

DISASTER POLITICS AND AGENDA SETTING

The four materials this week examine how “focusing events”—defined as events that are rare, sudden, relatively uncommon, can be reasonably defined as harmful or revealing of future harms, have harms concentrated in a geographical area or to a community of interest, and are known to the public and policy makers simultaneously—affect the dynamic political arena of agenda setting and policy making.

In “Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies,” Klingdon takes a quantitative approach in examining how crisis events, symbols, and personal experience push problems onto the public agenda. He finds that the lack of visibility of an event in the public domain as well as the concentration of its impacts makes the number of crisis references increase in people’s responses, which he offers as a partial explanation of why transportation policy is more sensitive to crisis events than health policy. Klingdon finds that the personal experiences of policy makers and powerful public symbols tend to serve as reinforcements for preexisting issues and perceptions, rather than as major influences on agendas in and of themselves.

In “Focusing Events, Mobilization, and Agenda Setting,” Thomas A. Birkland examines how focusing events shift the balance of power by changing issues on the agenda and creating interest group mobilization. Focusing events do change the dominant agenda against a permanent backdrop of multiple groups looking for strategic opportunities to advance their policy preferences. Moreover, focusing events shift power in the direction of pro-change groups, because (1) more attention to an issue produces more negative judgments of current policy, (2) sudden events leave in-power groups less time to “frame” an event favorably, thus diminishing their “natural advantage,” and (3) it leads to greater mobilization for action in terms of protests, membership, campaigns, by advocacy groups.

Birkland contrasts the policy communities in the earthquake and hurricane domains to show that the agenda setting and group politics vary considerably with the type of event and the nature of the policy community. Examining hurricanes and earthquakes (“acts of God” events), the author finds that the dominant issue in the earthquake domain is mitigation and dealing proactively with the hazard, whereas the dominant issue in the hurricane domain is disaster relief. The author attributes this finding to the earthquake community’s more dominant, cohesive, broad coalition.

Going on to compare events “for which blame can be assigned,” such as oil spills and nuclear disasters, the author finds that in both cases, the power of the causal story is key to explaining the dynamics of policy change. Events that are highly visible, concentrated, and highly symbolic will mobilize group action more easily than events in which the effects are diffuse, described in terms of probabilities, and caused by complicated technical failures. The spill at Three Mile Island was powerful only because the US already had a powerful anti-nuclear force—TMI became the rallying cry, but had no real effect on policy. Oil spill policy

making, in contrast, is very event-driven: a visible event provides existing pro-change groups with powerful symbols and images, and the focusing event brings them greater power in the dynamic bargaining game.

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In “Business and Political Dimensions in Disaster Management,” Birkland and Nath examine “business disasters,” which they define as “event that leads to deaths or injuries of people, property damage, or environmental damage for which a business is brought to account.” The article demonstrates how advocacy groups and businesses competed over causal stories, and provides three examples of how businesses attempted to cope with disaster through telling causal stories and assigning blame.

In the case of the Exxon Valdez oil spill, the company first tried to place blame on ice floes, or an unavoidable “act of God.” The alternative causal story proposed by advocacy groups was one of woeful negligence in which Exxon allowed an incompetent captain to control a ship; Exxon then shifted blame to the captain, arguing that he was essentially a “free agent” and that they should not be held responsible for his actions. The company’s strategy was to stress unguided action, while advocacy groups stressed purposeful action. Unlike previous oil spills, the Exxon case led to important policy changes, largely because of the power of the spill’s symbolic and visible images.

In the case of the Value Jet crash, cost-cutting on important safeguard measures was well-known before the crash of flight 592, and early warnings of safety problems were ignored. Unlike the Exxon Valdez case, ValuJet was a smaller company in a highly competitive industry, and its reckless behavior, combined with its lack of industry support and unconvincing causal story, led to the company’s disintegration.

In the case of the *E. Coli* outbreak at Jack in the Box, the company initially responded poorly, but then rebounded with a multi-pronged approach: it was precautionary (recalled all meat, closed a number of franchise); it admitted some responsibility (paying medical bills of those affected); and assured the public it would never happen again (by instituting higher standards). It combined this approach with a degree of blame-shifting to Vons and to weak federal guidelines. The “ambiguous” causal argument was an effective crisis management strategy for the company.

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