlett’s discussion of Baumgartner and Jones suffers from two flaws. First, he has the false impression that there can be no periodic trends in policy making under a punctuated equilibrium model. In truth, while a punctuated equilibrium model does not suggest or require these trends, it also does not preclude their existence.

The source of Howlett’s difficulty lies in his misinterpretation of Baumgartner and Jones’s use of the word “cycles.” When Baumgartner and Jones reject cyclical views of politics, they are referring to the notion that politics is dominated by periodic variations from an equilibrium.⁶ This opposition to equilibria in politics is the heart of their analysis.⁷ Their central thesis is that there is no single equilibrium over time, but rather that policy equilibria are constantly shifting because of issue redefinition and institutional change.

This Baumgartner and Jones thesis is in no way connected with Howlett’s conception of cycles. Howlett uses “cycles” in the more generic sense; for him, cycles are regular intervals, measured by spectral analysis. His discovery of issue salience at regular intervals says nothing about Baumgartner and Jones’s central concern—a return to equilibrium (or lack thereof) following policy change. Howlett’s identification of policy discussion at these regular intervals cannot be taken as evidence refuting the Baumgartner and Jones hypothesis.

The second problem with Howlett’s conclusions is a function of his dataset. The kinds of policy shifts that Baumgartner and Jones dis-

6 The citation Howlett uses from Baumgartner and Jones comes directly from the section where authors clarify what they mean by cyclical views of politics (*Agendas and Instability in American Politics*, 244-45; Howlett, “Issue-Attention and Punctuated Equilibrium Models Reconsidered,” 24). Baumgartner and Jones cite a number of examples of cyclical models, including Samuel P. Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); and Andrew S. McFarland, “Interest Groups and Political Time: Cycles in America,” *British Journal of Political Science* 17 (1991), 257-84.

7 This is also true of Jones’s more recent work (*Reconceiving Decision-Making in Democratic Politics: Attention, Choice, and Public Policy* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994]).

cuss are often related to issue definition (or redefinition) during or following a period of heightened issue salience. Howlett's dataset, however, includes only simple issue mentions. As a result, he lacks the kind of information necessary to test the content- and context-based theory that Baumgartner and Jones propose. Context-related shifts cannot be analyzed using thin content analysis data.

In sum, a true test of the Baumgartner and Jones thesis would require both a more developed content analysis and a different method of statistical analysis. The dataset would have to permit an examination of how a problem is redefined following a period of salience. This type of change is fundamental to the Baumgartner and Jones hypothesis, and cannot be examined using Howlett's dataset. Furthermore, a punctuated equilibrium model does not preclude the possibility that issue salience might show some periodic trend. The use of spectral analysis to identify periodic trends in the data, therefore, is not a test of the Baumgartner and Jones theory. As they currently stand, Howlett's conclusions regarding Baumgartner and Jones are moot.

Kingdon's "Policy Windows"

Kingdon's description of the policy-making process is centred around the ideas of streams and policy windows. There are three independent streams, or processes: problems, policies and politics. The possibility for policy initiation or change is at its greatest when all three streams come together—when problems are coupled with policy solutions at a time when it is politically feasible to implement change. This coupling of streams can result in a policy window, generally brought on by changes in the problem or political streams. Windows can appear predictably (as a result of elections, for instance) or unpredictably (brought on, for example, by a sudden crisis).

Kingdon uses a variety of data sources in his description of policy development. The data, however, do not guide his analysis so much as they provide a background to his qualitative assessment of the policy process. In an effort to make Kingdon's theories more readily testable, Howlett creates four policy window types based on Kingdon's discussion. Howlett describes the four types as follows:

Routine policy windows, in which institutionalized procedural events dictate predictable window openings; *discretionary political windows*, in which the behaviour of individual political actors lead to less predictable window openings; *spillover problem windows*, in which related issues are drawn into an already open window; and *random problem windows*, in which random events or crises open unpredictable windows.⁸

8 Howlett, "Predictable and Unpredictable Policy Windows," 500.

Howlett tests for the existence of the different window types using CCFs and spectral analysis. He interprets his statistical evidence as proof of Kingdon's hypotheses, and makes two conclusions: (1) there is evidence of the different types of policy windows, and (2) there is a relationship between the degree of institutionalization (or predictability) and the relative frequency of different policy window types. Routine policy windows, for instance, occur more frequently than discretionary policy windows.

There are three problems with Howlett's test of Kingdon. First, his statistics offer evidence for only one of his two conclusions. Spectral analysis and CCFs produce evidence of discretionary, spillover and routine windows in Canada, but they provide little evidence regarding the relative frequency of different policy window types.

Howlett cannot rely on CCFs to draw his conclusions on the frequency of policy window types because CCFs provide no information regarding the frequency of a given trend in the data. CCFs are products only of how closely correlated two time series are. If two series are perfectly correlated, it does not matter how many times they rise and fall—so long as they rise and fall together, the CCFs will remain the same. Two series that are perfectly flat, for example, will produce a CCF of 1.00; so, too, will two series that rise and fall repeatedly, so long as they do so together. Accordingly, Howlett's suggestion that the number of significant CCFs in the various policy fields is an indication of relative frequency is false. His evidence indicates only that the windows exist—their frequency is unknown. As a result, any conclusions regarding frequency are unfounded.

Second, Howlett's test for discretionary policy windows suffers, like his test of Downs, from the lack of a true measure of public opinion. This window type is based largely on Kingdon's discussion of the political stream, where he discusses the political factors that might affect the policy-making agenda, including interest groups and the national mood.⁹ Kingdon's "national mood" is a rather amorphous concept, and the author admits he is unable to account for how policy makers get their feel for the national mood. Kingdon suggests that a wide variety of elements are important, including mail from constituents, town meetings, personal contacts, political elites, interest groups and the media.¹⁰

Howlett's measure of the national mood is based on his media content analysis and on measures of real-world factors. As such, Howlett ignores what is possibly the most important national mood source—the public. His results can be regarded as an examination of a narrowly defined type of discretionary policy window, but they do not

9 Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives*, 152-72.

10 *Ibid.*, 156.

represent a comprehensive test for discretionary policy windows in general. Again, Howlett's analysis is hampered by the lack of a true measure of public opinion.

Finally, there is a problem with Howlett's policy window typology. While the categories are conceptually different, they are not mutually exclusive. Take, for instance, a hypothetical simultaneous rise in salience (in Hansard) for both constitutional and Native issues during a budget discussion period. First, Howlett tests for "spillover" windows by looking for correlations between the two series, suggesting that the discussion of one of these subjects might create an opportunity for attention to the other. Because the two series rise simultaneously, they could provide evidence of a "spillover" window. Second, he tests for "routine" policy windows by looking for correlations between the individual (Hansard) series, and a series indicating budget speeches. Because the two series rise during the period of a budget speech, they could now present evidence for routine windows.

A given rise in salience should not fit into more than one of Howlett's policy window types. Descriptively, this might make sense; empirically, it creates serious difficulties. If it is impossible to tell from his analysis whether a correlation between constitutional and Native issues is a product of a spillover or a routine policy window, then it is also impossible to draw any conclusions regarding the relative existence or frequency of policy windows.

A first step toward solving this problem might be to measure the frequency of spillover windows, controlling for routine windows. This might not be possible, however. Native issues could rise in salience during an election, for instance, because a political actor made an effort to draw them in to an ongoing discussion of constitutional issues. Is this a spillover or a routine policy window? It seems logical to conclude that the two window types might happen simultaneously, but this precludes the type of analysis for which Howlett created the typology in the first place.

This quandary explains, perhaps, why Kingdon neglected to create a typology of windows himself, and elected simply to describe different, but not necessarily competing, policy window types. The only way to distinguish one policy window from another—if this is even possible—is through detailed qualitative description. Howlett's exclusively quantitative argument is simply not compatible with Kingdon's less confined theorizing.

Conclusions on Howlett and Comments on Policy Agenda-Setting Theory

Howlett's agenda-setting articles are important in that they take what has been a consistently growing paradigm in political science in the United States and apply it elsewhere. The assumption that the policy agenda-setting effects found in the US exist in other countries requires further justification, and agenda-setting devotees in the US themselves have remarked on the importance of additional testing and duplication elsewhere.¹¹ As a result, Howlett's evidence is interesting when taken at face value. Furthermore, his unique evidence on agenda-setting timing and dynamics is interesting when seen as part of ongoing empirical discussions of agenda-setting effects and dynamics.

Nevertheless, it is misguided for Howlett to present his evidence as tests of previous agenda-setting theories for a variety of reasons. First, the dataset does not adequately facilitate an analysis of the theories at hand. This is true for the Downs and Kingdon theories because Howlett lacks a public opinion measure, and true for the Baumgartner and Jones theory because Howlett uses only a thin content analysis. Second, the statistical methods are based on evidence that is not directly connected to the theory being tested. The cycles Howlett exposes through spectral analysis are not the same cycles germane to the Baumgartner and Jones thesis, and CCFs provide no evidence of frequency relevant to the Kingdon discussion.

The difficulties with Howlett's analysis should not be taken as an indication that these theories need not be tested, however. The desire for a test of Downs and Kingdon is certainly justified—these authors are clearly much stronger in their theorizing than in their testing. Baumgartner and Jones are more data-oriented, but even they are content to tell a story and use data intermittently to back it up. In all three cases, Howlett prefers that the data tell the story. It may be that data can tell a story, but it cannot be the same one told by Downs, Baumgartner and Jones, or Kingdon. These authors' theories do not easily lend themselves to exclusively quantitative explication.

What Howlett's articles show, above all else, is that major theories of policy agenda-setting are not readily tested—at least not as thoroughly as some would prefer. And if one regards testability as essential for theory in political science, this is a crucial shortcoming.

Were agenda-setting not so valuable to those interested in policy making, the difficulties illustrated by Howlett might lead one to dismiss it altogether. Agenda-setting, however, has clearly helped to illustrate

11 See, for instance, Everett M. Rogers and James W. Dearing, "Agenda-Setting Research: Where Has It Been, Where Is It Going?" in James A. Anderson, ed., *Communication Yearbook*, Vol. 11 (London: Sage, 1988), 555-94.

and explain the policy process. Agendas and agenda change have proven to be useful tools to policy analysts. In fact, agenda-setting has been used widely by theorists in other fields (for example, political communication scholars interested in the media-public relationship). Agenda-setting, then, should not be summarily dismissed. It both informs policy analysis and political communication theory, and provides a link through which these fields can be connected.¹²

The policy agenda-setting analyses examined above demonstrate that, despite its usefulness, the agenda-setting paradigm does not necessarily lead to testable theory. Rather, the theories Howlett examines demonstrate the apparent trade-off between creating a theory that accurately reflects reality, and creating one that is easily tested. For the theories examined above, moderate quantitative evidence backed up with extensive duplication may have to suffice. In the future, it may be incumbent on policy agenda-setting analysts to create an entirely new theory that both reflects reality and more adequately facilitates empirical investigation.

- 12 The three policy-making theories Howlett tests show, to varying degrees, how agenda-setting can permit the analysis of the media, the public and policy using a single framework. For recent examples from political communications, see William J. Gonzenbach, *The Media, The President, and Public Opinion: A Longitudinal Analysis of the Drug Issue, 1984-1991* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996); and Everett M. Rogers, James W. Dearing and S. Chang, "AIDS in the 1980s: The Agenda-Setting Process of a Public Issue," *Journalism Monographs* 126 (April 1991).