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.

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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)

Streams, Ideas and the Fight Against Poverty in Brazil
Patricia Vieira da Costa (Universidade de Brasília)

Abortion as a political problem in the agenda setting process in Central America.
Jeraldine del Cid Castro (FLACSO México)

Mimicking strategic choices: the secret of setting defence agendas?
Friederike Richter (Universität der Bundeswehr München)

Why Do Failed Policy Ideas Persist? : The Survival of Zombie Ideas
Maximilian Nagel (Helmut-Schmidt University Hamburg)
B. Guy Peters (University of Pittsburgh)