AGENDA SETTINGS IN PUBLIC POLICY

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Abstract

As society we live in today is evolving very quickly, it has become more complex and more difficult to cope with problems that stem from society's fluctuating social conditions. Since problems related to the society are complicated and interactive in nature, they influence other members of the society in a way that requires an immediate governmental action. According to Kingdon (2003), agenda is a list of public issues which are given a close importance by people and tried to gain the attention of governmental officials at any given time. By approaching from the political perspective, Shafritz and his friends (2005) defines agenda setting as an interactive process in which ideas or important issues are gathered by society through using a number of political channels in order to catch the attention of both official and unofficial political figures such as courts, mass media and legislative branch. Agenda setting process includes three very important streams of activity which provide enough room to open policy windows. These policy windows present an opportunity for public entrepreneurs to couple and bring their social issues on to the institutional agenda status (Kingdon, 2003). At an even more complex level of analysis, firearms policy reflects cultural, normative structural forces that are shared with other visible systemic policies. Although opponents have not kept the issue entirely off the agenda, they have been able to restrict the options considered and impact implementation strategies.

Key words: Agenda settings, public policy, gun control, public issue, Agenda types

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Introduction

As society we live in today is evolving very quickly, it has become more complex and more difficult to cope with problems that stem from society's fluctuating social conditions. Since problems related to the society are complicated and interactive in nature, they influence other members of the society in a way that requires an immediate governmental action. Such social problems and issues are always in a big competition with each other in order to gain maximum attention of governmental officers who have authorities to bring them into the national agenda. Gun control is a perfect example of how it has managed to come to the national agenda, although it has more negative consequences in comparison to other issues. However, not all social problems or serious collective issues of society manage to reach national agenda level because of a number of factors including inadequate resources, time, interest, or inexperienced policy entrepreneurs. In some cases, whereas issues with greater importance for the public benefits fail to get on an agenda, other relatively less important issues can easily call public attention and reach the national agenda.

According to Kingdon (2003), agenda is a list of public issues which are given a close importance by people and tried to gain the attention of governmental officials at any given time. By approaching from the political perspective, Shafritz and his friends (2005) defines agenda setting as an interactive process in which ideas or important issues are gathered by society through using a number of political channels in order to catch the attention of both official and unofficial political figures such as courts, mass media and legislative branch. Kingdon (2003) also calls attention the distinction between agenda and alternatives by stating that whereas alternatives is generally adopted by experts and technicians, agenda is commonly dominated by official policy actors such as presidents and members of congress.

The systemic agenda is called as discussion agenda and it includes all ideas, issues and problems that are taken into consideration by society as a serious public issue and has potential to attract an adequate level of legitimate governmental officers' attention (Anderson, 2003 & Gupta, 2001).

A social problem must be taken into account by relevant governmental officials when the institutional (governmental) agenda is the case. An institutional agenda is called as an action agenda and it consists of limited number of problems or issues to which legislators or public officials feel obliged to give serious and an active attention (Birkland, 2001& Cobb and Elder, 1972). Institutional agenda's content includes more details, limited number of items and specific explanations about the accepted social issue (Cobb and Elder, 1972). According to Kingdon (2003), in institutional agenda status a social problem gets enough attention by governmental officers, it;

however, is ready for active decision when the decision agenda is the case. This paper aims to analyze agenda setting process by using gun control policy.

1. How Social Problems Come To The National Agenda?

In order to provide clarification for agenda setting process, this section analyzes Kingdon's streams of agenda setting to shed light into how gun control have come to the national agenda. It also provides information about the models to shape the political agenda.

1.1. Kingdon's Streams Metaphor of Agenda Setting

Agenda setting process includes three very important streams of activity which provide enough room to open policy windows. These policy windows present an opportunity for public entrepreneurs to couple and bring their social issues on to the institutional agenda status (Kingdon, 2003). The first stream is the problem stream in which various social issues and problems are followed by both official policy makers of governmental body and individuals. These social issues and problems are determined through focusing on indicators, focusing events, and feedback (Sabatier, 2007). Until the 1930's, gun control was not in the public agenda. Following the gun related violence American citizens experienced, opinion surveys first began to ask Americans about their attitudes towards gun control in the 1930's. According to surveys; most American citizens' supported the more restrictive gun laws, particularly at the federal level such as waiting periods, police permits, gun registration, and mandatory child-proof trigger locks (Singh, 2003). Anderson (2003) states that, the initial requirement of the policy agenda is about demand (demands need to be made). As stated above, the first step was brought to attention to the public through surveys. The statistics also indicates how gun control deserves attention from public and officials. Thousands are killed by gunfire each year (16,503 people in 2006) and hundreds of thousands more are threatened or injured in robberies and assaults (857,921 cases in 2006).

The second stream, policy stream, contains possible solution alternatives which are in competition with each other to open the policy window. In general, these solution alternatives are produced both the official and unofficial policy actors through hearings, academic articles, and discussions (Sabatier, 2007). The debate over gun control can and should be conducted, at least in part, in the context of a framework that defines the appropriate relationship between the individual, the community, and the state. Main part of this debate lays in the Second Amendment, which states, "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a Free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed." The proper interpretation of this statement has been contested in recent years. Scholars arguing the constitutionality of gun-control measures focus on the militia clause, and conclude that this is a right given to state governments (Wills, 1995). Others

assert that the right is given to "the people" rather than to the states, just as are the rights conferred in the First Amendment, and that the Founding Fathers were committed to the notion of an armed citizenry as a defense against both tyranny and crime (Van Alstyne, 1994). In any event, even if there is an individual right to bear arms, then (like the right of free speech) it is surely not absolute, but subject to reasonable restrictions. The appropriate extent of those restrictions, however, remains an unresolved issue. Rather ironically, for all the popular attention and disagreement that the Second Amendment generates, it is arguably certain that other provisions of the US constitution pose more formidable barriers to the enactment of stronger gun control (Singh, 2003).

The final stream is the political stream which comprises three basic components as the national mood, electoral change or turnover in administration and legislative branch, and influences of interest group activities. Policy windows are opened by compelling social problem or events that can influence political stream for a short duration. A national mood which refers to tendency for sharing the same ideas and standing along the common lines for the sake of country's general well-being can also lead to open policy window for social problems which are waiting for to reach institutional agenda status. Along with the protests or campaigns of interest groups, electoral change and turnovers of main official policymakers also provide opportunity for policy entrepreneurs to open policy window for agenda status (Birkland, 2001).According to Sabatier (2007), if these three elements manage to come together in one place, this influential combination can open policy windows easily. He also argues that policy choices are determined if the three streams are gathered in one place and coupled by the policy entrepreneurs at the right time. A successful policy entrepreneur must possess some qualifications such as having easy access to policymakers, having adequate resources in terms of money, time, and energy, and having an ability to use manipulation tools. In order to combine all relevant elements to produce best choice, policy entrepreneur must also retain their attention and concentration among limited number of social issues, conduct necessary researches on them, and select the best choice (Sabatier, 2007). Neither the political culture nor the Second Amendment explanations can fully account for America's non-strict gun regulatory regime, in particular, to the more practical politics that feature the matrix of elected officials, political parties, organized interests, and governing institutions may be responsible for the lax laws about gun control (Cook and Hemenway, 1997). Gun politics in America since 1968 has been distinguished by two reliable features: First; crisis moments when, in the aftermath of notable gun violence incidents (like assassination of Kennedy and Martin Luther King), a window of opportunity is created for the passage of new federal controls; and second, the rapid and decisive closing of that window by the longer-term dominance of gun rights groups, most

notably by the NRA. NRA has been highly successful in its lobbying efforts to either halt or curtail the scope of gun control legislation. The numerous efforts undertaken at the federal level including the National Firearms Act of 1934, The Gun Control Act of 1968, The Firearms Owners Protection Act of 1986, The Assault Weapons Ban of 1994, and the Brady Bill of 1993 all clearly had not only the input of the NRA, but were almost either rewritten by the NRA through it's legislative connections, or the NRA heavily influenced the elected members of Congress to severely amend the bills so as to curtail any infringements on gun control (Singh, 2003).

The most notable group on the opposing side is the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence. Formerly known as the Handgun Control Act, this group was founded by a businessman whose son had been murdered with a gun. Recognizing the influence of the NRA, the Brady Campaign patterned its tactics and structure the same way. Specifically, it sought a grassroots membership base and engaged them in letter writing, telephone canvassing, and financial support of gun control issues. In addition, they attempted to disparage its opponents. Their primary focus has continued to be state and national lobbying initiatives. Although, in comparison to that of the NRA, its size, resources, and influence pales, it has won some battles, they have been mostly ineffective in quelling the gun control debate and moving the government to fulfill its responsibility to the citizenry (Kairys, 2000).

Policy makers adopt some social problems, but they ignore others. The main reason under this situation is the differences in policy entrepreneurs' effort to couple all three streams. The more they couple all streams in one critical time, the more policy problem can reach the institutional agenda status (Sabatier, 2007& Birkland, 2001).

1.2. Models and Theories for Institutional Agenda Setting

Rational choice theory is the form of decision making at the center of political science. Persons are utility maximizers and decide in accord with available information and resources to gain the optimum outcome. However, it is not always a pure but partial rationality that individuals can pursue because of the limitations surrounding us. Rationality is bounded, as coined by Herbert Simon, to limitations of time, information, and cognition. Then decision maker is only able to seek the goal that satisfies the utility under the current conditions even if it is not the perfect one.

Incremental model decision making has challenged the rationalist model. By synthesizing the incremental decision making model with the non-incremental alterations, Bryan Jones and his colleagues pinned the "incremental decision model" of decision making. This model assumes that decision makers perform bounded rationality surrounded with restraints such as contemporary environment of institutions, interests, and resources which lead to a pattern of limited, small or no

changes of reacting to activators for long time periods. Decisions therefore have small or little drifts over time when compared to hitherto undertakings and then constitute a steady "equilibrium". Dramatic changes in the conditions entail the decision makers to alter their strategies. As a reflection to punctuation, swift new decision constitutes a new equilibrium to be lasting for another long time. Through this occasion, there lies incremental small or no changes for long epoch but sudden changes appear in instances since decision makers seek for new equilibrium to satisfy.

Punctuated equilibrium seems to replace incrementalism, as proponents also see as such. However, it does not look to be useful in complete analysis of policy choice as incrementalism because punctuated equilibrium allows explaining subsystemic policy changes. It mostly focuses on agenda setting on attention grabbing issues and on information process of the political system. This model guides us to reach consistent upshots of the punctuated equilibrium but not as much incrementalism allows reaching.

The last model is Kingdom's garbage can model which includes ingredients from pluralist, elitist, and sub governmental models. This model assumes that while making decision on policy issues, individuals suffer from defective rationality, lack of good preferences, and imperfect participation.

Singh (2003) characterizes the process as one of political entrepreneurs and policy streams that occasionally assemble to open policy windows for a limited time. Underlying both works is the presumption that; most policies will lack adequate constituent support to access the agenda. Only when events produce wide public awareness and support that will cause to take place in systemic policy; and the serious consideration will be given to the issue. Thus the incentive is far greater to craft policy initiatives for wide appeal than for effective implementation. Gun control is a classic example. Since 1968, numerous policy proposals have been introduced in Congress, the press has periodically focused on the issue, and a number of presidential commissions have made recommendations for strict control. Besides these facts, congress has not perceived enough intensity in public support to address comprehensive controls. Public support has consistently been stronger for the concept of gun control than for specifics such as owner licensing, registration, or prohibition.

Shafritz (2005) states that agenda setting is the process by which ideas or issues bubble up through the different political channels to take in to consideration by a political institution such as a court or legislature. Moreover, he asserts that the news media play a powerful role in setting policy agendas and framing the way the public and policy makers think about and respond to issues.

Agenda setting, which is usually confined to professional politicians, is a game that anybody can play and participate (Shafritz, Layne & Borick, 2005).

At an even more complex level of analysis, firearms policy reflects cultural, normative structural forces that are shared with other visible systemic policies. Although opponents have not kept the issue entirely off the agenda, they have been able to restrict the options considered and impact implementation strategies. Cobb and Elder (1972) identifies the four criteria for accessing the systemic political agenda as; 1-Broad public awareness of the issue: Singh (2003) states that starting from 1930's gun control has driven a broad public awareness.

2-Consensus that it constitutes a significant problem: Public has a strong consensus that gun violence creates a significant problem (Singh, 2003). 3-Legitimacy as a public issue: There are many regulations about gun control policy either at the federal or state levels (Singh, 2003). 4-Susceptibility to correction the government action: There are many attempts about gun control.

According to statisticians, each year in America, 38,000 people die in gun related incidents (Kirby, 1990). Gun control, like other issue areas in government, follows a certain policy cycle. Gun control is more highly affected by public opinion and the desires of interest groups than other issue areas. Like many other policy issues, gun control also involves a link between federal, state, and local organizations. All of these characteristics make the area of gun control quite complex public policy issue (Braga, David, Anne and Waring, 2001).

Gun control policy's main objective is; to develop and implement government programs to make guns less readily available, especially to those inclined toward violence, deserve a high priority in order to save lives and reduce the burden of crime on any society. Contrary to this policy objective, the number of firearms has grown to well over 20 million and the number of stakeholders has vastly increased in the last decades. In addition, the market has shifted from one dominated by sporting arms to one dominated by combat firearms. Thus the problem has evolved while the issue hovered at the margins of the agenda, presenting policy makers with a much different environment than existed in earlier years (Dorfman, 2000).

Political structure, values, and culture have all served to inhibit decisive action on gun control. Structurally, the system designed to eliminate the concentration of power, thus inhibiting decisive action. This is reinforced by a political culture with a strong preference for incrementalism and against collective analysis (Jones, 1997). Advocates respond by pursuing marginal changes that undercut the argument for theory or paradigm shift, thus undercutting their own theoretical base. A bias toward the individual level of analysis favors opponents of public action, who can focus on the high costs of policies to a few impacted parties, over advocates, who pursue marginal benefits

spread over the general population (Jones, 1997). The results are fragmented and inconsistent policies, often initiated after the targeted activity is well established and hardest to alter (Vizzard, 1995).

2.   Agenda Denial And Loss Of Status

Why do some public issues reach on the national agenda, where others are not taken into consideration by relevant government officers? It is true that attracting governmental officials' interest to the specific public issue is not an easy job and it requires more resources in terms of money, time, and energy to construct an adequate level governmental support and attention for the proposed public issue. In order to reach national agenda level items need extensive interest and concern from the relevant policy actors. In order to light up this context, this section briefly describes an identification of key players and factors for agenda setting and factors that lead agenda denial.

2.1.   Lack of Key Players and Ways for Agenda Setting

Political leadership is an important factor in setting agendas or political leaders may try to set the agenda involve in this process because of the fear of being unsuccessful in re-election, striving to create good public policy, and historical achievement (Anderson, 2003 & Birkland, 2001). Incentives for reelection may varry among actors. Whereas some of them want to get office for getting an opportunity to make good end feasible policies in the future, others take another position and desire to come office for satisfying their opportunistic nature (Wrasai, 2006). Between these two extreme, in one hand, voters try to encourage good politicians in their commitment to create good public policies, on the other hand, they want to control bad politician misuse of power and their opportunistic nature by using the reelection card. Therefore, politicians' hesitations regarding reelection may influence their preferences about social issues that are waiting for reaching on institutional agenda status.

One way of satisfying politicians is making good policies. Additionally, policymakers, especially, presidents always want to leave a deep trace of achievement and favorable fame behind them. This is another important incentive that lies under their desire of making good policies. They know that the more they produce effective and efficient policies, the more recognition they can obtain (Van Horn et. al. 2001). Therefore, striving to create good public policy and historical achievement of politicians can play an important role in elevating public issues on to the institutional agenda.

Another way of influencing political process is big business and interest groups' lobbying activities which refers to activities of various actors in order to influence policymakers' decision

making process (Birkland (2001). Similarly, rent seeking refers to activities of individuals in order to get benefit at the expense of other people, and it is usually exercised by interest groups in order to get exceptional legislative privilege. These big business and interest groups may also involve in campaigns or protest activities on order to call governmental attention to their issues for institutional agenda status. Interest groups' role in agenda process is creating a very close relationship with legislators, and bureaucrats in order to influence and force them to adopt policy issues that can yield benefits for their groups (Van Horn et. al. 2001). Gun control provides an example of an issue where public policy outcomes do not reflect majority preferences. Gun control is dominated by the NRA, and gun rights groups who provide an energizing support to an active minority that opposes stronger gun control. As a part of the nongovernmental participants in the public policy, the gun rights lobby plays the interest groups role in the issue. As Anderson (2003) states; they express demands and present alternatives (like claiming that possessing concealed weapons decrease the crime rates) for policy action. By focusing their issue, they substantially affect the public policy. Especially, at the national level, state and local government officials are influenced by these interest groups

The mass media such as newspapers, news magazines, internet, televisions, and radio is another powerful actor in policymaking process, especially, in agenda setting stage. Mass media's main role is seen in their ability to provide critical information, unique ideas, and efficient feedback for policymakers in order to influence and shape their opinion over a particular policy issue (Anderson, 2003). Additionally, the mass media has a crucial role through the course of election campaign since they provide both positive and negative feedbacks that can give cues for voters to make their mind (Van Horn et. al. 2001). Therefore, the mass media plays an important role in preparing public issues for the institutional agenda status.

Political changes such as election results, electoral cycle, and administrations may influence the speed of public issues through agenda setting process. Since political parties are generally formed for competition in winning election and controlling government (Mahler, 2003), they also play an important role in agenda setting process. In one hand, they force elected legislators to adopt party preferences by using the party discipline concept; on the other hand, they manipulate elected legislators' decision making process by providing biased ideas consistent with political party's ideological goals. Therefore, political parties' preferences emerge as an important factor that can lead a social issue on the institutional agenda level.

According to Anderson (2003) social issues may achieve to reach institutional agenda status and be acted upon as a result of some sort of crisis, natural disaster, or sensation event. Hurricane,

air-plain disaster, earthquake, and flooding are set a very good example for encouraging government officials to elevate them on to the institutional agenda. Lack of such events and crises may result in failure to reach institutional agenda status.

According to Cobb and Elder (1972), there are two main mechanisms (internal and external events) that help to shape social issues. The internal event mechanism includes five sub classes. The first one is natural disaster such as earthquake, flooding, and fire. The second subdivision, unexpected human activities, includes riot, hijacking, and murders. Technological change emerges as a third internal event issue. As a fourth subdivision, we can see protest activities and strikes that stem from injustice and unfairness resource distribution. Finally, the last internal event type is ecological change including migration and increasing population in some areas. As for the external mechanism, the most striking one can be innovation in weapon technology which brings debates on gun control. Other external mechanism may be international conflict and changing world alignment patterns (Cobb and Elder, 1972).

Finally, along with above-mentioned players and factors, technological changes in every segment of the society, change in statistical indicators, and other governmental entities are factors that can influence the agenda setting process

2.2.   Factors for Agenda Denial and Issue-Attention Cycle

There are some reasons that lead agenda denial because of the efforts of agenda opponents. The first reason is denying the existence of the social problem. Secondly, agenda opponents accept the existence of social problem, but ignore it by stating that the problem is not within the accessibility of governmental bodies, and direct governmental action is not appropriate for the defined social problem. Thirdly, there may be a possibility of facing some negative consequences as a result of accepting social issues if government takes action towards it. Fourthly, governmental officers do not involve in some social problems if they think that they can be solved better by the non-governmental organizations. Finally, resources in terms of time, money, and energy can direct other areas rather than specific social problems (Anderson, 2003).

Anthony Downs (1972) argues that some public issues disappear from public agenda, and explain his ideas through issue-attention cycle which includes five consecutive phases. The first phase is the "pre-problem stage" which refers the existence of the problem but fails to get enough public attention. The second phase is the "alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm". In this phase, individuals are aware of the existed social problem, and there is a strong desire to take initial steps for solving it. The next phase, the "realisation of the cost of significant progress, the high cost of the social problem is realized by individuals. In the fourth phase, the "gradual decline in the

intensity of public interest", individuals suffer from difficulties that stem from high cost and show discouragement. The final phase is the "post-problem stage". In this stage, the social problem fades away from the public interest (Downs, 1972).

Conclusion

Much of the intensity and emotive character of the gun control conflict arises from the sharply divided groups in the US Society. For traditionalists, firearms represent the culture of American Culture. They claim that Second Amendment secure and protect individual's freedom and property rights and deterring government from disregarding personal liberties. But, for the opponents of this view, the more guns, the more criminals in the society. According to their claim; there must be some strict regulations to hinder owning guns for the sake of society.

There is no exact solution to the problem. This may be justified by saying that; United States has a modern democracy. Majone (2003) asserts that, policy making process focuses on the pre- and post-decision processes rather than on the actual moment of choice. Knowing how a problem has been defined is essential to understanding the process of agenda formation. There is an almost unlimited number of policy problems that could be awarded very high or the highest attention (reaching the top of the political agenda) by the government, the media, and the public. Some policy solutions will be considered while others will not.

According to Birkland (2001), agenda setting is the process by which problems and alternative solutions gain or loose public and elite attention. Group competition to set the agenda is fierce because no society, political system, official actor, unofficial actor, or individual person has the capacity to address all possible alternatives to all possible problems that arise at any one time. Groups must therefore fight to earn their issues' places among all the other issues sharing the limited space on the agenda or to prepare for the time when a crisis makes their issue more likely to occupy a more prominent space on the agenda. Even when an issue gains attention, groups must fight to ensure that their depiction of the issue remains in the forefront and that their preferred approaches to the problem are those that are most actively considered. Schattschneider (2001) asserts that; the group that successfully describes a problem will also be the one that defines the solutions to it, thereby prevailing in the policy debate. At the same time, groups fight to keep issues off the agenda.

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