

## **RESPONSE PAPER**

### **Birkland- "Focusing Events, Mobilization, and Agenda Setting"**

The article builds on existing theories of the policy process to explain the dynamics and importance of focusing events. While there are several ways of looking at the social and political influences of focusing events, this article concentrates on interests group mobilization after focusing events, with particular attention to the four elements of post event mobilization.

The policy process literature has made substantive progress in helping us to understand the dynamics of policy making. Considerable gaps remain in our knowledge of the policy process, and even with the progress made in the past two decades, many of the theoretical perspectives employed in this article raise more questions than answers. The most important contribution to the understanding of focusing events vary from domain to domain, even when seemingly similar domains are compared.

### **"Business and Political Dimensions in Disaster Management"**

The primary gap in the crisis management literature is its failure to understand the motivations of countervailing interest groups and the facts that mobilize them to take action. Businesses today manage dangerous processes and complex technologies that carry with them a relatively small but very real risk of disaster. In the past twenty five years, crisis events of far-reaching magnitude in various industries have simultaneously focused attention on crisis management while at the same time sensitizing the public to hazards ranging from eating fast food to underlying on commercial airlines. These events have occurred in various parts of the globe and have been notable for the extent of damage they have done to the firms involved as well as the public. In response, a literature on crisis management has developed that seeks to help business managers address these disasters. Examples of major crisis events include the catastrophic poison gas release from the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal, India, in 1984 to the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska.

This article describes how firms seek to manage the political effects of what they call 'business disasters.' The authors are particularly interested in the politics of these disasters ie., how the media, interest groups, governmental officials, and other actors react to these events in the political arena. As citizens and social scientists, they are concerned that the business literature on crisis management fails fully to understand the policy and political aspects of business disasters, and concentrates on prescriptive, managerial issues that show disregard and sometimes disdain for democratic politics. If policy scholars can shed some light on the politics of crisis management, both business interests and their detractors will better understand each other's motivations, with better disaster-driven policy making a possible result. The examples the authors cite and the literature they employ center primarily on crises in the United States. Nonetheless, their examples are applicable to nearly any business crisis in democratic, pluralist nations in which the mass media are relatively free to report business and government shortcomings, and in which interest groups are free to mobilize to demand some sort of policy change or redress. This description describes existing and emerging democracies and markets throughout the world.

Birkland - "In the Wake of the Exxon Valdez"

While environmental catastrophes such as oil spills can lead to a policy change, it is important to reconsider what triggers this change. While OPA 90 is an important element of our environmental laws, it took the largest oil spill in the nation's history to induce government, industry and environmentalists to work toward a policy that would reduce the risk of such spills and the damage that occurs when such events occur. This reflects the tendency of the environmental policies along with other policies, to deal with the latest, most visible disaster, rather than attempting to create proactive policies that may help prevent the next disaster from occurring.

While a spill is fresh in the public's mind, environmental groups mobilise to add members, raise funds and other resources, and ultimately pressure elected officials to change oil spill policy to punish spillers. Groups would do well not to distort facts or policy but to promote more responsible and responsive environmental policies. Such policies should no longer focus on simply cleaning up after the mess, but to ensure that they do not happen again.