Practical lessons from the study of agenda setting: combine evidence with emotional appeals to exploit ‘windows of opportunity’

Abstract. This paper identifies lessons from the agenda setting literature for advocates of the greater influence of scientific evidence in policy. Policymakers have to ignore most policy problems and most ways to understand and seek to solve them. Agenda setting is about exercising power to generate attention for some issues over others, in a policy environment with many policymakers and potential audiences. Successful ‘policy entrepreneurs’ combine strategies - identifying audiences in key venues, and the rules of information gathering in each venue, adapting to the cognitive biases of policymakers, and exploiting ‘windows of opportunity’ to pursue their favoured policy solutions. Although these strategies are well known, and often taken for granted by policy scientists, they need to be restated continuously to scientists more attached to romantic stories of government in which we should expect policymakers to produce ‘rational’ or ‘evidence based policymaking’ in a policy cycle with linear stages.

Keywords: agenda setting – multiple streams approach – policymaker psychology – evidence-based policymaking – policy cycle - windows of opportunity
Introduction: established insights that are ‘new to you’

Many of the insights that we take for granted in political and policy science can have a profound influence on the ways in which other scientists understand and engage in politics. For example, after high profile events such as the ‘Brexit’ vote in the UK and the election of Donald Trump as US President, it is tempting for scientists to identify the pathological effect of politics on policymaking. We have allegedly entered an era of ‘post-truth politics’ in which ideology and emotion trumps evidence and expertise (particularly when issues are salient) and protest is the best response. Yet, most policy is processed out of this public spotlight, and scientists have a crucial role in the more humdrum day-to-day business of policymaking, particularly when experts are consulted routinely and scientific evidence forms part of the language in which policymakers identify problems and solutions.

We cannot expect scientists trained in one discipline to retrain in policy studies to appreciate these insights. Instead, we need to find a simpler way to explain them in a way that captures their imagination, identifies the payoffs to studying policymaking from a political science perspective, and encourages them to learn more. We require an understanding of policymaking that is simple enough to use without being so simplistic that it becomes misleading. There is a danger that, as scientists become more interested in policymaking, they: only have enough time to engage superficially with a large and jargon-filled modern literature, find little of value, so engage with simpler concepts that are decades old and have been rejected in favour of more scientific and useful research agendas driven by modern theories. In particular, renewed hopes for ‘evidence based policymaking’ (EBPM) are reminiscent of post-war discussions of comprehensive rationality and stage-based policy cycles, both of which are used by policy scholars to describe what doesn’t happen (Botterill and Hindmoor, 2012), but seem to offer hope for evidence advocates in other disciplines and professions (Oliver et al, 2014a; 2014b; Cairney, 2016).

Studies of agenda setting provide such accessible analysis and profound lessons for actors seeking to make and influence policy. They help us identify the ways in which we can adapt to two key limits to policymaking. First, policymakers can only pay attention to a tiny proportion of their responsibilities, ignoring most issues and promoting some to the top of their agenda. Second, they can only pay attention to one of many possible ways to understand and seek to solve problems. So, agenda setting is about exercising power to generate attention for some issues over others, and establishing one way of thinking about problems at the expense of the others. Successful actors identify the rules and norms in key venues, how to manipulate or reinforce the cognitive biases of influential policymakers, tell simple and persuasive stories, combine facts with values and emotional appeals, and exploit ‘windows of opportunity’ to

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1 Nutley et al (2007: 14) identify more realistic phrases in common currency, such as ‘evidence informed, evidence-influence and evidence-inspired’, Parkhurst (2017) rejects EBPM as a misleading phrase, and I describe it as a myth (Cairney, 2016a). However, I still use the abbreviation EBPM to remind us of the ways in which some actors use it as an ideal and political slogan (partly to criticise its opposite, ‘policy-based evidence’), even if we would see it as an ideal-type like comprehensive rationality. This decision reflects the tone of the paper: we take our insights for granted, but one key audience does not, and a focus on practical lessons is a focus on how to fill that gap.
pursue their favoured policy solutions. Politics is about exercising power to get what we want, not waiting in hope for policymakers to pay the same respect as scientists to scientific evidence.

In this context, Kingdon’s (1984) multiple streams approach (MSA) has particular value: it can be as accessible as the policy cycle without being as misleading, and some non-specialists have used it to generate practical analysis (Cairney and Jones, 2016). However, the explanation for its appeal can also explain its drawback: MSA’s simple metaphor is easy to use, but it is used in many different ways, generally without enough appreciation of its limitations (at least, without additional help from other theories) or reference to other applications. Most of its concepts are abstract enough to be applied to any case study, but their implications vary markedly when we analyse, for example, the size of political system, scale of policymaking, and ability of key actors such as ‘policy entrepreneurs’ to influence the outcomes.

Consequently, the plan of this paper is as follows. First, I describe key insights from agenda setting and policy studies, and how the MSA draws them together to produce a simple abstract theory. Second, I describe the practical implications of agenda setting and the MSA. Third, I identify the most relevant aspects of MSA’s active research agenda, which contains hundreds of empirical applications and provides more concrete insights and practical implications from many case studies.

The general ‘take home message’ is to emulate the (albeit vague defined) ‘policy entrepreneurs’ who help create and exploit the ‘windows of opportunity’ when policymakers have the motive and opportunity to pay attention to a problem and select a feasible solution. However, the specific role of entrepreneurs can change markedly. For Kingdon, they were ‘surfers waiting for the big wave’ rather than controllers of the sea. So, pragmatic actors should learn from empirical applications about the extent to which they should emulate King Cnut rather than Poseidon when deciding how to act, particularly when the policy environment seems more important to explanation than the skills of individual actors.

Agenda setting insights: attention to problems is not dependent on the evidence of their size, ‘evidence-base’ of solutions, or stage in a policy cycle

To avoid reinventing the wheel, advocates of EBPM should take seriously two key insights from agenda setting and policy studies. First, the supply of more scientific evidence for policy will only help address one limitation to ‘comprehensive rationality’, but not many others, including: our inability to separate facts from values (Douglas, 2009), rank policy preferences in a meaningful order, or process all the information available to us. Rather, early postwar studies explored the implications of ‘bounded rationality’ when, for example, policymakers used ‘rules of thumb’ to limit their analysis and produce ‘good enough’ decisions (Simon, 1976: xxviii) or ‘simple incremental analysis’ and ‘trial and error’ strategies (Lindblom, 1959: 88). Then, modern theories took forward psychological insights (Kahneman, 2012; Haidt, 2001) to identify the ‘fast thinking’ – drawing on emotion, moral reasoning, gut instinct, and habit - that policymakers use to take shortcuts to gather information, and understand or frame complex policy problems in simple ways (Lewis, 2013; Cairney and Kwiatkowski, 2017; Lodge and Wegrich, 2016).

Both insights demonstrate that (a) policymakers can only pay attention to a tiny proportion of their responsibilities, so ignore most issues and promote some to the top of their agenda
(Baumgartner and Jones, 1993), (b) they can only pay attention to one of many possible ways to understand and seek to solve problems, and (c) this attention relates more to the beliefs of policymakers, and persuasion strategies of influencers, than the size of the problem or evidence base for its solution (Majone, 1989: 24; Dearing and Rogers, 1996).

Policy studies describe actors trying to exploit these ways in which policymakers use fast/ slow (or ‘irrational’/ ‘rational’) thinking to sift large amounts of potentially relevant information. They combine evidence and emotional appeals (True et al, 2007), tell simple stories with heroes and morals (McBeth et al, 2014), romanticise their own cause and demonize their opponents (Sabatier et al, 1987), and/or exploit stereotypes of ‘target populations’ (Schneider and Ingram, 1997). These ways to exercise power – with reference to the beliefs and psychology of policymakers – can be as important as the material resources of actors: ‘Lobbyists marshal their arguments as well as their number … The content of the ideas themselves, far from being mere smokescreens or rationalizations, are integral parts of decision making in and around government’ (Kingdon, 1984: 133; 131).

Scientists, and other supporters of EBPM, should note the key distinction between the exercise of power to reduce ambiguity rather than uncertainty (Zahariadis, 2007: 66; Baumgartner and Jones, 1993: 31; Cairney, 2012a: 234, Majone, 1989). Scientists often focus on producing more high quality evidence to reduce uncertainty: use evidence to measure the size of a known problem and the effectiveness of a relevant and appropriate solution (Cairney et al, 2016; Cairney and Oliver, 2017). Yet, in the presence of ambiguity, there are many ways in which actors understand and describe problems. We reduce ambiguity by choosing one policy ‘image’, and that choice produces the conditions under which we can use evidence to reduce uncertainty. This is not a ‘scientific’ process, even if actors can use scientific evidence to make their case. Rather, agenda setting – or problem definition – is about ‘framing’ issues, or drawing the highest attention to one image, by accentuating some facts over others, linking problems to deeply held beliefs and values, using simple stories to assign cause and responsibility, exploiting crises or events, selecting supportive measures, and tailoring these strategies to different audiences (Rochefort and Cobb, 1994: vii; Jones and Baumgartner, 2005: 8; Baumgartner and Jones, 1993: 107–8; 113; Hogwood, 1987: 30; Stone, 1989: 282–3; 2002: 191; Dearing and Rogers, 1996: 37–9; Birkland, 1997).

For example, tobacco control is often treated as a model for evidence advocates, in which the scientific evidence played a key role in debate and policy at a national and international level (Cairney et al, 2012). Yet, the availability of evidence produced with scientific rigour was one part of the agenda setting story, in which advocates of tobacco control learned to: combine the scientific evidence on the harms of smoking and environmental tobacco smoke with emotional appeals (on the harms to children), challenge competing frames (by quantifying the economic costs of smoking), reframe the implications of key values (such as the right to health and clean air over the right to smoke), and generate a sense of crisis (describing smoking as a non-infections disease, epidemic, and public health crisis) (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993: 114; Cairney and Yamazaki, 2007; Cairney, 2016a: 67-72).

**Added insights from Kingdon: timing is about solutions chasing problems, not responding quickly to lurches of attention**

The MSA’s starting point is that this process of problem definition is only one part of the puzzle; a necessary but insufficient condition for major policy change. Instead of viewing
agenda setting as one stage in a linear process (followed by formulation, legitimation, and implementation), it draws on the ‘garbage can model’ of choice in which policymakers organizations are, ‘collections of choices looking for problems, issues and feelings looking for decision situations in which they might be aired, solutions looking for issues to which they might be an answer, and decision makers looking for work’ (Cohen et al., 1972: 1). This is ‘organized anarchy’ in which ‘stages’ should be viewed instead as ‘relatively independent streams’ which come together in a mess of activity: some actors articulate a poor or contested understanding of problems in relation to their vague aims, some have their preferred solutions and are looking to attach them to problems, and policymakers have unclear motives when selecting them (1972: 16).

Kingdon (1984) extended this focus on multiple streams to describe the conditions under which major policy change would take place. Three streams ‘couple’ during a ‘window of opportunity’.

1. **Problem stream:** attention lurches to a policy problem, and policymakers define that problem in a specific way. Getting attention is a major achievement which must be acted upon quickly, before attention shifts elsewhere. This might be achieved by reinforcing a concern ‘already in the back of people’s minds’, and demonstrating that a well thought out solution already exists, because policymakers will not dwell on problems that cannot be solved (1984: 103).

2. **Policy stream:** a technically and politically feasible solution is already available to solve the problem defined by policymakers. While attention lurches quickly from issue to issue, viable solutions involving major policy change take time to develop. Kingdon describes ideas in a ‘policy primeval soup’, evolving as they are proposed by one actor then reconsidered and modified by a large number of participants (who may have to be ‘softened up’ to new ideas). To deal with this disconnect between lurching attention and slow policy development, they try to develop widely-accepted solutions in anticipation of future problems, then find the right time to exploit or encourage attention to a relevant problem (1984: 181).

3. **Politics stream:** policymakers have the motive and opportunity to turn it into policy. Policymakers have to pay attention to the problem and be receptive to the proposed solution. Potential causes of a shift in receptivity include: ‘Swings of national mood, vagaries of public opinion, election results, changes of administration … turnover in Congress … and interest group pressure campaigns’ (1984: 19).

For people new to politics and armed with the reasonable expectation, derived from the policy cycle, that we generate solutions after when we identify problems, MSA has one profound implication: there is not enough time to do so. Attention lurches quickly from issue to issue, the motive to act is temporary, so ‘When the time for action arrives, when the policy window … opens, it is too late to develop a new proposal from scratch. It must have already gone through this process of consideration, floating up, discussion, revision and trying out again’ (1984: 149). Therefore, ‘advocates lie in wait in and around government with their solutions at hand, waiting for problems to float by to which they can attach their solutions, waiting for a development in the political stream they can use to their advantage’ (Kingdon 1984: 165–6).

MSA therefore helps clarify the role of three factors relevant to practical engagement in politics and policymaking. The first is ‘timing’ and idioms such as ‘being in the right place at the right
time’ in policymaking. An absence of good timing is listed frequently (in studies not driven by policy theory) as a major barrier to the use of scientific evidence in policy, prompting studies to recognise the need for good networks to help spot opportunities, albeit often subject to the ‘serendipitous nature of the policy process’ (Oliver et al, 2014a: 4). This emphasis on timing as serendipity is also reinforced in some studies of the policy implications of MSA (Avery, 2004; Howie, 2009; Pralle, 2009). There is comparatively little on the need to help create such opportunities and influencing the role of two types of timing:

- The psychology of policymakers, and the right time to exploit emotional thinking (Cairney and Kwiatkowski, 2017). Reinforce the cognitive biases of influential policymakers, tell simple and persuasive stories combining facts with values and emotional appeals, and frame policy solutions as consistent with dominant ways to understand problems.

- The perfect storm of conditions that help create opportunities to act effectively in a ‘policy environment’ (Heikkila and Cairney, 2017). Identify many potentially influential audiences (actors at multiple levels of government or in key venues), learn the rules and norms in key venues, form coalitions and access networks, and respond to socioeconomic trends and key events.

The second is the role of solution-production in the wider policy networks and environments in which policymakers are embedded and evidence advocates need to engage routinely. If solutions precede problems, and they have to become technically and politically feasible in advance of a window of opportunity, they need to be proposed and well discussed for some time. Just how long this takes is unclear, but note the importance of particular metaphors. Smith (2014) describes the chameleon-like nature of ideas, which suggests they can change quickly to adapt to a new environment, which is an image consistent with ‘the idea of short-term knowledge transfer in which scientists pass on the knowledge and expect policymakers to act quickly’ (Cairney, 2016: 64). However, Kingdon (1984) uses a ‘Darwinian’ evolutionary metaphor, which suggests the ‘the slow progress of an idea towards acceptability within the policy community’ which might take years or decades (Cairney, 2013: 281). Hence, the general advice for evidence advocates to prepare either for the long haul or their limited influence.

The third is the role of ‘policy entrepreneurs’. Entrepreneurs can be elected policymakers or unelected influencers. They are rarely defined well, beyond the implication that they are exceptional actors investing their time wisely for future reward, and possessing key skills that help them adapt particularly well to their environments (Cairney, 2012: 272). The evolutionary metaphor suggests that both their actions and environments are key to explanation, with the latter qualifying the former heavily. In other words, for Kingdon (1984: 165–6), entrepreneurs are the people with the knowledge, power, tenacity and luck to be able to exploit windows of opportunity and heightened levels of attention to policy problems to promote their ‘pet solutions’ to policymakers (compare with Mintrom and Vergari, 1996: 431; Mintrom and Norman, 2009; Jones, 1994: 196; John, 1999: 45). However, he also describes them as ‘surfers waiting for the big wave’ (1984: 173), which suggests that the environment or policymaking context dominates explanation. This is crucial context when we seek practical lessons from entrepreneurs: it is important to identify key skills or strategies – including persistence, ‘salami tactics, higher-order symbols, and appropriate framing techniques’ (Cairney and Zahariadis, 2016: 102; Zahariadis, 2014) – but also accept their limitations. One may learn more from King
Cnut, who demonstrated the limits to his influence over the sea (in one version of the story – Hay, 2009), than Poseidon, who can turn the tides and control the streams (Cairney and Jones, 2016: 41).

New insights from MSA applications: solutions can be transferred, ambiguity extends to venues, and entrepreneurs can occasionally mimic Poseidon

These references to metaphors and fictional characters may help us remember key insights but - like phrases such as ‘who moved my cheese?’ - they only take us so far when designing specific strategies and practical lessons for concrete situations. Some recent studies focus on one solution, to operationalise each term to present clearer hypotheses (Herweg et al, 2015; Cairney and Zahariadis, 2016), and I add another, to use the many specific insights that we now have from empirical applications. This exercise helps us to identify the (a) ‘universal’ implications of MSA’s abstract concepts, and (b) specific meaning and practical implication of insights originally used to explain agenda setting at the US federal level but since applied in many other fields.

Jones et al (2016) identify 311 MSA applications published from 2000–2014, of which 132 are to the US, 205 to European countries or the EU, and 140 studies are outside both (many compare systems, so the number is above 311). The MSA has inspired applications in at least 65 countries and over 100 applications to subnational policymaking. This division is also reflected in Zahariadis’ (2014) most-useful applications (an ‘illustrative list’ of 41 texts), used by Cairney and Jones (2016: 44) to provide a ‘best case’, more qualitative, analysis of the modern insights generated by MSA studies: there are national (20), subnational (13), and international (8) applications (including the EU and UN); and, while the US and Europe account for most, there are enough non-traditional applications – in areas such as China and Burkina Faso – to explore the potential to challenge the assumption that MSA concepts are ‘universal’ (see also Rawat and Morris, 2016).

**General MSA insights and their general implications**

From MSA, we can identify general elements associated with the agenda-setting process and policy entrepreneurs, and provide some general advice on appropriate actions or skills (table 1).

**Table 1: Insights from MSA and their practical implications**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Insight</th>
<th>Implication</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Few problems reach the top of the agenda, even if there is much scientific evidence on their size</td>
<td>Find ways to draw attention to problems, focusing on the beliefs of your audience more than your assessment of the evidence</td>
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<tr>
<td>There are many ways to frame any policy problem, and evidence often plays a limited role in problem definition</td>
<td>Reduce ambiguity via framing strategies, persuasion, and storytelling</td>
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<tr>
<td>New information is always difficult to gather, limited, and subject to manipulation</td>
<td>If you don’t tell a convincing story about your evidence, your competitors will</td>
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<tr>
<td>Limited time forces people to make choices before their preferences are clear</td>
<td>Adapt to ‘rational’ and ‘irrational’ ways in which policymakers short-cut decisions</td>
</tr>
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</table>
There is no linear policy cycle in which policymakers identify problems, formulate solutions, and make a choice.

Generate technically and politically feasible policy solutions and seek opportunities to sell them during heightened attention

Solutions take time to ‘soften’ to become accepted within policy networks

Form coalitions with allies, and engage in networks, to identify how to modify and generate support for policy solutions

Policy entrepreneurs help couple streams during windows of opportunity

Learn from the strategies of successful entrepreneurs

Sources: Cairney (2012), Cairney and Jones (2016), Cairney and Zahariadis (2016), (Zahariadis, 2014), (Mintrom and Norman, 2009)

While each of these abstract insights has a ‘universal’ quality, in which they can be applied to any time or place (Cairney and Jones, 2016: 39), or from a single organisation (Cohen et al, 1972) to the US federal level (Kingdon, 1984), their implications can change markedly in different applications. To demonstrate, first consider key aspects of the context in which Kingdon generated his analysis:

- Few problems reach the top of the agenda because US federal policy can apply to almost all aspects of social and political life. What happens when there is reduced ability for some issues to ‘crowd out’ most others?
- There are many ways to define issues, and the US ‘macropolitical’ level resembles an ‘issue network’ in which there are many actors competing to define issues (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Heclo, 1978). What happens in less competitive arenas where some definitions dominate debate for years or decades?
- Problems, policies, and politics are separate streams partly as a function of the size of the US system and limits to key roles, such as when the President sets agendas but other actors generate solutions. What happens when key actors can engage in the activities associated with more than one stream?
- The ‘policy primeval soup’ metaphor works for a US political system in which solutions take time to ‘soften’ and a piece of legislation may only gain traction when a large number of actors in a ‘policy community’ have engaged with and modified the original policy proposal. What happens when this initial process happens externally, such as in international organisations/ networks or in other countries? The role of partly-coercive ‘policy transfer’ is discussed more in non-US or subnational US studies.

In each case, these modifications can affect the role of timing and the way in which we describe the policymaking environment, and therefore the skills and strategies that we might associate with successful entrepreneurs.

New directions and exemplar case studies: note key variations in scale, competition, source of solutions, and feasibility

So far, MSA does not provide us with a detailed blueprint for action; its insights are generally useful, but largely as heuristics or factors to bear in mind during a process of trial-and-error action and analysis in the real world. How can we go further to identify more specific advice? One way is to turn the MSA metaphor into more specific and useful hypotheses. For example, Herweg et al (2015) identify specific drivers for policymakers to pay attention to problems,
including when it ‘puts the policy makers’ re-election at risk’ (by, for example, relating to a manifesto commitment or ‘core issues are those that voters regularly care about’), and become receptive to solutions, including when the solution is popular among the public and key interest groups, when the governing political party is seen as competent in this field and has made an ideological commitment to a particular approach. Such statements at least remind us of the important role of political parties (especially in parliamentary systems) and need to anticipate the effect of party competition and success in many issues. Other studies expand on the ways in which we can learn from policy entrepreneurs, such as when they link framing strategies to solvable problems and well-supported symbols (Cairney and Zahariadis, 2016), and build teams and lead by example (Mintrom and Norman, 2009).

Still, many hypotheses remain remarkably vague because the MSA metaphor is vague, such as Herweg et al’s (2015: 9) ‘H6: Agenda change becomes more likely if (a) a policy window opens; (b) the streams are ripe; and (c) a policy-entrepreneur promotes the agenda change’ and ‘H7: The policy-entrepreneur is more likely to successfully couple the streams during an open policy window, the more access to core policy makers he or she has’, which amount to little more than restating Kingdon’s point that windows of opportunity arise, and some people seem better connected and therefore more able to exploit them than others.

Another way is to learn from specific case studies about the ways in which these processes play out, and ‘entrepreneurs’ act, in concrete examples (see Cairney and Jones, 2016). Examples of potential lessons include:

Venue shop and frame issues to promote venue shift
MSA seems to suggest that policy solutions only become feasible when they are acceptable to enough actors in key venues. Punctuated equilibrium theory modifies this expectation by focusing on the role of venue shopping, when actors are dissatisfied with progress in one venue and seek more sympathetic audiences elsewhere (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993: 35–7). If successful, they short-cut the ‘softening’ process in venues where audiences are more sympathetic to policy change (1993: 32–3; Cairney, 2013: 282). Some modern MSA applications, particularly in the EU, use this insight to show that competition to reduce ambiguity relates simultaneously to problem definition and defining the most appropriate venue to address it (Ackrill and Kay, 2011, Sarmiento-Mirwaldt, 2013).

However, we should be careful not to overstate the frequency and potential of such shifts, particularly if we assume that many venues can be territorial about issues; venue shift involves a level of effort not available to many actors. For example, Cairney (2006; 2007b; 2009) got a bit excited about the reframing of a ban on smoking in public places as a public health issue (a Scottish Parliament responsibility) rather than health and safety (Westminster), only to fail to see another example in the next 10 years.

Learn how to short-cut the softening process by importing super-soft solutions
Non-US and subnational US studies identify the role of policy transfer and diffusion as an often-quick way to shortcut the softening process. The caricature example is of an elected policymaker travelling to another country and importing a solution on a whim. It highlights less extreme examples relating to bounded rationality, when policymakers and influencers can use external experiences and reputations for successful policy innovation as new ways to set

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2 I welcome all discussion of metaphorically ripe streams.
the agenda and present solvable policy problems. Or, in some cases, federal, supranational bodies, and international organisations (or powerful countries like the US) put pressure on others to import policy solutions (Berry and Berry, 2014; Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996; Rose, 2005; Cairney, 2012: 108; Bache, 2012; Bache & Reardon, 2013; Cairney, 2009; Liu, Lindquist, Vedlitz, & Vincent, 2011; McLendon, 2003; Zahariadis, 2004).

However, the need to learn from other theories and concepts cuts both ways: policy transfer provides the source of new solutions, but MSA helps explain the conditions under which they would be accepted during a “policy transfer window” (Cairney, 2012: 269–71). For example, most countries agreed to the same package of policy solutions in the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, but very few have the policy environments conducive to the adoption of those instruments during subsequent policy windows in each country (Cairney and Yamazaki, 2017).

Identify the conditions under which entrepreneurs emulate Poseidon, not Cnut
Subnational MSA studies suggest that policy entrepreneurs can be more effective at ‘a smaller and/or more local scale of government’ (Cairney and Jones, 2016: 46). Henstra (2010), Oborn et al (2011), and Dudley (2013) identify examples of scales small enough for an entrepreneur to influence all three streams successfully: $100k funding for a Canadian municipal emergency management policy, healthcare reform inside London, and the London mayor as framer and audience for a road congestion charge. Robinson and Eller (2010) also find that, in Texas schools policy, the streams are not separate in the way Kingdon describes, since key actors are involved in all three. Each example raises the possibility that the coupling of streams by entrepreneurs is more straightforward in smaller and more manageable issues (even if their analytical separation began as a way to explain ‘organised anarchy’ in a University – Cohen et al, 1972).

Identify the times when the usual rules of MSA seem not to apply
Hall (1993) identifies the rare occasions in one political system (in his case, the UK) in which the rules of policy softening and feasibility no longer apply: during crisis leading to paradigm change, the old ideas and their proponents are no longer relevant (albeit, Hall was not engaging with MSA – see Cairney, 2013: 283). Zhu’s (2008) MSA case study of China adds the possibility that, in some political systems with very different rules to the US, the rules of softening may also not apply. Zhu identifies the key role of technical infeasibility: actors can propose a politically acceptable solution that cannot be dealt with routinely by the governing bureaucracy, prompting high external and government attention, and potentially major policy change. The case study implication is so different to Kingdon’s that it reminds us to consider the universal nature of any practical solution generated by MSA.

Be realistic about the frequency and cause of windows of opportunity
Howlett’s (1998) quantitative analysis suggests that elections represent the most frequent source of a window of opportunity for policy change, at least in Canada and comparable systems. It provides a way to qualify the idea of a serendipitous aligning of the stars which can happen at any moment, suggesting that planning for an election may be more sensible than for a random event.
Note the difference between a window of opportunity for a broad idea or specific solution, in the absence of a policy cycle

Cairney et al (2017) suggest that, in the case of ‘prevention’ policy in the UK, policymakers ‘paid attention to an ill-defined problem and produced a solution which often proves to be too vague to operationalize in a simple way’. There was high support and enthusiasm to prompt a shift from reactive public services towards earlier intervention in people’s lives, but limited discussion of the specific ways in which they would deliver well-defined solutions. Such experiences remind us of the importance of the absence of a policy cycle with linear and ordered stages. If present, this initial resolution of a problem at the agenda setting stage would be followed by more detailed solution production, formulation, and implementation. If not, an idea’s time may come and go without any meaningful resolution, beyond this broad commitment to do something. In the case of prevention, policymakers made many commitments to reactive and preventive policies, and the former often took precedence over – and in some cases contradicted – the latter.

Conclusion

At an abstract level, MSA has great potential to provide a simple strategy for policy engagement: exercise power to frame a policy problems, generate agreement for your favoured solution, and exploit a ‘window of opportunity’ in which policymakers have the willingness and ability to adopt it. It can usefully be combined with other theories and concepts which add depth to each process, including: combine evidence with emotional appeals to help define problems (punctuated equilibrium theory); engage with advocacy coalitions to help generate support for solutions (advocacy coalition framework); tell simple stories with a hero and moral (narrative policy framework); and perhaps, at least if you have relatively few ethical concerns, exploit stereotypes of target populations to generate support for policy (social construction and policy design).

At a concrete level, modern MSA studies show us how to adapt such strategies to different types of government in different countries. Kingdon’s original study of US federal policymaking was based on the ‘garbage can model’ of organisational decision-making, which suggests that its basic insights can be applied at multiple scales, from a single organisation to a large political system. It also travels well, and has been applied to hundreds of case studies in over 65 countries. Yet, this reach of MSA is partly misleading, since scholars are picking up and using an intuitively appealing metaphor with abstract implications, and making sense of it in very different ways in many different concrete situations.

So, we may find variations in the value of specific practical lessons, or the production of competing metaphors. For example, Kingdon describes a ‘policy entrepreneur’ as a surfer waiting for the big wave in the US, but smaller scale studies suggest that entrepreneurs come closer to the owners of wave machines in swimming pools or, at least, the parents standing in the kiddie pool and able to deal quite easily with its current. In another example, a case study of China challenges the assumption that policy solutions will fare best if they soften to become politically and technically feasible, or acceptable to enough people to give policymakers the motive to adopt it when the opportunity arises. At different scales, and in different systems, the role of actors such as entrepreneurs changes, and so do the practical insights that we can give to actors seeking to engage in the policy process.
Still, MSA provides a generally valuable set of insights based on a challenge to the types of advice that actors might take themselves from a superficial analysis of modern EBPM debates built on hopes for comprehensive rationality and reference to the policy cycle. It invites us to (a) adopt a counterintuitive strategy of producing solutions then chasing problems, because it will be too late to produce them after a lurch of attention, and (b) to focus on framing and persuasion to reduce ambiguity and generate demand for evidence, rather than producing more and more evidence to reduce uncertainty in the hope that scientific evidence will win the day or speak for itself. Finally, key case studies remind us that (c) the window of opportunity may be for a broad idea or commitment, not a specific and successfully delivered solution, with no guarantee of longer term commitment. In short, adapt to the policy process that exists, not the system that you would like to see.

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13


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