

Disaster Politics and Agenda Setting

Kingdon – Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies

Birkland and Nath – Business and Political Dimensions in Disaster Management

Birkland – Focusing Events, Mobilization, and Agenda Setting

Birkland – In the Wake of the Exxon Valdez: How Environmental Disasters Influence Policy

The materials this week concerned focusing events and how they shaped the policy agenda.

Birkland defined a focusing event as a sudden, relatively uncommon, harmful event known to the public and policy makers at the same time. These events can shine a light on problems and cause groups to mobilize. Kingdon argued that symbols act in the same way. They can focus attention and reinforce something already taking place. Kingdon showed how CAT scans became a symbol for expensive medical procedures. It could be argued that the Exxon Valdez has moved from an event to a symbol used by anti-oil groups.

Not every type of problem has focusing events. The hole in the ozone layer, global warming, crime, and disease all need aggregation and analysis to understand and time to unfold. That is not to say that there can not be a focusing event which could bring attention to these problems. For instance, melting arctic permafrost causes the Trans-Alaska Pipeline to crack and spill. This would be a focusing event with a direct causal link to global warming. The resulting environmental disaster could serve as a spotlight. Until then, there isn't enough happening to focus attention.

A focusing event in itself is not enough to change the policy agenda. Both Birkland and Kingdon note that there must be a previous problem that needed to be highlighted. A single plane crash does not entail a crisis. There needs to be something there that needs attention.

Even with a previous problem, all focusing events do not have similar results on the agenda. Kingdon noted that focusing events do not happen with the same frequency across all domains. Health, with its greater public visibility, affects everyone but experiences few focusing events when compared to transportation. Birkland wrote that, "the nature of policies and the communities in which such policies are made influence the nature and outcomes of the policy process." It was also argued that the less clear the harm done by an event, the less the issue will expand and influence the agenda. While the domain, geography, policies, and the clear injury of an event shape the outcome, so does the existence of groups that have an interest. An event is more likely to be focal if interest groups exist to exploit the event in an attempt to change policy.

The 2004 East Asian tsunami is a great example of a focusing event mobilizing groups and changing the policy agenda. Pressure has led to a call for a tsunami early warning system for the Indian Ocean. It could be ready as early as June 2006. The recent Sumatran earthquake also demonstrated how the tsunami changed organizational policy. After the tsunami, groups sought to place blame on international seismic organizations for the lack of warning. While this causal story was not exceptionally compelling, it did shape how these organizations responded to the newest earthquake and how they will respond to threats in the future.