P02 / From Real-World Problems to Political Problems

Topic : PUBLIC PROBLEM AND AGENDA SETTING

Chair : Renate Reiter (Fernuniversität Gesamthochschule Hagen)

Second Chair : Kathrin Loer (Fernuniversität Hagen)

Third Chair : Annette Toeller

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Problems are conditions that contradict shared normative assumptions of a society. Cases in point are the destruction of biodiversity, heavy air pollution in metropolitan areas, comparably poor medical provision in rural areas, or the discrimination of minorities. Policy scholars have been puzzling on problem definition for decades (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988, Stone 1989, Weiss 1989, Rochefort and Cobb 1993, Birkland 2011, Peters 2018), e.g. addressing in how far the interplay of empirical facets or descriptions, political actors' interests and ideas affect the selection of a problem as a political problem (Mehta 2011). From our empirical research we are particularly puzzled why there is usually a considerable time-lag between the emergence of real-world-problems (as defined above) and their definition as a political problem (something that must be "fixed"). On the contrary, one can also ask, why (under which conditions) real world problems in the end do become political problems? This is the research question of our proposed panel.

The state of the art is impressive on the one hand, but partly focuses on different aspects and partly still lacks clear results. On the one side, we find the two schools of thought which for long have been dominated the debate on the definition of social or political problems: the constructivist ("blaming", "shaming") and the realist or conflict-oriented ("politicization") school of thought. These schools provide partly contradicting answers to the question why certain real world problems can become political problems at all. However, none of these two schools focuses on the timing of problem selection. On the other side, the question of timing has been treated – at least implicitly – by several scholars providing important elements of an anyhow still inconclusive answer. For example, Kingdon in his seminal work (1984) pointed to the role of real world situational events (scandals, accidents, disasters etc.) that are placed on the political agenda although they have been existing before (in a "stream" of latent political problems). He also made a strong point (as Majone had suggested before) that real world conditions, notably the (technical, administrative or political) availability of a solution (see also Peters 2018), may trigger the definition of a political problem at a certain moment in time. In contrast, Hall, and, later, Béland and Cox and their colleagues, emphasized the role of constantly changing ideas thus shaping the circumstances of politics and the sensitivity of politicians for certain real problems at a given moment (Hall 1990, Béland and Cox 2010, 2014, 2016).

The proposed panel aims at further exploring these strands of research and at exposing patterns of why (under which conditions) and when real world problems in the end do become political problems?

CALL FOR PAPERS

Identifying and explaining the definition of political problems is crucial to understand public policymaking. Given the fact that there is usually a considerable time-lag between the emergence of real-world-problems (conditions that contradict shared normative assumptions of a society) and their definition as a political problem (something that must be "fixed"), the panel aims at answering the overall research question: Why (under which conditions) and when do real world problems become political problems?

The following questions may help to tackle this:

- How do we make sure that a political problem has been fixed, where do we identify problem definition? In the media? In government statements? In parliamentary debates?
- Who (which actors) defines a political problem and under which conditions?
- Who (which actors) aims at obstructing the definition of a political problem?
- Which role do situational events (scandals, disasters) play?
- Which impact does the (technical or political) availability of a solution ("policy", policy instrument) have?
- Under which conditions does a re-framing of problem definitions occur?

- Which role do ideas play in contexts of problem definition?

We invite papers that provide a theory-based answer to our overall research-question. Papers may be of a purely theoretic nature, or combine theoretical reasoning with empirical research in any policy area and on different levels of government, including case studies, comparative case studies, and research with medium and large n. Thus methodologically we are open to any method that is suitable to address our puzzle.

P02 / From Real-World Problems to Political Problems

Chair : Renate Reiter (Fernuniversität Gesamthochschule Hagen)

Second Chair : Kathrin Loer (Fernuniversität Hagen)

Third Chair : Annette Toeller

Session 1

Friday, June 28th 14:00 to 16:00 (MB 2.270)

A conceptual approach to exploring pathways for soil re-politicization

Lago Gonzalez (Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney)

The soil, one of the most important natural resources on Earth, is now reaching critical thresholds. However, despite the alarming levels of erosion and depletion with one-third of global soil resources moderately to highly degraded (FAO and IPBES, 2015), this vital resource remains neglected from policy in most parts of the world (Bouma and McBratney, 2013; Ginzky et al., 2018). Moreover, along with constant anthropogenic pressures such as poor agricultural practices, exponential population growth, and rapidly growing demands for protein, fibre and bioenergy, policy failures amplify the pressure on soil resources (Clarke, Lamb and Ward, 2002b). Until recently, both in international and national contexts, the soil was regarded as ‘the poor cousin’ of other environmental resources such as water and air, with environmental issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss and food insecurity receiving most of the attention (Boer and Hannam, 2015; Boer, Ginzky and Heuser, 2017). Overall, as outlined by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, the inclusion of soil in public policy ‘has been weak in most parts of the world’ (FAO and ITPS, 2015, p. 224).

Despite the public good nature of effective soil protection policy, it is widely acknowledged in policy studies that not all public problems turn into policy problems or become politicized through the process of policy-making. Turnbull (2006) claims that ‘setting policy problems is a political act’ in which political actors persuade and mobilize others about the existence of a problem and put pressure for action upon it. Public problems fail to be politicized when they are not perceived as important, or if powerful interests from actors, businesses or corporations impede inquiries about such issues being raised. Therefore, all public problems contain two questions: ‘the question of the problem, and the question of whether it should be a policy problem’ (Turnbull, 2006).

Motivated by the overwhelming neglect of soil protection policies in most parts of the world, this paper explores theoretical perspectives from policy studies to understand how the problem of soil degradation can become a subject of political action and, thus, enter into governments’ institutional agendas. By adopting a constructionist/interpretive perspective, we propose a conceptual approach linking framings and mental models at the science-policy interface to analyze how soil can be re-politicized in the policy arena.

Streams, Ideas and the Fight Against Poverty in Brazil

Patricia Vieira da Costa (Universidade de Brasília)

Poverty has been present in the Brazilian society since colonial times. But it was only in the mid-1980s (after the end of the military dictatorship) that the perception of poverty as a huge problem that plagues the country's citizens and hinders its development became a generalized normative assumption.

Yet, it was just around the turn of the 21st century that poverty entered the agenda as a political problem, and action aimed at fighting it was seriously considered – and taken. It took the coupling of multiple streams to get there.

The problems stream, involving the availability of reliable statistics about poverty and the powerful symbol provided by images of the poor affected by the draught in the northeastern region in the 1990s.

The politics stream, including pressures from civil society groups, a rising policy community, and the election of presidents with increasing levels of commitment to the agenda (Cardoso, Lula and Dilma).

The policy stream, involving the availability of social infrastructure (nationwide social health and education

services, however precarious), of federal budget resources, and the push from international organizations interested in large-scale solutions to fight poverty.

A major window of opportunity was open with the election of a president from a left wing party, who had a personal background of living in poverty as a child.

On another front, ideas about poverty also played a relevant role in bringing the issue to attention. One of the stickiest ideas is that people are poor because they do not work hard. Another one is that poor people waste money on unimportant things instead of buying food, for instance.

When the first social protection policies began to emerge in Brazil, in the 1030s, they were in line with the implicit idea that only “deserving working people” merited support. The policies focused the world of formal and urban work, leaving out those most needed: the vast majority of the poor who were still living in the countryside.

More inclusive policies came after the 1988 Constitution. The construction of a social protection network was aimed at people incapacitated for work because of old age or disability. Thus, it orbited poverty, but still without having it as its focus.

Even though more progressive citizens were already “on board”, the only way to convince the most conservative sectors of society that helping young adults with no formal jobs was not a waste of public resources was to reframe the issue. At first, as a fight against hunger. But access to food was no longer at the heart of poverty in Brazil, and hunger ceased to be the most representative face of the problem. Then came another reframing, as a fight against child poverty, paving the way for the Bolsa Familia conditional cash transfer program.

The success of the program, in turn, nurtured the mindset for a broader strategy to combat poverty in the next administration. And even though this agenda faded with the arrival of a conservative government, the Bolsa Familia program has proved resilient so far.

Abortion as a political problem in the agenda setting process in Central America.

Jeraldine del Cid Castro (FLACSO México)

The definition of political problems is crucial to understand public policymaking. This paper is interested in discus how far the interplay of empirical facets or descriptions, political actors’ interests and ideas affect the selection of a problem as a political problem (Mehta 2011). Also, under which conditions the demand of decriminalization of abortion is becoming a political problem in context where the current policies for moral issues are very restrictive?

Central America is a developing region. With high levels of violence, poverty and recent democratization processes, it is the worldwide region with the greatest legislative lacking in the decriminalization of abortion. El Salvador penalized all the abortion’s causes in 1997. Currently there have been presented bills to decriminalize some causes of abortion in the Parliament (2017), but none has reached the decision’s arena in the Congress. Nicaragua penalized all the causes in 2006. Currently there have been presented bills to decriminalize some causes of abortion in the Parliament (2010 and 2016), but they have not even reached the corresponding parliamentary committees to be analyzed. Guatemala has maintained a single decriminalized cause (therapeutic abortion / risk of death for pregnant women). The politics entrepreneurs haven’t presented any specific initiatives to decriminalize other causes. Even though, there has been presented some bills to change the current policies.

The hypothetical argument is that government actors apply biases (institutional and non-institutional), associated with the dominant gender regime, which prevents the use of windows of opportunity by entrepreneurs of this issue (usually feminist organizations) to install the demand with a different definition of abortion as a public problem in the decision agenda arena in the Parliaments.

The entrepreneurs of the demand for the decriminalization of abortion develop strategies to achieve politics promoting coalitions with government actors advoking for a different problem definition to try to decriminalize abortion. However, the alliances that are against this demand have greater influence in the state arena, which is associated with the historically close relationship between the State and Churches in these contexts.

To identify it, the technique of critical analysis of discourse will be applied in the meaning frames to which the actors and institutions involved in the process appeal. The research techniques will be semi- structured interviews with the main actors of the process, as well as a review of the newspaper will be conducted to observe stakeholder practices and policy and politics decisions. In addition, the discourse’s critical analysis

will be applied to the formal institutional instruments linked to the research case through hermeneutical units that reveal the main codes in their narratives.

This paper fits in this panel because will combine theoretical reasoning with empirical research in the three contexts mentioned and will focus on how do the principal actor involved in the process define the abortion problem to understand their strategies and finally their chances to get into de decision agenda area in the Parliaments.

Mimicking strategic choices: the secret of setting defence agendas?

Friederike Richter (Universität der Bundeswehr München)

This article analyses how defence issues rise on government agendas in France and the United Kingdom (UK), the two leading military powers in Europe. Both countries have the political and the military tools to match their international ambitions, including a large military-industrial base and nuclear weapons, and often share similar approaches within international organisations such as the United Nations. Given this comparability in defence matters, the aim of this article is (1) to determine if the UK and France devote the same level of attention to defence issues and (2) to examine how defence enters the government agenda, taking into account that there are significant differences between the institutions that shape defence policy in France and the UK. Using data from the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP), this article tests alternative explanations for stability and critical junctures in British and French defence policy over the period 1980-2017 in order to show under which conditions security-related issues become a political problem. A special focus is given to the choices governments make when allocating attention between manpower and equipment.

Why Do Failed Policy Ideas Persist? : The Survival of Zombie Ideas

Maximilian Nagel (Helmut-Schmidt University Hamburg)

B. Guy Peters (University of Pittsburgh)

Public policies are dependent upon ideas. Although the policy process involves the exercise of political power and policies are affected by individual actors and by institutions, ideas tend to be a foundation for policy advocacy and may justify the public policies that may eventually be adopted. Good ideas can produce good policies, and likewise bad ideas will tend to produce bad policies. It is, however, often difficult to determine ex ante which policy ideas are viable, and which are not.

We are concerned with the persistence of bad policy ideas in the policy process. By “bad” we mean ideas that have been proven through experience not to work, or to have such negative unintended consequences that any positive consequences may be greatly outweighed. Especially in economic, health and social policy areas there are a number of policy ideas that continue to survive and to be advanced by political leaders even though they have shown to have little or no positive impact on the intended targets.

We will examine several alternative explanations for the persistence of these zombie ideas. The simplest explanation may be path dependence–these ideas are linked to policy organizations that may continue to advocate them even in the face of failure. Or if they do not reject those failed policies their response is incremental, leading to the persistence of the basic failed policy. Also, these ideas may be related to ideology. That is, the ideas persist because they are less connected to the realities of policy than they are to political ideologies. In addition, there may be no agreement among actors about the failure of policies so that some political actors will claim victory, even if there is consensus among many others that the policy is a failure. That source of persistence may be exacerbated because policies may have multiple and even conflicting goals. And some actors may argue that the appropriate conditions for success were not present–either temporally or geographically–but that here and now the failed policy will work. Finally, polices are made in moments of uncertainty and risk. Policy makers can’t forecast and don’t have knowledge about interacting forces (economic, social, climatic, technological). For this reason, they might stick to a general policy direction and only change one aspect of a certain policy, following the fallacy of the single cause.

Using examples from several countries, this paper will examine the persistence of these zombie ideas. In addition to examining possible explanations for their persistence, we will also look at ways of killing off the ideas.