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The Public Administrator's Role in Setting the Policy Agenda

To achieve their promise, systems of democratic government must take action: They must make and execute public policy. It is widely recognized that public administrators perform a number of tasks to contribute to this process. It may be less obvious, however, that such administrators can play key roles even as policy problems first attract the attention of government and are placed on its agenda for decision.

This chapter considers the public administrator's role in helping to set the policy agenda and is designed particularly to assist those who seek guidelines for effective administrative practice. Accordingly, the first section briefly summarizes some important analytical distinctions and relevant findings. The next section, which constitutes the bulk of the chapter, explicitly sketches some research-based guidelines for effective practice regarding agenda setting within the framework of democratic government. These guidelines emphasize tools and processes through which public administrators can contribute to the agenda-setting activity.

Agenda Setting and Administrators

Governments in the United States are often expected to address a staggering number and range of concerns, from nuclear power to nuclear medicine, from social security to locally provided social services, from sex edu-

cation to gender equality. By almost any measure, public agendas seem to have grown tremendously, despite service cutbacks and tax reductions at all levels during the 1980s. As governments are pressured to deal with an increasing number of issues while being constrained by budgetary and political boundaries, the process of setting the public policy agenda becomes crucial. What is the agenda-setting process like? What is the role of the public administrator in this set of decisions? What can and should that role be? This mix of empirical and normative concerns lies at the heart of the analysis here.

In simplest terms, the agenda is the list of issues up for public consideration at a particular time. Thus, agendas are limited by calendars, politics, and the time and attention of policymakers, and they can change over time. Agenda setting is "the course by which issues are adopted for public consideration and, perhaps, remedy" (Nelson, 1984, p. 20).

This notion is misleading, however. It conveys the sense of a clear array that all can observe. There are really many policy agendas that together constitute the formal or governmental agenda (see Cobb and Elder, 1983, p. 86; Nelson, 1984, p. 20). The federal system provides substantial policy autonomy between national and state governments, and local units pursue diverse issues. Thus, Washington, D.C., may focus on monetary policy at the same time that Oklahoma considers revisions in its severance tax on oil and Tulsa debates municipal service cutbacks as a budget-balancing maneuver. Furthermore, it is rare to find a single government unanimously considering a common set of topics. The president may devote a huge portion of time to the modernization of conventional defense forces, while Congress largely ignores the issue in favor of proposals for national health insurance.

What roles do public administrators play in agenda setting? Numerous studies document involvement by administrators at crucial stages of the process. (Individual case studies include Crenson, 1971; Derthick, 1979; Fritschler, 1983; and Nelson, 1984. Systematic inquiry across multiple cases is reported in Heclo, 1974; Kirst, Meister, and Rowley, 1984; Light, 1982; and Polsby, 1984.) Sometimes administrative success in agenda setting in one locale spreads to others: Analyses of the diffusion of innovations across units of government have shed light on the complex processes by which governments and governmental administrators pick up ideas and become receptive to learning from each other (Rogers, 1983; see also Savage, 1985). Nevertheless, administrators do not typically dominate the agenda-setting process in every case and from beginning to end (Ripley and Franklin, 1986, p. 33). Thus, it is important to develop a more refined understanding of that process and of the administrator's role in it. To do so requires distinguishing systemic from routine agendas and explaining different elements or stages of the agenda-setting process.

The governmental agenda may contain matters from the list of larger societal concerns (the *systemic* agenda), or the items may derive from the ideas

and even the standard procedures of government itself (the *routine* agenda). The degree of match or mismatch between the systemic and routine agendas can provide clues to the responsiveness of public settings and thus about whether, when, and how public administrators might become more active in affecting the content of the agenda in the government or in their own agencies.

At the broadest systemic level, as society continually considers various problems and issues, one usually expects and even desires public administrators to play a more secondary role. This is the presumption of democratic theory, which reserves the primary agenda-setting role at the systemic level to the people and their political representatives. The systemic agenda is nevertheless neither neutral nor perfectly representative of the interests of the larger public (Cobb and Elder, 1983, p. 85). Some problems, like income inequality, may be perceived as outside the proper scope of governmental attention, since the agenda-setting process can reflect the interests of more powerful segments in the political community (see Lindblom, 1980, pp. 119–121). It would be too simple to conclude, therefore, that it is clearly inappropriate for administrators to seek to influence the systemic agenda.

More routine processes of policy initiation, which consume significant amounts of time, deal with complicated technical matters, and focus especially on the development of feasible alternatives for policymakers, are more likely to involve administrators regularly in important roles (see Kingdon, 1984; Polsby, 1984; and Nelson, 1984). This is because professional administrators possess a relative abundance of certain resources—principally longevity, ideas and expertise, regular channels of contact within and among communities of policy specialists, and key positions in the structure of policymaking—that provide particular advantages under these contingencies.

An understanding of the administrator's role also requires one to distinguish analytically between two elements or phases of the process: one through which issues achieve positions on the governmental agenda, and another through which policy alternatives are fashioned to compete as possible responses to the issues. This distinction, developed by Kingdon (1984, pp. 32–37) in the most rigorous empirical study of agenda setting to date, helps one to see that administrators are more influential, with respect to elected officials and political appointees, in the latter aspect of the process than in the former.

It cannot be assumed, however, that this refinement is a well-accepted division of labor, nor should an administrator believe that the policy process regarding agenda setting is rational and linear, with politicians selecting issues and administrators and other experts then fashioning and sifting through alternatives to deal with the issues. One finding consistently expressed in recent studies of innovation and agenda setting is that action is necessarily much more haphazard. The principal metaphor employed is borrowed from organization theory: agenda setting as a "garbage can" (Cohen, March, and Olsen, 1972). Issues are constantly being defined and redefined

as they compete for the interest of busy decision makers; alternatives are also constantly being produced and, especially, recycled through the system—often by participants in the process who have been proposing them for years. These issues and alternatives are mixed chaotically as they are dumped into the "garbage can" of the policy process (see Kingdon, 1984; Levine, 1985; Light, 1982; Polsby, 1984; Rogers, 1983; and Walker, 1981). The politically successful linking of policy problems to appropriate alternatives, therefore, cannot be assumed; it requires the participation of skillful policy entrepreneurs, who are often administrators.

Successful policy entrepreneurship on the part of administrators often requires in turn that contextual conditions be favorable. More specifically, the influence of the administrator in such an entrepreneurial role varies across time, governmental jurisdiction, and substantive policy sector. (The nature of these variations and how they can be taken into account in the practice of administration are detailed in the following section.)

In sum, then, the agenda-setting process is really a set of processes, and the administrative role is actually an amalgam of varying and complex roles. The level of public administrative influence, as well as the degree of legitimacy accorded such administrative efforts, varies with the aspect and context of agenda setting being examined. More than that generalization, however, the distinctions and research findings sketched above imply some fairly specific guidelines for effective practice in agenda setting.

Agenda Setting: Guidelines for Effective Practice

As the previous discussion indicates, the task of setting the public policy agenda is complex and multifaceted. What is known about this topic demonstrates that no simple set of prescriptions can possibly provide detailed guidance for effective practice to administrators of all types, at all levels, for all occasions. Furthermore, some difficult ethical and political questions attend any effort by public administrators to influence the course of governmental action. Thus, there is bound to be some disagreement with the specifics of any set of guidelines for effective practice. Still, the research summarized here does provide implications worth considering.

Effective administrative participation in agenda setting varies by context. This proposition specifically means the following things.

1. Public administrators should be prepared to play major roles in routine agenda setting. Administrative agencies often are at their most efficient in dealing with the manifold routines of government, and many administrative routines provide the triggers that can move items to the policy agenda.

Sometimes the triggering forces that place items on public agendas reach largely beyond the control of any individual or institution. In other circumstances, however, administrative activities and processes contribute quite directly to agenda setting. The use of social and technical indicators,

for instance, has become a pervasive part of the policy setting and affects both the recognition and the definition of problems, as well as the shape of the governmental agenda. Such familiar items as the administratively reported national unemployment rate or the monthly cost of living index have been responsible for moving some issues and programs to the forefront of the policy process. Feedback—through happenstance, routine reports, active monitoring, or sophisticated policy evaluation—may also strongly influence public agendas (Kingdon, 1984, pp. 95-103). Many of these items have to do with the acquisition, use, and communication of data and analytical information, with technical matters, or with fairly complex governmental and social processes. Although activists and political leaders may well have perceptions and viewpoints about various items, administrators are a crucial source not only of information but also of issues suggested by this information. The AIDS epidemic, discovered by public health officials through regular mechanisms of disease reporting, illustrates how information from a mundane, standard administrative process can alert a policy community, and eventually the world, to a major issue.

If administrators are not sensitive to their roles in routine agenda setting, it may be that no one else is well situated to do so. Government and policymaking may thereby suffer seriously.

2. The process by which the systemic agenda is established is somewhat different. Accordingly, the role administrators can and should take for effective action is also different. Whereas administrators are unlikely to be the main actors here, they can fulfill important roles by stimulating and managing creativity in administrative institutions—for example, by recruiting and rewarding diversity among agency personnel, encouraging staff to interact among other professionals in the field as well as with interested outsiders, structuring organizational arrangements to provide incentives for the exercise of "voice" (Hirschman, 1970), avoiding (if possible) patterns that focus almost exclusively on dealing with current crises rather than on considering the needs of the future, and by acting as policy entrepreneurs within the constraints of democratic government.

Furthermore, when considering the systemic agenda, administrators can contribute to effective practice by being aware of the distinctive features, indeed the biases, of the standard policy and political processes: Neither the so-called mandates of political campaigns nor the persuasive efforts of organized interest groups should be uncritically allowed to shape the policy-relevant activities of administrative agencies. Different modes of tapping public opinion are likely to reach and elicit responses from different elements of the public, who have very different views about which issues and problems are worth pursuing vigorously.

Without seeking to usurp authority, then, or to supplant the crucial role of overtly political actors in the policy process, administrators can help contribute to the shape of the systemic agenda by using innovative methods to identify the views and concerns of citizens. Polls, surveys, interviews,

deliberative group processes, hearings, and computer and telecommunications technologies can all be used sensitively by administrators who seek to develop a richer sense of the systemic agenda as it relates to the activities of their organization. Moreover, the information garnered through such channels can be directed, as appropriate, to others in the policy process as they deliberate and shape the governmental agenda.

3. Administrative roles and their effectiveness differ by time, jurisdiction, and substantive issue. Administrators should be sensitive to these variations and adapt strategy and tactics to these dimensions of context.

More specifically on the matter of time, broad cycles of innovation and retrenchment have been found to envelop those involved in agenda setting and to render various periods promising or inopportune (see Eyestone, 1978, pp. 28–30). The most skillful administrator may thus encounter nothing but frustration when seeking to place large, controversial issues on the government's agenda during a period of across-the-board cutbacks. On the contrary, interesting ideas were comparatively easy to add to the agenda during such periods as the Great Society years, before the Vietnam buildup (Sundquist, 1968). Furthermore, influence by administrators and other experts sometimes cannot be seen easily in the short term, yet over the longer haul, and with their assistance, policy-oriented learning may take place and affect the definition of problems and the agenda for action. For instance, one study of policy regarding land use in the Lake Tahoe region of Nevada and California documents such long-term changes (Sabatier, 1987).

Governmental jurisdictions matter as well. Research on diffusion of innovation suggests that jurisdictions and political cultures vary in their openness to ideas from professionals in policy communities, including public administrators (see Eyestone, 1977; Kirst, Meister, and Rowley, 1984; Savage, 1985; and Walker, 1981). Some evidence (Palumbo, 1988, p. 47) also indicates that administrative influence "is even more pronounced" in state and local government than at the federal level, since "most councilmembers, state representatives, and senators work only part time." Part of the emphasis here is on the comparative expertise, leadership, and entrepreneurial skill of key individuals, including administrators, in the processes of setting the agenda and defining the options for serious consideration. Thus, in relatively open and innovative settings where administrators are the most knowledgeable and skillful actors, their role and rate of success in agenda setting are likely to be correspondingly greater, as is their degree of responsibility for the size and shape of the overall agenda.

That the issue and how it is defined also make a difference is clear from a great deal of research (for example, Meier, 1987, pp. 82, 91–92, 98–99, 105). On the whole, an important conclusion is that the way issues are defined or portrayed affects who participates in the process of agenda setting, the levels of consensus or conflict that are provoked, and thereby the relative influence of various parties (Cobb and Elder, 1983, pp. 6–97). When policy issues are portrayed in stark terms (often through the use of

political symbols), and when they focus on interpretations of events that engage or mobilize large numbers of people, agenda setting moves away from the quieter, narrower, and more technical realms of government in which administrators are typically most influential.

Despite variations, public administrators generally can enhance their role in agenda setting by doing the following things.

1. They can develop and refine problem-finding routines. Some agencies and officials have "routine 'problem-finding' activities" (Nelson, 1984, p. 33) as part of their mandate, whereas others are not officially required to do so. In either case, however, efforts to monitor current programs, policies, and jurisdictions for issues or nascent concerns can be made a part of standard processes and can enhance effectiveness during agenda setting.

2. They can develop systematic efforts to identify and articulate, in policy circles, the concerns and issues of the public. For agencies and programs designed to serve particular segments of the public (such as the poor, organized labor, business, and the elderly), administrators may incur a special obligation to represent these constituencies in agenda-setting activities.

3. They can create and refine contacts with groups of specialists external to the agency, including those outside of government. Research demonstrates the importance of participation in policy issue networks for effective involvement in agenda setting. Nevertheless, administrators heavily involved in professional circles and issue networks generally need to guard against being coopted or being induced to see things primarily from the standpoint of the experts. Matters apart from those of great concern to policy specialists may deserve a legitimate place on the governmental agenda (that is, the professional and governmental agendas are not identical), and administrators should not restrict their attention merely to the more circumscribed set. Even on such esoteric subjects as genetic experimentation, individuals far beyond the community of research scientists may have good reason to be heard. These individuals include ethical and religious leaders, public health officials and physicians, representatives of agricultural interests, members of organized labor, and citizens at large.

4. They can retain in-house research and policy monitoring capabilities, instead (for instance) of contracting such activities out to other institutions, if it is especially important for administrators and their agencies to be directly involved in the agenda-setting process. Building expertise and influence by using specialists outside the public unit can weaken an agency's own ability to contribute to the definition of policy issues and feasible alternatives. For instance, the U.S. Children's Bureau lost its ability to lead in agenda setting for child abuse by contracting for policy-relevant research, rather than directly managing its own effort (see Nelson, 1984).

5. They can concentrate agenda-setting efforts in substantive specialties close to the administrator's (and the agency's) legitimate jurisdiction and demonstrated achievement. The description of the policy process (presented earlier) shows the importance of persistence, expertise, position, and timing

to the success of agenda setting. Administrators are most likely to do well on these dimensions in their own areas of specialty. In addition, more esoteric and routine items can be handled on specialized agendas—for instance, the institutional agenda of an agency (see Kingdon, 1984, p. 195); there is not so much competition for space on these as on the systemic agenda, nor is there as much potential for conflict. Thus, the chance to move an item to agenda status, and thence to decision, is enhanced. Furthermore, the normative argument on behalf of administrative activism during agenda setting is strongest when administrators act in or near their own bailiwicks.

6. They can time agenda-setting efforts wisely. Research by Kingdon (1984) and others shows conclusively that specific policy or program ideas may lie dormant in the "garbage can" or the "policy primeval soup" for years or decades before they become salient beyond a small, specialized group of experts. Recognizing the onset of openings—"policy windows"—for agenda setting is essential to effective practice. Some opportunities, like reauthorization hearings or a change of administration, come along at predictable intervals. Others are considerably less predictable, like nuclear power plant accidents (which mobilize opponents of this form of energy production) or attempted assassinations of political leaders (which galvanize the supporters of stricter gun control). In either case, many actors will seek to take advantage of the opening, and the period during which the agenda is flexible is short. Therefore, administrators who want to make an impact on this phase of the policy process need more than a good cause and a bright idea. They need to refine their skills in timing and in adapting to the rhythms and texture of the political process.

7. They can iron out differences within the policy or the professional community before seeking agenda status at some broader level. To the extent that an approximation of unanimity can be achieved among the specialists, that particular definition of an issue and its resolution is likely to carry weight more broadly in the process of policymaking. Such was the case a few years ago, when regulatory policy specialists, especially those with economic training, developed a coherent, persuasive, and nearly unanimous position on the benefits of national deregulation in the airlines, trucking, and telecommunications industries; the result was a potent and ultimately successful impact on the agenda-setting and overall policy processes (Derthick and Quirk, 1985). This sort of activity is one aspect of the task of policy entrepreneurship.

8. They can administer the preparation and maintenance of feasible options for possible adoption. Items may acquire agenda status or move to prime consideration partially on the basis of whether there seem to be any feasible policy alternatives available to deal with the issues. One aspect of effective administrative practice in agenda setting, then, is to stimulate novel but potentially usable ideas, to help combine and recombine these with other proposals, and to incubate these fledgling or candidate policies until the time is right. The stimulating and managing of innovation and creativity are themselves a topic far too complex to cover in this chapter, but administrators

need to be aware of its importance for the agenda-setting process, and they should also encourage those in the bureaucracy to think comparatively, to look to other governments and even to nonpublic settings for hints about which questions are defined as issues and which kinds of policy alternatives are possible.

Incubation itself, a prime responsibility of public administrators, involves "mobilizing support, doing technical research on the effects of various levels of government activity, trying out a variety of alternative means to the same or similar ends, and indoctrinating a generation of experts in the need for effort" (Polsby, 1984, pp. 127–128). Thus, administrators take on significant responsibility for stimulating fresh ideas, adapting them as appropriate, and floating them at the times and in the places where they may have some chance of catching on.

9. They can perform the function of policy entrepreneur within their own specialties. Issues of great public salience, which have reached a prime place on the systemic agenda, may be dealt with by government, without great need for assistance from policy entrepreneurs. Nevertheless, when he or she is absolutely convinced of the gravity and timeliness of an issue that has not reached the systemic agenda, the administrator—possibly with others—may seek to place it there, sometimes through the use of symbols, which can potently attract attention to issues, and perhaps through adroit use of the media. Some administrative agencies have learned how to use the media quite effectively to help shape the policy agenda—for instance, regarding law enforcement and crime (see Jacob, 1984). Learning about the processes through which the media actually construct the news is an important step, if administrators are to use such communication channels to raise issues effectively in much broader arenas (see, for instance, Altheide, 1985).

In contrast, when issues or options need time for interest to build or for maturation, the administrator's role can be especially critical. In the fluid, confused, and decentralized world of policymaking, the bureaucratic resources of persistence, longevity, expertise, and strategic position can make the pivotal difference. As one astute analyst commented after a study of several diverse instances, the agenda-setting process "often gives the illusion that powerful rather than knowledgeable people are the inventors of public policy. The case studies suggest, however, that policy innovations tend to belong to people who take an interest in them" (Polsby, 1984, p. 172; see also Kingdon, 1984). Above all, policy entrepreneurs take an interest in a nascent policy. They foster it, they work to understand it, they view the process with an eye toward spotting or opening policy windows, they keep the matter circulating in the right places, they advocate, and they broker (Kingdon, 1984). They are well aware of the importance of politics and of the distribution of power, but they also understand the impact of a good idea skillfully crafted and presented (see Levine, 1985, p. 256).

Through all these efforts at effective participation in the process, administrators should remain acutely aware of the normative issues at stake. In democratic systems, such officials have a fundamental obligation to serve the public, rather than

to assert their own personal agendas. Fulfilling this obligation can be difficult, once it is understood that administrators cannot simply abdicate a role in agenda setting but instead must sometimes play active roles in identifying issues, helping to develop alternatives, and moving appropriate policies to center stage at auspicious moments. The administrator is not an overtly political official, nor is he or she a partisan interest-group representative. Public administrators have an obligation not simply to obey and defend an existing set of bureaucratic rules but also to work on behalf of "the practice of democratic politics and the cause of effective public policy," especially within their fields of specialty (Burke, 1986, p. 42). If so, an active and assertive role for administrators in agenda setting becomes more defensible, justified, and necessary:

- The more biased or skewed the existing governmental agenda is, as compared to the systemic agenda (this is a matter that can and should be monitored by conscientious administrators)
- The more the issues seem generated by the bureaucratic routines and functions of government (that is, the more agenda-setting action seems called for by the administrator's formally established role)
- The less the administrator disguises his or her activities behind a veneer of ministerial behavior (that is, the more the administrator makes clear to others that he or she is actually seeking to influence rather than merely follow the agenda)
- The more that debate about key issues or alternatives is based on demonstrably false or dubious empirical premises (the expertise of administrators carries with it a special obligation to correct the agenda-setting record in such situations)
- The fewer alternative channels are available to those who are concerned about the issue and seeking access to the agenda
- The more powerless are those who seek such access

Summary

This analysis of the process of agenda setting for public policy reveals a complex set of considerations for administrators to evaluate. There are many agendas, and the activities involved in their development are not simply or easily summarized. Public administrators can assume varying roles in these different settings: assisting in the assessment and development of the systemic agenda, while playing a more active and decisive part in crafting the routine one; assuming a real although often not primary role in forcing issues into consideration, while exercising lead responsibility in developing and considering major alternatives for decision; and, throughout the mix of agenda-setting processes, acting frequently as policy entrepreneurs, while being bounded by the legitimate constraints of the democratic system.

From several considerations advanced in this chapter, workable guidelines for effective practice have been developed to help administrators as they consider the complexities of the agenda-setting role. In a process as disjointed and fascinatingly convoluted as this one, however, there can be no way to reduce the set of possible guidelines to a few simple maxims. Indeed, plain "dumb luck" often plays a decisive part in the success of some participants in the process (see, for example, Nelson, 1984, p. 44). Nevertheless, the considerations explored briefly in this chapter should enhance the overall effectiveness of public administrators who use the guidelines as part of a strategy to have a thoughtful impact.

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