

*Agendas, Alternatives,  
and Public Policies*

Second Edition

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## *The Policy Window, and Joining the Streams*

*When you lobby for something, what you have to do is put together your coalition, you have to gear up, you have to get your political forces in line, and then you sit there and wait for the fortuitous event. For example, people who were trying to do something about regulation of railroads tried to ride the environment for a while, but that wave didn't wash them in to shore. So they grabbed their surfboards and they tried to ride something else, but that didn't do the job. The Penn Central collapse was the big wave that brought them in. As I see it, people who are trying to advocate change are like surfers waiting for the big wave. You get out there, you have to be ready to go, you have to be ready to paddle. If you're not ready to paddle when the big wave comes along, you're not going to ride it in.*

—An analyst for an interest group

The policy window is an opportunity for advocates of proposals to push their pet solutions, or to push attention to their special problems. Indeed, as the quotation above illustrates, 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. Sometimes, the window opens quite predictably. The scheduled renewal of a program, for instance, creates an opportunity for many participants to push their pet project or concern. At other times, it happens quite unpredictably. Policy entrepreneurs must be prepared, their pet proposal at the ready, their special problem well-documented, lest the opportunity pass them by.

We have just finished a series of chapters that considered separately the various streams flowing through the system. The separate streams come together at critical times. A problem is recognized, a solution is developed and available in the policy community, a political change makes it the right time for policy change, and potential constraints are not severe. This chapter deals with the processes by which the separate streams are joined. We begin by discussing what policy windows are and why they open, and then proceed to describe the coupling of the streams that takes place. Policy entrepreneurs play a major part

in the coupling at the open policy window, attaching solutions to problems, overcoming the constraints by redrafting proposals, and taking advantage of politically propitious events. We then discuss the occurrence of open windows: their frequency, duration, and predictability. Finally, we discuss spillovers, a process in which the appearance of one item on the governmental agenda sets up the subsequent prominence of conceptually adjacent items.

## WHAT POLICY WINDOWS ARE AND WHY THEY OPEN

In space shots, the window presents the opportunity for a launch. The target planets are in proper alignment, but will not stay that way for long. Thus the launch must take place when the window is open, lest the opportunity slip away. Once lost, the opportunity may recur, but in the interim, astronauts and space engineers must wait until the window reopens.

Similarly, windows open in policy systems. These policy windows, the opportunities for action on given initiatives, present themselves and stay open for only short periods. If the participants cannot or do not take advantage of these opportunities, they must bide their time until the next opportunity comes along. As one congressional committee staffer said of one such opportunity, "You might just say the stars were right." The separate streams we have been discussing in the three previous chapters come together and are coupled at these times. Participants dump their conceptions of problems, their proposals, and political forces into the choice opportunity,<sup>1</sup> and the outcomes depend on the mix of elements present and how the various elements are coupled.

An open window affects the type of agenda we labeled a decision agenda in Chapter 1. As we have been discussing agendas, the *governmental agenda* is the list of subjects to which people in and around government are paying serious attention at any given point in time. We have essentially measured that agenda in this study by asking the participants what the list is. Within that governmental agenda, there is a smaller set of items that is being decided upon, a *decision agenda*. Proposals are being moved into position for legislative enactment, for instance, or subjects are under review for an imminent decision by the president or a department secretary. In the vernacular of the participants, the issue is "really getting hot," which is a step up from saying that the participants are seriously occupied with it. Being on this decision agenda, of course, does not insure enactment or favorable bureaucratic decision, but it is a more active status than being on the governmental agenda.

Policy windows open infrequently, and do not stay open long. Despite their rarity, the major changes in public policy result from the appearance of these opportunities. In 1965–66, for instance, the fortuitous appearance of extra liberal Democratic seats in Congress brought about by the Goldwater debacle

<sup>1</sup>This phenomenon is captured nicely in Michael D. Cohen, James G. March, and Johan P. Olsen, "A Garbage Can Model of Organizational Choice," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 17 (March 1972): 1–25.

opened a window for the Johnson administration that resulted in the enactment of Medicare, Medicaid, the poverty program, aid to education, and all of the other programs collected into Johnson's Great Society initiatives.

Think of a queue of items awaiting their turn on a decision agenda. Somehow, the items must be ordered in the queue. The opening of a window often establishes the priority in the queue. Participants move some items ahead of others, essentially because they believe the proposals stand a decent chance of enactment. During the late 1970s, for instance, various transportation deregulation proposals were in the queue. The Carter administration chose to move aviation ahead of the others, not because it was conceptually the best but because it stood the best chance of passage. Senators Edward Kennedy and Howard Cannon had already agreed on a bill, the Hill had been softened up by a long set of hearings, the regulatory agency (the Civil Aeronautics Board) favored deregulation, and the industry groups were not unanimously opposed. Trucking deregulation, on the other hand, faced the unified and formidable opposition of the regulated truckers and the Teamsters. Change in the much larger and inertia-bound Interstate Commerce Commission, which dealt with both trucking and railroads, also seemed unlikely. Under the circumstances, aviation represented what various respondents called a "soft target" or a "quick hit," at least by comparison with the alternatives.

Health respondents talked similarly about Medicare. As one of the prominent proponents of Medicare beautifully summarized the priority placed on the elderly during the early- to mid-1960s:

If you stop to think about this, it was a crazy way to go about it, from a rational point of view. Here we took the one group in the population, the elderly, that was the *most* expensive, needed the *most* health care, for whom medical care would do the *least* amount of good, for whom there was the *least* payoff from a societal point of view. But we did it because that's politically what we could run with at the time. It didn't make rational sense to start a health insurance scheme with this sector of the population, but it's where we started anyway.

To take the other side of priority setting, without the prospect of an open window, participants slack off. They are unwilling to invest their time, political capital, energy, and other resources in an effort that is unlikely to bear fruit. Many potential items never rise on the agenda because their advocates conclude it isn't worth their effort to push them. They are so far away from coming to real action—legislative enactment or other authoritative decision—that they are never taken up at all. As one congressional staffer said, "We concentrate on issues that we think are going to be productive. If they're not productive, then we don't have unlimited time here, and we're not going to go into them." If trucking deregulation wasn't a live option, for instance, most participants concentrated on something that was: aviation.

The same reasoning applies to bargaining. When the issue isn't really hot, advocates hold firmly to their extreme positions. But when the issue has a serious chance of legislative or other action, then advocates become more flexible,

bargaining from their previously rigid positions, compromising in order to be in the game, as we said in the last chapter. As another congressional staffer put it, referring to the Kennedy-labor stance of holding fast to their comprehensive national health insurance plan and then offering compromises when it looked in the late 1970s like some version of health insurance might stand a chance of passage, "Why should you bargain if there is no realistic chance of getting a bill anyway?" So one stakes out an extreme position early, then compromises when the window opens.

### *Why Windows Open and Close*

Returning to our distinction between the agenda and the alternatives, and speaking rather generally of our three process streams, the agenda is affected more by the problems and political streams, and the alternatives are affected more by the policy stream. Basically, a window opens because of change in the political stream (e.g., a change of administration, a shift in the partisan or ideological distribution of seats in Congress, or a shift in national mood); or it opens because a new problem captures the attention of governmental officials and those close to them. A change of administration is probably the most obvious window in the policy system. In the words of one political appointee, "A new administration comes to town, and they ask, 'What should we do first?' Something right away." The new administration gives some groups, legislators, and agencies their opportunity—an open policy window—to push positions and proposals they did not have the opportunity to push with the previous administration, and it disadvantages other players.

The same is true of turnover of any of the political actors. The rise of a new congressional committee chair, a wholesale change in congressional membership (as in 1966 or 1974), and new members on a regulatory body all open windows for the advocates of proposals that might get a sympathetic hearing with the new cast of characters. Thus the new Reagan administration provided a window for a host of players previously disadvantaged: budget balancers, supply-siders, right-to-lifers, advocates of school prayer, and others. Likewise, new appointees to the Civil Aeronautics Board and the Interstate Commerce Commission during the Carter administration created a receptivity to deregulation initiatives that was not as marked before.

None of these political events—administration change, a redistribution of seats in Congress, national mood shifts—specifies in detail what is to be done. All of them set general themes that need to be filled out with specific proposals. A Carter administration wants to "get government off our backs," for instance, and casts about for ways to do that. Or a taxpayer revolt makes members of Congress wary of expensive initiatives, but does not specify exactly where budget cuts should be made. The advocates of more detailed proposals use these general events and themes to push their own ideas to the fore. In other words, these political events and themes open windows for these advocates.

There are also occasions during which a problem becomes pressing, creating an opportunity for advocates of proposals to attach their solutions to it. For in-

stance, gas lines bring governmental attention to energy shortages, and many transportation interests—mass transit, railroads, and others—argue that their programs should be seen as at least a partial solution to the prominent problem. As a congressional staffer put it, "Energy is the conversation of the year. It used to be the environment. If something was connected to the environment, everyone would genuflect. Now it's energy." Or medical care costs become such a pressing problem that everybody must relate proposals to the search for solutions. Focusing events work this way as well. An airplane crash, for instance, opens a window for advocates of initiatives in aviation safety. If they have their proposals ready, the crash provides an opportunity to argue that the proposal should be enacted.

Once the window opens, it does not stay open long. An idea's time comes, but it also passes. There is no irresistible momentum that builds for a given initiative. The window closes for a variety of reasons. First, participants may feel they have addressed the problem through decision or enactment. Even if they have not, the fact that some action has been taken brings down the curtain on the subject for the time being.<sup>2</sup> Second, and closely related, participants may fail to get action. If they fail, they are unwilling to invest further time, energy, political capital, or other resources in the endeavor. As a bureaucrat said of the Carter administration's effort to pass a hospital cost containment bill, "When they can't get it passed, naturally attention turns to some other things."

Third, the events that prompted the window to open may pass from the scene. A crisis or focusing event, for example, is by its nature of short duration. People can stay excited about an airline crash or a railroad collapse for only so long. Or the pyramiding of resources that caused the window to open may not last long. A new administration, for instance, enjoys its honeymoon for only a few months, and its passing is inevitable. The moment the new president starts to make decisions of any kind—appointments, budgets, legislative proposals—he begins to disappoint some people and to satisfy others. Before those first decisions, everybody is looking to the president with eager anticipation. But the window provided by the honeymoon is most fleeting.<sup>3</sup>

Fourth, if a change in personnel opens a window, the personnel may change again. People in key positions come and go, and so do the opportunities that their presence furnishes. As one transportation committee staffer mused about his interest in changing the funding arrangements for infrastructure construction, "Staffers on this committee have thought about the issues a lot. It might be that we could, over four years' time or so, persuade members of our point of view and pursue this thing actively. But it's quite likely that we'll leave here first. I'm not saying that we're going right away, but it's in the nature of turnover." And they were in fact gone in two years.

<sup>2</sup>Murray Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964), Chapter 2.

<sup>3</sup>See Paul C. Light, *The President's Agenda* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), Chapter 2.

Finally, the window sometimes closes because there is no available alternative. In the chapter on the policy stream, we spoke of the need to soften up the system, to have a given proposal worked out, discussed, amended, and ready to go, long before the window opens. The opportunity passes if the ready alternative is not available.

The short duration of the open window lends powerful credence to the old saying, "Strike while the iron is hot." Anthony Downs's issue-attention cycle calls for quick action when the opportunity presents itself.<sup>4</sup> He argues that intense desire to act gives way to a realization of the financial and social costs of action. As one reflective journalist put it, "I have a theory that the really big steps are always taken very quickly or not at all. The poverty program breezed through, and only after it passed did people start to have second thoughts about it. Until the time that national health insurance can be done in a groundswell, very quickly, it won't be done." Thus HEW Secretary Joseph Califano seized the occasion of his first months in office to jam through the reorganization of the department that created the Health Care Financing Administration. He did it so quickly and in such secrecy that only a handful of people knew what was up before the announcement. To prevent leaks, even the graphics to be used in the press conference announcing the move were made up by a friend in another department.

If the window passes without action, it may not open again for a long time. Consider the abject frustration of the official who wanted to cut Amtrak's budget, only to see the effort swallowed by the 1979 energy crisis:

In April and May we thought we were in real good shape. Then the gas shortage turned the whole thing around. The papers got into it, and there were all these articles about the demands for Amtrak. If the energy crisis had just held off for *five months*, we would have had our proposal approved. But it didn't.

As with the Amtrak case, the opponents of a change also know that the window closes soon. Thus is born the common expression, "Riding out the storm." If one can delay, by studying the issue or by another expedient, the pressure for the change subsides. The longer people live with a problem, the less pressing it seems. The problem may not change at all, but if people can live with it, it appears less urgent. It becomes less a problem and more a condition than it seemed at the beginning.

### *Perceptions, Estimations, and Misestimations*

We have been talking as if one can tell with some certainty when a policy window opens. Sadly for strategists trying to manipulate the process, the world is

<sup>4</sup>Anthony Downs, "Up and Down with Ecology—The 'Issue-Attention Cycle,'" *The Public Interest* 28 (Summer 1972): 38–50.

not quite that simple. Some objective features define a policy window, such as a change of administration, a renewal, or the imminent collapse of a major sector of the economy. But the window exists in the perceptions of the participants as well. They perceive its presence or absence, they estimate the likelihood of its future occurrence, and they sometimes misestimate or misperceive. Beyond misperceiving, even highly skilled and knowledgeable people may disagree on whether a window is or will be open because the nature of the beast is complex and a bit opaque.

The case of national health insurance proposals during the first years of the Carter administration nicely illustrates these differences in perception. Advocates of comprehensive national health insurance, particularly the alliance of Senator Kennedy and organized labor, looked upon the years 1977 and 1978 as an open policy window unlikely to emerge again for some time, an opportunity to push their proposals into agenda prominence and even into enactment. They thus entered into a series of negotiations with the Carter people, and even abandoned their previous insistence that the plan be financed through government rather than through mandated private insurance. One of them told me, "You have a president in office who is strongly and publicly committed to national health insurance, and an overwhelmingly Democratic Congress. You just don't see these opportunities come along very often." Another put it more dramatically: "Our feeling is that if this is not done in the next Congress, it will be dead for a decade, and it might even be dead for a generation. All of us feel that this is the time. If we can't bring the interests together now, we won't be able to do it again for a long time."

Others were skeptical that the window actually was open. One well-known health activist told me, "I don't think it's going anywhere, and if it's not going anywhere, it's not something I want to spend any time on." An important congressional committee staffer also expressed his deep skepticism: "What you're going to see is a lot of singing and dancing, a lot of sound and fury, a lot of playing the national anthem, and not much more than that. The fact is that there is no way to finance it, number one, and number two, there is no public demand for it. [Even catastrophic insurance] has by now been priced out of the market." Advocates of comprehensive plans might disagree with these assessments of the budgetary and political realities, but that is precisely the point. In judging how wide a window is open, there is considerable room for disagreement even among reasonable people.

It turned out that the window closed, if it was ever open. Inflation and budgetary deficits, combined with such indicators of taxpayer revolt as California's Proposition 13, made administration officials and members of Congress skittish about large new federal expenditures. Advocates also could not come to agreement, which meant that an alternative was not available. The project was thus left destroyed on the reefs of financial cost, dissension among advocates of various plans, and a lack of time to work out all of the substantive details and political bargains.



Savvy politicians often speak of the importance of timing. As one bureaucrat said, "The important thing is that a proposal come at the right time." What they mean is that the proposal must be worked out beforehand, and must surface and be pushed when the window is open. Missing that window results in a wait until it opens again. Many national health insurance advocates portrayed labor intransigence in 1973–74 as a prominent example. During that brief period, Senator Kennedy and House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Wilbur Mills introduced a compromise national health insurance plan. Many people felt at that time, before the major onslaught of taxpayer revolt and budgetary stringency, that the federal government could afford at least the Kennedy-Mills plan. Weakened by Watergate, Nixon might even have signed it as part of an attempt to save his presidency. But organized labor opposed the Kennedy-Mills plan, substantively because they would not approve of the deductibles and less-than-comprehensive benefits, and politically because they preferred to wait for what they judged would be more propitious times, particularly with a Democratic president. In retrospect, one advocate told me in 1978, "That was a big mistake on the part of labor. They opposed it because it was only a 40 billion dollar bill. Now they're going to be lucky to get something that's 10 or 15 billion." Said another, "In my opinion, it was a terrific strategic mistake. You could have accepted [Kennedy-Mills], and built on it to get to the point where you want to be." A labor participant, however, refused to accept such a characterization, arguing that Kennedy-Mills really was substantively unacceptable. When asked if Kennedy is too prone to compromise for his taste, he replied, "No, other than his brief flirtation with Kennedy-Mills. But he returned to the fold after that." In any event, Kennedy-Mills *may* have been the window that national health insurance advocates were seeking for many years, though there was some disagreement about that. If it was, the time for seizing the opportunity passed, and as it turned out, the experience of the Carter administration and the subsequent election of Ronald Reagan resulted in the window closing for many years thereafter.

## COUPLING

In the policy stream, proposals, alternatives, and solutions float about, being discussed, revised, and discussed again. In contrast to a problem-solving model, in which people become aware of a problem and consider alternative solutions, solutions float around in and near government, searching for problems to which to become attached or political events that increase their likelihood of adoption. These proposals are constantly in the policy stream, but then suddenly they become elevated on the governmental agenda because they can be seen as solutions to a pressing problem or because politicians find their sponsorship expedient. National health insurance, for example, has been discussed constantly for the better part of this century. The arguments and infor-

mation about it are quite well honed by now. But the proposal rises on the agenda when the political stream, in the form of such events as a new administration or a shift in national mood, opens a window that makes its timing propitious.

An excellent example of the constant solution adapting to the changing mosaic of problems and politics is the case of urban mass transit. When a federal program for mass transit was first proposed, it was sold primarily as a straight-forward traffic management tool.<sup>5</sup> If we could get people out of their private automobiles, we would move them about more efficiently, and relieve traffic congestion in the cities, making them more habitable. When the traffic and congestion issues played themselves out in the problem stream, advocates of mass transit looked for the next prominent problem to which to attach their solution. Along came the environmental movement.<sup>6</sup> Since pollution was on everybody's minds, a prominent part of the solution could be mass transit: Get people out of their cars and pollution will be reduced. The environmental movement faded, and what was the next big push? You guessed it: energy. The way to solve the country's energy problem, so reasoned the advocates of mass transit, was to get people out of their cars when commuting. Of course, the cities' need for money and their interest in transferring substantial portions of the cost to the federal taxpayer were driving their advocacy of mass transit all along. But since that driving impetus could not successfully serve as the entire rationale, advocates were obliged to hook their solution onto whatever problem might be prominent at any given moment. As one such advocate summed it up, "There is a continuing interest in mass transit. The underlying goals exist and continue along. You want to do something, and you ask, 'What will work this year? What's hot this year that I can hang this on?'"

Thus solutions come to be coupled with problems, proposals linked with political exigencies, and alternatives introduced when the agenda changes. Their advocates hook them onto the problem of the moment, or push them at a time that seems propitious in the political stream. This is why, as one bureaucrat said, "Issues keep reemerging in other forms. You think you'd buried it one year, but it comes up in the next year in a different place. The issues get packaged differently, but they are just about the same." One of those advocates doing the repackaging agreed: "There is nothing new. We are resurrecting old dead dogs, sprucing them up, and floating them up to the top."

### *Problem Windows and Political Windows*

What does an open window call for? The answer depends on what opened the window in the first place, or, to put it another way, what caused the agenda to change. As noted above, such change usually comes about in response to devel-

<sup>5</sup>See Alan Altshuler, "Changing Patterns of Public Policy," *Public Policy* 25 (Spring 1977): 186.

<sup>6</sup>See William Lilley, "Transit Lobby Sights Victory," *National Journal* (4 March 1972): 39. He says that transit is "able to ride piggyback on the politically hot environmental issue."

opments in the problems and political streams, not in the policy stream. So the two categories of windows—problem and political windows—call for different borrowings from the policy stream. If decision makers become convinced a problem is pressing, they reach into the policy stream for an alternative that can reasonably be seen as a solution. If politicians adopt a given theme for their administration or start casting about for proposals that will serve their reelection or other purposes, they reach into the policy stream for proposals.

Sometimes the window is opened by a problem that presses in on government, or at least comes to be regarded as pressing. The collapse of the Penn Central Railroad, for instance, demanded some sort of response. In the absence of federal government action, service to shippers all over the Northeast would have come to a halt. The Penn Central collapse thus opened a window for advocates of all sorts of proposals relating in more general terms to the financial condition of the nation's railroads: subsidies, deregulation, nationalization, loan guarantees, roadbed rehabilitation, and many others. Advocates attempted to couple their pet solution to the problem at hand.

The prominence of the cost problem in the health area created similar pressures. With the adoption of Medicare and Medicaid, health care costs rose dramatically. When people in and around government fixed on cost as *the* problem of the period, then everything had to be somehow tied to it. Various regulatory programs—Professional Standards Review Organizations, Health Planning, fraud and abuse—were adopted, justified in part by their supposed contribution to saving money. Health Maintenance Organizations were established with the hope that the competition between prepaid practice and fee-for-service practice would introduce competition into the medical marketplace and drive down costs. People became interested in restraining the introduction of high-cost technology and in working on prevention in order to contribute to a reduction of unnecessary expenditures. The problem of rising cost was so pressing and so pervasive in the thinking of health policy makers that it resulted in the consideration and adoption of a large battery of programs connected to it.

In addition to one opened by the emergence of a pressing problem, a window can be opened by an event in the political stream—a change of administration, a shift in national mood, an influx of new members of Congress. Politicians decide to undertake some sort of initiative on a particular subject, and cast about for ideas. Putting themselves in the market for proposals creates a window for advocates, and many alternatives are then advanced by their sponsors. One or more of the proposals worked up and available in the policy stream thus becomes coupled to the event in the political stream that changed the agenda. The problems may not have changed at all; nor did the solutions. But the availability of an alternative that responds in some way to a new political situation changes the policy agenda.

For example, available alternatives are coupled with general administration themes. The Ford administration put out a general call within the executive branch for proposals to reduce unemployment. They received a suggestion to hire unemployed people to maintain rail roadbeds. Rail specialists had been occupied with roadbed deterioration for years, and saw the administration's inter-

est in employment as an opportunity to address the roadbed problem. The Carter administration's desire to undertake an urban initiative is another example. There had been some talk within transportation circles of encouraging intermodal terminals in cities, which would combine rail and bus, intercity and commuter travel. The administration's interest in programs for the cities opened a window for transportation specialists. As one bureaucrat told me, "When the urban initiative came along, we decided that would be a good thing to tack it to." And the proposal for intermodal terminals did indeed become a part of the urban initiative.

The problem windows and the political windows are related. When a window opens because a problem is pressing, the alternatives generated as solutions to the problem fare better if they also meet the tests of political acceptability. Proposals that cannot muster sufficient Hill support or that meet with administration opposition tend to be dropped, even though they might be perfectly logical solutions to the problem at hand. Similarly, when a political event opens a window, participants try to find a problem to which the proposed solution can be attached. The political event even results in the heightened preoccupation with a problem. When Senator Long decided to hold markup sessions on national health insurance in 1979, for instance, prominent references to the problems that created a need or constituency for national health insurance rose abruptly in the interviews, from 3 percent in 1978 to 42 percent in 1979. Discussion of national health insurance was in the air, necessitating attention to the problems it was supposed to address, even though these problems had not changed abruptly during the same time interval.

### *Seizing Opportunities*

When a window opens, advocates of proposals sense their opportunity and rush to take advantage of it. When a commercial airliner collided with a private aircraft over San Diego, for instance, the publicity opened a window for advocates of greater control over private planes. Said a knowledgeable bureaucrat, "That crash provided FAA with a wonderful excuse to expand the traffic control areas. They want that kind of thing anyway." A budgeteer agreed: "Accidents are unfortunate, of course, but you do get more money for facilities when they happen. Proposals for restricting general aviation had been considered and had been rejected, not on the merits but because of fears of objection to them. Then they came up again because the accident opened a little window, in which advocates of these proposals figured they could do something."

Sometimes the rush to hook one's own interests onto the problem or political event of the moment becomes a bit extreme. During the height of environmental action, for instance, the highway interests felt rather bombarded by arguments that highway construction and the encouragement of automobile use were environmentally unsound. In an effort to make highways compatible with environmental concerns, the highway administration studied various environmental issues. A bureaucrat picks up the action:

They got their people busy and made a big study to calculate what a big problem there would be with horse shit and mule shit if we hadn't invented the car. This was when everybody was hollering about pollution. So they wanted to make this argument that the car has actually helped on the pollution thing because without it the whole country would have a layer of mule shit two feet thick.

When opportunities come along, participants bring their problems to the deliberations, hoping that decision makers will solve them, and also bring their proposals, hoping they will be adopted. Among the energy initiatives advanced during the Carter years, for example, were proposals to levy a steep tax on crude oil, in hope of encouraging conservation, and to exact a windfall profits tax from energy companies in return for decontrol. For transportation actors, both proposals promised to be revenue bonanzas. Mass transit initiatives were proposed for the construction and operation of conventional and unconventional commuter systems. Highway interests talked of constructing "coal roads" to haul the coal on which the administration proposed to rely increasingly. Railroads talked of subsidies to haul coal as well. A multitude of transportation construction projects could be financed: airports, locks and dams, highways, rail roadbeds, bridges, subways. One lobbyist observed, "It looks to be a way of resolving transportation financing problems that is an easier way than fighting over the trust fund." In the flurry of activity, prominent mentions of new sources of financing transportation rose abruptly from 10 percent of my 1978 interviews to 44 percent in 1979.

A similar chain of events took place when the Nixon administration proposed the Health Maintenance Organization legislation in the early 1970s. When it arrived on the Hill, liberals saw it as their chance to insert a multitude of provisions not in the original legislation. As the legislation emerged from Congress, in order to qualify for federal status and support HMOs were required to offer a much richer package of benefits than the administration's bill contemplated, including dental care and alcohol treatment; to allow for open enrollment; and to base membership on whole communities rather than selected groups. The merits of these various provisions could be debated at length, but the net effect, according to many of my respondents, was to load HMOs down with an impossible set of requirements that made it exceedingly difficult to get the program under way.

On reflection, it seems inevitable that such overloading will occur. More solutions are available than windows to handle them. So when a window does open, solutions flock to it. In addition, strategists sometimes deliberately overload an agenda to frustrate all action. If they want to prevent action on a particular item, they load in many other items to compete.

What happens when such an unmanageable multitude of problems and alternatives get dumped into the deliberations? One possibility, indeed not uncommon, is that the entire complex of issues falls of its own weight. Most participants conclude that the subject is too complex, the problems too numerous, and the array of alternatives too overwhelming. Their attention drifts away to other, more manageable subjects. If they are willing to invest considerable resources

in the issues, however, then several alternatives are possible. Sometimes, herculean investment will resolve most or all of the problems and dispose of most or all of the alternatives. More likely, some problems and alternatives will drift away from the particular choice at hand, leaving a set behind that is manageable.<sup>7</sup> Those that can be disposed of without a great investment of resources are handled fairly easily. For the remainder, problems are resolved and decisions are made after a fashion, according to processes that are by now familiar in the literature on decision making: bargaining, majority coalition building, and building consensus. The key to understanding which outcome obtains is the level of resource commitment. The more the participants are willing to commit their resources, the more problems can be resolved and the more alternatives can be dispatched.

The working of resource commitment is illustrated nicely by the case of dangerous chemicals spilled from tank cars during railroad derailments. There was a rash of such accidents in 1977-78, the most prominent of them at Waverly, Tennessee. These accidents opened a window, and advocates of quite a wide variety of solutions pushed for their adoption. Some, including the governor of Tennessee, called for nationalization of the rail roadbed; others called for less ambitious repair of roadbed to prevent derailments. Why did the accidents fail to provide the opportunity to enact sweeping programs dealing with roadbed rehabilitation or even nationalization? The answer was that a less expensive alternative was considered at the same time: dealing with the tank cars themselves. Government could require chemical and petroleum companies to make their tank cars less susceptible to puncture. That solution would not require the investment of financial resources that fixing the roadbed would require, and would avoid the inevitable opposition to nationalization and to aiding the railroad "barons." Under different conditions—if there had been a softening up of sentiment for nationalization, for instance—the Waverly accident might have been a window for roadbed upgrading or nationalization.

The outcomes, however, can be quite unpredictable. An administration proposes a bill, then is unable to control subsequent happenings and predict the result. Solutions become attached to problems, even though the problems themselves did not necessarily dictate those particular solutions. Thus a mine disaster sparks legislation not only for mine safety, but also for black lung disease. A railroad collapse results in a measure of regulatory reform even though the regulatory climate may not have contributed in any significant degree to the railroad's financial condition. Since the outcome depends on the mix of problems and proposals under consideration, there is bound to be some happenstance, depending on which participants are present, which alternatives are available, and even what catches people's eyes.

This unpredictability and inability to control events once they are set in motion creates a dilemma for the participants in the process. To the extent that they have any discretion over the opening of a window, they need to ask them-

<sup>7</sup>The following discussion reflects the garbage can model's discussion of resolution, oversight, and flight. See Cohen, March, and Olsen, "A Garbage Can Model," op. cit.

selves before unlatching it whether they risk setting in motion an unmanageable chain of events that might produce a result not to their liking. An administration, for instance, must decide whether pushing for a given proposal might produce legislation from Congress unlike their original intention, or might produce no legislation at all and leave in the wake of the controversy a generalized image of chaos that reflects poorly on the administration. The submission of a legislative proposal becomes a garbage can into which modifications, amendments, wholly new directions, and even extraneous items can be dumped as the bill wends its way through the legislative process. Once the agenda is set, control over the process is lost. Common language references for such a phenomenon include "opening Pandora's box," "the train went off the tracks," and "opening a can of worms." Sometimes participants choose not to open a window at all rather than risk an outcome that would be worse than the status quo.

### *The General Importance of Coupling*

Problems or politics by themselves can structure the *governmental* agenda. But the probability of an item rising on the *decision* agenda is dramatically increased if all three streams—problems, policies, and politics—are joined. An alternative floating in the policy stream, for instance, becomes coupled either to a prominent problem or to events in the political stream in order to be considered seriously in a context broader than the community of specialists. If an alternative is coupled to a problem as a solution, then that combination also finds support in the political stream. Similarly, if an alternative is seized upon by politicians, it is justified as a solution to a real problem. None of the streams are sufficient by themselves to place an item firmly on the decision agenda.

If one of the three elements is missing—if a solution is not available, a problem cannot be found or is not sufficiently compelling, or support is not forthcoming from the political stream—then the subject's place on the decision agenda is fleeting. The window may be open for a short time, but if the coupling is not made quickly, the window closes. A subject can rise on the agenda abruptly and be there for a short time. A president can place a high priority on it, for instance, or a focusing event like an airplane crash can open a window. But the item is likely to fade from view quickly without the critical joining of the three streams. Since it cannot move from governmental agenda status to a decision agenda, attention turns to other subjects.

If no available alternative is produced by the policy stream, for instance, the subject either fades from view or never rises in the first place. In the case of long-term medical care, both the problems and political streams are firmly in place. The present and future aging of the population indicates a problem that will become most pressing, and the "gray lobby" has shown sufficient political muscle to create abundant incentives for politicians to be interested. But advocates have not devised solutions that are affordable and that have worked out the modalities of matching patients to the appropriate facility or other type of care. As one respondent said, "Every problem does not have a good solution. In the case of long-term care, the first time somebody comes up with a viable solution, then it will become a front burner item in short order." A similar argu-

ment about the lack of an agreed-upon solution that would work and that would not be too expensive could be made about the problem of bettering the mental health of the population. Indeed, in my quantitative indicators combining the four years of health interviews, no long-term care variable rose above 13 percent of my respondents discussing it prominently, and no mental health variable rose above 5 percent.

On the other hand, if an alternative can be found, the subject really takes off. Construction of an interstate highway system, for example, was stalled for a number of years due to disagreement over the right financing. During the 1950s, when the Clay Commission advocated a pay-as-you-go earmarked fuel tax, planning accelerated rapidly and construction started. The joining of the three streams had been made: the problem of congestion was evident, there was plenty of political reason to undertake the project, and the acceptable alternative came along.

There are very few single-factor explanations for high placement on the agenda. Generally, the rise of an item is due to the joint effect of several factors coming together at a given point in time, not to the effect of one or another of them singly. When I asked respondents why a given subject got hot, they usually replied in terms of interactions among elements, rather than discussing a single factor or even the addition of several single factors together. It was their *joint* effects that were so powerful. Here are some of the expressions of that idea:

Several things came together at the same time.

There was a confluence of streams.

It was a combination of things.

A cluster of factors got blended into the mix.

It was an amalgam.

Generally, no one factor dominates or precedes the others. Each has its own life and its own dynamics. The combination of these streams, as well as their separate development, is the key to understanding agenda change.

## POLICY ENTREPRENEURS

And what makes the coupling of the streams? Enter again our already-familiar acquaintances, the policy entrepreneurs. In the chapters on problems and the policy primeval soup, we described entrepreneurs as advocates who are willing to invest their resources—time, energy, reputation, money—to promote a position in return for anticipated future gain in the form of material, purposive, or solidary benefits. We discussed their incentives for being active, and their activities in the critical softening-up process that must precede high agenda status or enactment.

The entrepreneurs are found in many locations. No single formal position or even informal place in the political system has a monopoly on them. For one

case study, the key entrepreneur might be a cabinet secretary; for another, a senator or member of the House; for others, a lobbyist, academic, Washington lawyer, or career bureaucrat. Many people have some important resources, and Chapters 2 and 3 of this book described the resources of each. The placement of entrepreneurs is nearly irrelevant, anyway, to understanding their activities or their successes. One experienced hand described the differences between administrations by saying that the most important actors within his department would shift from one time to another; at various times the undersecretary, the assistant secretary for legislation, or the head of planning and evaluation would be important. As he summarized the point, "I'm not sure that the location of the person makes a lot of difference. You can do a lot outside the formal structure. You'd be amazed at that."

When researching case studies, one can nearly always pinpoint a particular person, or at most a few persons, who were central in moving a subject up on the agenda and into position for enactment. Indeed, in our 23 case studies, we coded entrepreneurs as very or somewhat important in 15, and found them unimportant in only 3. To those familiar with various happenings in health and transportation over the last decade or so, the litany of these people would be very familiar. The following must suffice as examples:

- Paul Ellwood, the head of InterStudy, as a promoter of HMO legislation.
- Abe Bergman, a Seattle physician, who persuaded Senator Warren Magnuson of the virtues of a Health Service Corps, funding for research on sudden infant death syndrome, and legislation to regulate flammable children's sleepwear.
- Ralph Nader, the consumer advocate who started his career on the auto safety issue.
- Senator Pete Domenici, who pushed for the imposition of a waterway user charge in 1977–78, a version of which eventually was enacted.
- Alfred Kahn, the economist who became head of the Civil Aeronautics Board in the Carter administration, and who used that position to implement a deregulation strategy for airlines and to push for legislation as well.

In none of these cases was the single individual solely responsible for the high agenda status of the subject, as our reasoning about multiple sources would indicate. But most observers would also identify these policy entrepreneurs as central figures in the drama.

### *Entrepreneurs' Qualities*

What qualities contribute to the policy entrepreneurs' successes? To distill a list from respondents' observations, qualities fall into three categories. First, the person has some claim to a hearing. Scores of people might be floating around who would like to be heard; of that set of people, only those who have a claim to a hearing are actually heard. This claim has one of three sources: expertise; an ability to speak for others, as in the case of the leader of a powerful interest group; or an authoritative decision-making position, such as the presidency or a congressional committee chairmanship.

Second, the person is known for his political connections or negotiating skill. Respondents often referred to someone like Wilbur Cohen (a prominent specialist in social security and health insurance, and a former HEW secretary), for example, as a person who combined technical expertise with political savvy, and the combination created much more influence than either of the two qualities taken separately.

Third, and probably most important, successful entrepreneurs are persistent. Many potentially influential people might have expertise and political skill, but sheer tenacity pays off. Most of these people spend a great deal of time giving talks, writing position papers, sending letters to important people, drafting bills, testifying before congressional committees and executive branch commissions, and having lunch, all with the aim of pushing their ideas in whatever way and forum might further the cause. One informant said of one of these famous entrepreneurs, "He could talk a dog off a meat wagon." Another spun out a theory that there were strong and weak senators, and strong and weak staffs. When asked what defined strength, he replied, "A strong senator is one who is just there. He is willing to be at the meeting. That may sound funny, but senators are spread so thin that a senator who shows up is one who is important. And the strong staffer is someone who can deliver his senator to the meeting." Persistence alone does not carry the day, but in combination with the other qualities, it is disarmingly important. In terms of our concept of entrepreneurship, persistence implies a willingness to invest large and sometimes remarkable quantities of one's resources.

### *Entrepreneurs and Coupling*

The qualities of a successful policy entrepreneur are useful in the process of softening up the system, which we described in the chapter on the policy stream. But entrepreneurs do more than push, push, and push for their proposals or for their conception of problems. They also lie in wait—for a window to open. In the process of leaping at their opportunity, they play a central role in coupling the streams at the window.<sup>8</sup> As in the surfer image at the beginning of this chapter, entrepreneurs are ready to paddle, and their readiness combined with their sense for riding the wave and using the forces beyond their control contributes to success.

First, though, they must be ready. Space windows are exquisitely predictable, whereas the policy windows are not. Thus policy entrepreneurs must develop their ideas, expertise, and proposals well in advance of the time the window opens. Without that earlier consideration and softening up, they cannot take advantage of the window when it opens. One bureaucrat, advocating a promotion of transportation modes that conserve energy and a penalty on modes that do not, pointed out the necessity for this sort of anticipation: "I think in

<sup>8</sup>The distinction between pushing and coupling is similar to Eyestone's distinction between generator and broker entrepreneurial roles. See Robert Eyestone, *From Social Issues to Public Policy* (New York: Wiley, 1978), p. 89.

government someplace there should be a little group in a back room that is laying plans right now for how to handle the next Arab oil embargo. You want to be in a position to take advantage of times like that. Something like an Arab oil embargo does not present itself too often, and you want to be ready to propose changes at the point that the opportunity does come along." Waiting to develop one's proposals until the window opens is waiting too long.

The policy entrepreneur who is ready rides whatever comes along. Any crisis is seized as an opportunity. As the quotation at the beginning of this chapter points out, proponents of railroad deregulation took advantage of the collapse of the Penn Central to introduce a modicum of deregulation into the package that eventually passed. A new administration comes into power, perhaps riding a shift in national mood, and policy entrepreneurs try to make their proposals part of the administration's program. A problem captures the attention of important people, and participants hook their proposals onto it, arguing that they represent solutions, even though advocacy of these proposals originally had nothing to do with the new problem. One believer in the dangers of ever-higher technology in medical care described in particularly astute fashion how he rode the general concern over the problem of cost:

Cost doesn't matter a lot, but it produces political pressure to do something. I'm one of those people riding on the bandwagon of cost. Actually, I don't care much about cost. My concerns are about effectiveness, appropriateness, and quality of care. But I'm happy to see the political visibility being given to technology for whatever reason it's happening, and I'm happy to ride along on it.

During the pursuit of their personal purposes, entrepreneurs perform the function for the system of coupling the previously separate streams. They hook solutions to problems, proposals to political momentum, and political events to policy problems. If a policy entrepreneur is attaching a proposal to a change in the political stream, for example, a problem is also found for which the proposal is a solution, thus linking problem, policy, and politics. Or if a solution is attached to a prominent problem, the entrepreneur also attempts to enlist political allies, again joining the three streams. Without the presence of an entrepreneur, the linking of the streams may not take place. Good ideas lie fallow for lack of an advocate. Problems are unsolved for lack of a solution. Political events are not capitalized for lack of inventive and developed proposals.

### *Implications*

The role entrepreneurs play in joining problems, policies, and politics has several implications. First, it makes sense of the dispute over personality versus structure. When trying to understand change, social scientists are inclined to look at structural changes while journalists are inclined to emphasize the right person in the right place at the right time. Actually, both are right. The window opens because of some factor beyond the realm of the individual entrepreneur, but the individual takes advantage of the opportunity. Besides telling us that personalities are important, this formulation tells us why and when they are.

Second, calling attention to the special role entrepreneurs play in joining the streams highlights two rather different types of activity. Advocacy is involved, but so is brokerage. *Entrepreneurs advocate their proposals, as in the softening up process in the policy stream, but they also act as brokers, negotiating among people and making the critical couplings.* Sometimes, the two activities are combined in a single person; at other times, entrepreneurs specialize, as in the instance of one pushing from an extreme position and another negotiating the compromises. This emphasis on coupling shifts our focus from invention, or the origin and pushing of an idea, to brokerage. Mutation turns out once again to be less important than recombination. Inventors are less important than entrepreneurs.

Third, such a free-form process promotes creativity. Periodically, observers cry out for more structure in government decision making. Structures are not tidy, government inefficiency is rampant, and people do not precisely define their goals and then adopt the most efficient solution. It could be, in contrast to such reasoning, that messy processes have their virtues. In a system like the one described here, entrepreneurs must take whatever opportunities present themselves, so they bend the problems to the solutions they are pushing. If goals are defined too precisely, many interesting and creative ideas are left in the lurch. It is certainly better for these entrepreneurs, and possibly even better for the system, if goals are left sufficiently vague and political events continue to be sufficiently imprecise and messy, that new and innovative ideas have a chance.

Finally, we should not paint these entrepreneurs as superhumanly clever. It could be that they are—that they have excellent antennae, read the windows extremely well, and move at the right moments. But it could as easily be that they aren't. They push for their proposals all the time; long before a window opens, they try coupling after coupling that fails; and by dumb luck, they happen to come along when a window is open. Indeed, the coupling we have described does not take place only when a window opens. Entrepreneurs try to make linkages far before windows open so they can bring a prepackaged combination of solution, problem, and political momentum to the window when it does open. They constantly hook these streams together, unhook them, and then hook them in a different way. But the items rise most dramatically and abruptly on the agenda when the windows are open.

One political appointee had a particularly marvelous summary of the coupling process in which entrepreneurs engage:

In spite of the planning and evaluation machinery we have here, you still have to have a loaded gun, and look for targets of opportunity. There are periods when things happen, and if you miss them, you miss them. You can't predict it. They just come along. You political scientists are worried about processes. You'd like to build some theory to account for what goes on. I don't know about process. I'm more pragmatic. You keep your gun loaded and you look for opportunities to come along. *Have idea, will shoot.*

## OCCURRENCE OF WINDOWS

We have discussed the concept of the policy window, the coupling that takes place when a window opens, and the entrepreneurs who are responsible for that coupling. Here, we consider the opening of windows: its frequency or scarcity; the regular, cyclical, predictable opening of some windows; and the unpredictability that remains.

### *Competition for a Place on the Agenda*

Many potential agenda items are perfectly worthy of serious consideration, yet they do not rise high on the governmental policy agenda largely because they simply get crowded aside in the press of business. There is a limit on the capacity of the system to process a multitude of agenda items. Many subjects are ready, with the streams all in place: A real perceived problem has a solution available, and there is no political barrier to action. But these subjects queue up for the available decision-making time, and pressing items crowd the less pressing ones down in the queue. When "bigger" items are not occupying the attention of decision makers, "smaller" items are free to rise in agenda prominence. To rise on the agenda, these "smaller" items—FDA reform, biomedical research, or clinical labs regulation, as opposed to national health insurance or hospital cost containment—need not change at all in terms of their own properties. The removal of the competition is enough to remove the barrier to their serious consideration.

Part of the scarcity of open windows is due to the simple capacity of the system. In both the executive branch and Congress, there are bottlenecks through which all related items must pass. As one respondent replied, when asked why welfare reform and national health insurance could not be considered at the same time, "Both of them have to go through the same committees of Congress, they have to go through the same department, and they have to go through the same people in that department. There is a pipeline for these things, and there's only so much that you can put through it at once." There is simply a limit on the time people in these central positions have available. In an executive branch department, major items must funnel upward through an ever-contracting bottleneck. "The secretary can attend to only so many things, and things compete for his time," observed one high-level civil servant. A staffer for a congressional committee told me that action was put off for a year on a program that was actually up for renewal because they had no available staffer to work on it.

In addition to this simple limit on time and processing capacity, strategic considerations also constrain the number of items participants consider at any given moment. Each of them has a stock of political resources, and husbands that stock. Their resources are finite, and they cannot spend them on everything at once. Even presidents find they can wear out their welcome, and therefore must save their resources for the subjects they consider highest priority. As one

bureaucrat observed of a bill that had run into trouble on the Hill, "There are more important things that the administration is going to use its chips for. It's not that their ardor has cooled. It's just that you have only so much limited capital you can expend."<sup>9</sup>

Other strategic constraints involve the dangers in overloading. If the administration, for instance, insists on action on everything at once, their insistence might jeopardize the items on which they could reasonably expect action. In deregulation, for instance, the Carter administration concentrated first on aviation, and let trucking, rail, and buses slide for the time being. If they had filled the plate too full, the controversy surrounding the other modes might have jeopardized the aviation initiative. By limiting consideration to aviation, the opponents of deregulation in the other modes had less incentive to become active and less claim to a stake in the outcome than if the whole package were being considered at once.

In addition to capacity and strategic constraints on the number of agenda items that can be processed at once, there can also be logical constraints. Once people in and around government become occupied with one subject, this preoccupation may logically preclude consideration of others. In their concern over the costs of medical care, for instance, health policy makers tended to impose a hefty budget constraint on every proposal. The cost issue, according to many observers, drove out consideration of proposals that might prove to be costly and pulled others into prominence if they promised cost savings or at least cost neutrality. These logical constraints are particularly sharp when applied to budgets because a severe budget constraint limits the opportunities for new initiatives and thus restricts the availability of many windows. As a bureaucrat put it, "An organization does have a breadth of attention. What is finite is money."

This talk of competition for space on the agenda, however, should not be exaggerated. The capacity of the system is not constant from one time to another, nor is there a fully zero-sum competition for space on the agenda. The agenda can and does expand at some times and contract at others. During a time when reform is in the air, such as 1932–36 or 1965–66, the system deals with many more agenda items than it does during a more placid time. There may be a similar cycle over the life of an administration. The system may absorb more agenda items during an administration's honeymoon period, when many of its resources are at their height, than later in its tenure.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, during the three years of my interviewing in the Carter administration, there were increasing references to competition for a space on the agenda, as if the capacity of the system was shrinking at the same time that the administration was proposing what seemed like an ever-expanding menu of legislation.

Another mechanism that expands the agenda is specialization. The agenda is constrained insofar as items must funnel through the bottlenecks, but many

<sup>9</sup>On the need to preserve capital, see Light, *op. cit.*, *The President's Agenda*, Chapter 1.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, Chapter 2.

items can bypass them. Because of specialization, a bureaucracy or a legislature is able to attend to several items at once, resulting in a smaller need to set priorities among the items. This importance of specialization leads to a more general formulation of the conditions under which the system absorbs more or fewer agenda items. Basically, the system can handle many specific, routine items, but few general, nonroutine items at any given time. The more specific a subject, the more it can be parceled out to specialists, which implies that the whole set of specialists is able to handle several problems at once. More general subjects, however, must funnel up through the bottlenecks in a bureaucracy, or must be transferred from committee to legislative floor, imposing limits on the number of general subjects that can be considered at any point in time. Similarly, the more routine the subject, the more it can be handled by specialists through standard operating procedures, implying that many routine items can be processed at once. The less routine items are bumped up to the bottlenecks, standing in the queue for a secretary or an important congressional committee to handle.

### Predictable Windows

Windows sometimes open with great predictability. Regular cycles of various kinds open and close windows on a schedule. That schedule varies in its precision and hence its predictability, but the cyclical nature of many windows is nonetheless evident.

First, some formal requirements create open windows on a schedule: renewals, the budget cycle, and regular reports and addresses. Many governmental programs expire on a certain date and must be reauthorized. As one Senate committee staffer said, when asked why he pays attention to one thing rather than another, "Nine out of ten times, we're occupied with expiring legislation. I know that doesn't sound very inspiring, but, frankly, that's the truth." Not only Congress, but also the executive branch agencies that administer the programs and the people outside of government who are interested find that their agendas are structured by the renewal cycle. In my quantitative indicators, for instance, discussion of health manpower issues—manpower itself, specialty maldistribution, geographical maldistribution, doctor draft—peaked in 1976, and then declined sharply in the subsequent years. Prominent discussion of manpower went from 43 percent of the interviews in 1976 to 11 percent in 1977. The higher frequency in 1976 was due almost entirely to the fact that the legislation was up for renewal then. Once the renewal was accomplished, people had exhausted that subject for the time being, and their attention turned to other health policy issues.

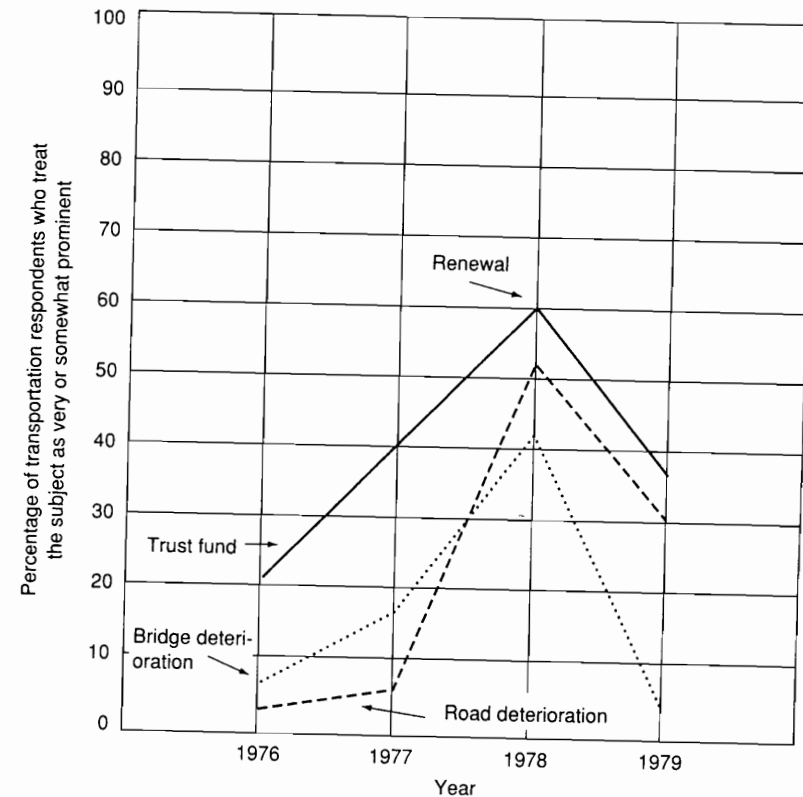
At first, it seems that renewal is on a routine agenda rather than on a discretionary agenda, as Jack Walker calls it.<sup>11</sup> Indeed it is, in the sense that the subjects rise and fall on the agenda according to the renewal cycle. But what is done with the renewal is quite discretionary. Consideration of the program can be nothing more than a routine extension, or it can involve substantial revision,

<sup>11</sup>Jack L. Walker, "Setting the Agenda in the U.S. Senate," *British Journal of Political Science* 7 (October 1977): 423-445.

serious questioning, or even abolition of the program. As one political appointee said of health manpower, "We knew it would come up. That was predictable, but the issues that were going to arise in connection with that renewal were not necessarily very predictable." Thus, knowing when the subject will come up, staffers, interest groups, bureaucrats, and others accumulate possible provisions, amendments, changes, and proposals over the years, and wait for renewal time to raise them.

So the renewal becomes a window giving policy entrepreneurs of various descriptions an opportunity to advance their ideas, raise their problems, and push their proposals. They don't need to affect the agenda because they know the renewal will do the job for them. Instead, they simply need to be ready when the time for renewal comes. One analyst described the expiration of a piece of legislation as "a major entry wedge for us. We want to get in and point the debate in certain directions." Consider Figure 8-1 for a fascinating illustration. Notice that discussion of road and bridge deterioration rose abruptly in 1978 and declined just as abruptly in 1979. Surely, this spike in attention was not due to the objective condition of highways and bridges. They did not sud-

**Figure 8-1**  
*Discussion of Highways:  
Trust Fund, Bridge Deterioration, and Road Deterioration*





denly deteriorate in 1978 nor rapidly revive in 1979. Instead, the renewal of the highway authorization in 1978 presented people who were concerned about these problems with an opportunity to highlight them and to push for funding that would begin to address them. The renewal was a garbage can into which deterioration, trust fund reform, financing, and many other problems and proposals were dumped.

The renewal cycle sometimes has rather subtle effects. For years, transportation specialists lived with a decision-making process in which various modes were considered quite separately. But a small measure of thinking across modes still was accomplished by changing the scheduling of the renewals. Whether by design or by coincidence, the mass transit and highway bills were put on the same renewal cycle. Even though they were separate bills, Congress and the Department of Transportation still found it difficult—because they occupied their attention at the same time—to consider them without relating them to one another. Not only did this scheduling encourage comparison across the modes, but it also made logrolling exchanges more possible. As one highway committee staffer put it, “When they come up at different times, you get the transit people jumping on the highway people when highways come up, and then the highway jumping on transit when transit comes up. By putting them on the same cycle, maybe you can avoid some of that conflict, when each is getting something in the bill.”

In addition to renewals, there are other regularly scheduled windows. The budget cycle, for instance, is a vehicle for everybody who has a hand in it to introduce both funding and program changes. Every year, like clockwork, the budget needs attention, and entrepreneurs all along the line in the process have a chance to affect funding. Scheduled reports and addresses operate in the same way. The president’s State of the Union address, for instance, is a classic garbage can. Agencies all over government, staffers in the White House, interest groups, and others all vie for a place in the message. Mention of their particular problem or proposal, even though restricted to a sentence or two, boosts further consideration.

There are also larger cycles, less precisely scheduled but still noticeable in their occurrence and their regularity. Various scholars have written about reform cycles in American politics in which a burst of reform energy is followed by a period during which the system rests, followed anew by another burst.<sup>12</sup> The rest period provides time for reassessment and consolidation, but during this time pressure gradually builds for another period of intense activity directed toward substantial change. The political process does not stand quiescent for too long because there is every incentive for politicians to claim credit for some accomplishment.<sup>13</sup> Claiming credit is promoted by dramatic change, not by the quiet refining of existing programs. Thus politicians find it difficult to tolerate the fallow periods for very long.

<sup>12</sup>See James L. Sundquist, *Politics and Policy* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1968), pp. 499–505; Thomas E. Cronin, *The State of the Presidency*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980), pp. 18–19; and Arthur M. Schlesinger, *Paths to the Present* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964), Chapter 5.

<sup>13</sup>See David R. Mayhew, *Congress: The Electoral Connection* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), pp. 52–61.

Attention to national health insurance may operate on such a cyclical basis. A lot of interest revolves around the idea for a while, then interest slackens, only to come to the fore again. It seems that proponents must gear up to push for national health insurance, both because of the formidable opposition and because of the intellectual complexity of the issues. They gear up, they may even be partially successful, as with Medicare, and then they fall exhausted until they are able to regroup and try again. This cyclical dynamic of push, then exhaustion, then renewed push accounts for the regular bursts of interest at fifteen- to twenty-year intervals, starting with Teddy Roosevelt, followed by the New Deal, Harry Truman’s comprehensive proposal in the late 1940s, then Medicare in the early- to mid-1960s, and finally the Kennedy-Mills and Carter administration proposals in the mid- to late-1970s.

Scholars and practitioners alike often speak of swinging pendulums. One of them is the swing between periods of reform and quiescence. Another is the swing between liberal and conservative national moods. Many of my respondents in the late 1970s spoke in these terms of the difference between the burst of liberal Great Society legislation in the mid-1960s and the gathering conservatism that culminated in the Reagan election of 1980. As one observer described it, “There’s a belief that we’ve been on a social policy binge, and that it’s time for relooking, recouping, drawing in, homey virtues, and self-sufficiency.” Or as another said, “In policy as in physics, every action promotes a reaction.”

### *Unpredictable Windows*

We have described fairly completely the dynamics within each stream and how the separate streams come together. Sometimes their joining is partly accidental. The separate development of the streams has proceeded to the point where they are each ready for coupling at the same time. A problem is recognized, a solution is available, and the political climate happens to be right, all at the same moment. Or one of the components may be lacking, which results in no or only fleeting appearance on the agenda.

Many respondents noticed a remaining randomness, and pointed to it quite eloquently:

Government does not come to conclusions. It stumbles into paradoxical situations that force it to move one way or another. There are social forces that you can identify, but what comes out of them is just accident.

Which idea gets struck by lightning, I can’t tell you. I’ve been watching this process for twenty years and I can’t tell you. I can’t tell you why an idea has been sitting around for five years, being pushed by somebody, and all of a sudden it catches on. Then another idea with the same kind of advocates, being pushed for those five years, won’t catch on fire. You have an element of chance.

Our recognition of a residual randomness does not imply that the entire process is nothing but rolls of the dice. Various constraints—budgets, public acceptance, the distribution of resources—all structure the system in predictable ways. We can also identify the streams and how they come together,

and we can say why some items do *not* rise or last on the agenda. We return to the subject of randomness in the concluding chapter.

Many factors promote a subject to high agenda status. If only one of them is missing, then the subject is unlikely to remain high on the agenda, and may even fail to rise in the first place. If any of the factors depends on chance, in other words, the entire process depends on it. To the extent that some policy domains are affected by crisis, for instance, the timing of the crisis—an airplane crash, the collapse of the Penn Central, an Arab oil embargo—is uncontrollable and only partially predictable. To the extent that the process depends on the appearance of an entrepreneur at the right time, the comings and goings of personnel affect the outcomes. Inserting a funding proposal in an appropriation bill, for instance, may depend on the fortuitous absence of an articulate opponent. The inclusion of a provision in an administration proposal may turn on the presence of an advocate among the set of presidential appointees. A given group's interest may not be adequately represented in the Senate because the senator who champions their cause may be lazy, inarticulate, or dumb compared to his opponent.

Sometimes, all the streams are developed and ready, and a willing and able entrepreneur is set to go, but the subject still needs a lever for the entrepreneur to use. Such was the case with the movement of waterway user charges onto the transportation agenda in the late 1970s. The idea of imposing a charge on barge and other inland waterway traffic had been kicking around for years. What made its serious consideration and eventual passage possible in the 1970s was the availability of a hostage—the crumbling Lock and Dam 26 on the Mississippi River at Alton, Illinois. The barge interests wanted that facility replaced so badly that proponents of the user charge could hold it hostage: no user charge, no new facility. Senator Pete Domenici, the leading user charge proponent, linked the issues that way, and President Carter threatened a veto of any funding for Lock and Dam 26 unless it was accompanied by a user charge provision. Without the availability of this hostage, even vigorous entrepreneurs like Domenici, Secretary Brock Adams, and Carter probably would not have been able to pull off the passage of a user charge.

## SPILOVERS

The appearance of a window for one subject often increases the probability that a window will open for another similar subject. Borrowing from Ernst Haas's terminology, let us use the word "spillover" to describe such a chain of events.<sup>14</sup> Taking advantage of a given window sometimes establishes a principle that will guide future decisions within a policy arena. At other times, a precedent spills over from one arena into an adjacent one.

## Establishing a Principle

Within a given policy arena, such as health or transportation or any of their subarenas, policy changes generally occur gradually, incrementally, in small and nearly invisible steps. But there are times, with the passage of landmark legislation or the adoption of a precedent-setting presidential decision, when a new principle is established. Once that occurs, public policy in that arena is never quite the same because succeeding increments are based on the new principle, people become accustomed to a new way of doing things, and it becomes as difficult to reverse the new direction as it was to change the old. People talk under these circumstances of "establishing the principle," "changing direction," "getting the camel's nose under the tent," "getting your foot in the door," and "setting a precedent."

Establishing a principle does not necessarily imply that policy actually has taken a dramatic new turn, at least in the short run. The step might or might not be quite small; the importance of such events lies in their precedent-setting nature. In the case of imposing a waterway user charge, for example, the actual payment imposed in 1978 on barges for use of navigable waterways was minimal, and was delayed for several years. But the important thing to proponents and opponents alike was that the federal government, for the first time, decided that *some* waterway user charge would be collected. After lamenting the fact that the charge had been watered down considerably over the course of the bill's passage, one proponent nevertheless concluded, "But even at worst, it is an important beach head." Once some version of a user charge was enacted, proponents of greater charges could spend the next several years gradually ratcheting up the charge to the point where they could regard it as equitable and meaningful. So any enactment implied a future quite different from the old regime.

Part of the importance of establishing a new principle lies in its logic: A precedent is set, so future arguments surrounding the policy are couched in different terms. But part of it is political: An old coalition that was blocking change is defeated, and life is never quite the same. That coalition may fight a rear-guard action for years, but is henceforth unable to argue that they are invincible. As one proponent of national health insurance exuberantly claimed:

The power of the AMA was broken by Medicare. I think that was the greatest accomplishment of Medicare, actually. It was a real crossing of the Rubicon. I'm not saying that the AMA is no longer important. They can slow things down, they can divert people. But they are not *the* sponsor or opponent of legislation any longer. Medicare proved that they can be beaten. Once it proved that, it opened up the way for other programs.

Establishing a principle is so important because people become accustomed to the new way of doing things and build the new policies into their standard operating procedures. Then inertia sets in, and it becomes difficult to divert the system from its new direction. Patients and doctors alike for instance, adapted to Medicare. Elderly patients and their younger children liked having the bills paid, and doctors also came to like the reimbursement. With the onset of

<sup>14</sup>Ernst B. Haas, *The Uniting of Europe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968), pp. 291–299.

Medicare, major government involvement in financing medical care became acceptable, the accustomed way of doing business. It was then most difficult for opponents to retreat to "socialized medicine" slogans, or to argue that government involvement should be resisted in principle.

### *Spillovers to Adjacent Areas*

Once a precedent is established in one area, it can be used to further a similar change in an area that is like the first in some way. After deregulation was enacted for aviation, for example, proponents of deregulation in the other transportation modes used the experience of the airlines to argue for similar measures for trucking and rail. As we saw in Chapter 1 (Figure 1-2), the agenda prominence for the other modes simply took off between 1978 and 1979. Even airlines were more prominently mentioned, despite 1978 enactment, because respondents who dealt primarily with the other modes were citing the experience of airline deregulation in their arguments both for and against similar measures as applied to them. Similarly, the passage of the first auto safety legislation resulted in a parade of safety legislation in flammable children's clothes, coal mines, and other diverse fields, culminating in the Occupational Safety and Health legislation. Indeed, Ralph Nader's first success with automobiles spread into a very far-ranging consumer protection movement.

Why do such spillovers occur? Part of the answer is to be found in Jack Walker's work on agenda setting in the United States Senate.<sup>15</sup> Following the case of safety, Walker points out that some entrepreneurial senators introduce a lot of legislation and like to claim credit for innovation. Once they saw the publicity and credit-claiming virtues of auto safety, for instance, they picked other safety issues because they saw the same potential. Thus, Congress ran through all the safety issues in very short order because the first of them had "hit" and was a political bonanza for its sponsors. Similarly, once politicians saw the attractiveness of deregulation in the airline case, they turned to the other modes in the hope of cashing in on a similarly popular situation.

But it is important to move very quickly. The window in the first area opens windows in adjacent areas, but they close rapidly as well. Implementation of the first policy eventually takes the bloom off its passage. While airline deregulation produced immediate benefits, such as lower fares, higher load factors, and greater airline profits, the problems only later became evident. Since policy implementation usually uncovers inevitable problems, the precedent-setting ideas must be extended to other areas fast because the argument for doing so may erode as time passes.

Spillover also occurs because the passage of the first principle-establishing legislation alters the coalition structure surrounding the policies. The coalition resisting change is defeated, and the coalition that was built and nurtured to establish the new policy can be transferred to other fights. A coalition had been built for auto safety legislation, for instance, that could be transferred to other

<sup>15</sup>Walker, "Setting the Agenda," op. cit.

safety and consumer protection issues.<sup>16</sup> The coalition-building strategy can also be transferred. Proponents of airline deregulation found that it helped tremendously when a few carriers broke the united front of opposition and endorsed the change. Learning from the success of that strategy, they tried to pick off some regulated truckers as well by writing their proposals to benefit the truckers who had come across to their side.

In addition to the incentives for entrepreneurs to seek adjacent arenas and the availability of coalitions to help them, a process of argumentation promotes spillover. The success of the first case provides an argument by analogy for success in the second. In the deregulation case, for example, proponents of trucking deregulation pointed to all of the benefits of airline deregulation, arguing that the same could result if legislation were passed for trucking. If fares were lower, for instance, prices could be lower for shippers because trucking competition would also drive down prices. As a journalist put it in 1979, "It is possible for me to put my kid on a cross-country trip to Los Angeles for \$99 to visit Grandma. That's a pretty cheap trip. So the businessman says, 'Maybe we can get the same thing with freight rates.'" It was also harder to make the argument against trucking deregulation because similar predictions of dire consequences in the airline case had not been borne out, at least in the period shortly after its enactment.<sup>17</sup>

Such argumentation requires appropriate category construction. The only way for any issue to progress from one case to another is for the two issues to be placed in the same category. People easily move from one safety issue to the next, for instance, because they all are defined as belonging to the category "safety." But if coal mine safety were defined as belonging to the category of labor-management relations, then it would be much more difficult to carry over the safety reasoning. Similarly, when transportation specialists argued for greater federal funding for highway and bridge maintenance, they often cited the disastrous consequences of letting infrastructure deteriorate in the case of rail roadbeds. The only way one could draw such an analogy was to have a larger category, called "infrastructure deterioration," which could comfortably accommodate both the rail and the highway cases.

Which category one should use is not always obvious. Handicapped activists obtained enactment of legislation requiring mass transit systems to provide equal access to subways. As interpreted in regulations, this legislation literally required retrofitting of existing subways with elevators, an extremely expensive proposition. Categorization had much to do with the issue. If it had been classified as a transportation issue, there were much less expensive solutions (e.g., door-to-door taxi service) that would be more convenient for most handicapped people. But it was classified as a civil rights issue; "separate but equal"

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Crenson discusses the ways attention to one issue creates attention to others. See Matthew A. Crenson, *The Un-Politics of Air Pollution* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), pp. 170-176.

transit facilities were not enough. The civil rights movement had spilled over into transportation for the handicapped.

### *The Power of Spillovers*

The first success creates tremendously powerful spillover effects. Entrepreneurs are encouraged to rush to the next available issue, coalitions are transferred, and arguments from analogy and precedent take hold. In the deregulation case, for instance, as late as 1977 and 1978 respondents would routinely dismiss the possibilities for trucking legislation, pointing out the formidable opposition coalition of regulated truckers and Teamsters. Yet by 1979, those opponents were clearly on the run and legislation was on the way, due in large part to the passage and apparent success of airline deregulation. Even that sort of blocking coalition could be bowled over by the powerful spillover effect. Deregulation became "The Game in Town," in the words of one analyst, and extended into areas far removed from transportation.

There comes a point when entrepreneurs run through the string, when nothing is left to spill into. As one respondent said of auto safety, "They have done all the things you'd think of having them do—seat belts, collapsible steering columns, and so forth—and are skirting the fringes of new technology with air bags. They're running out of things to do." Similarly, waterway user charges represented the last transportation user charge. There were fuel taxes for highway construction and ticket taxes for airport construction; the "last holdout was the waterway people," in the words of one observer. We noticed that references to airline deregulation actually increased subsequent to its passage, as the issue spilled over to the other modes. In marked contrast, references to a waterway user charge fell dramatically from 1978 to 1979, from 32 percent to 4 percent, because there was nothing left. The string of user charge proposals was played out.

## CONCLUSION

The separate streams of problems, policies, and politics come together at certain critical times. Solutions become joined to problems, and both of them are joined to favorable political forces. This coupling is most likely when a policy window—an opportunity to push pet proposals or one's conceptions of problems—is open.

Policy windows are opened either by the appearance of compelling problems or by happenings in the political stream. Hence, there are "problems windows" and "political windows." To return to our distinction between the agenda and the alternatives, the governmental agenda is set in the problems or political streams, and the alternatives are generated in the policy stream.

One key coupling is that of a policy alternative to something else. Entrepreneurs who advocate their pet alternatives are responsible for this coupling. They keep their proposal ready, waiting for one of two things: a problem that

might float by to which they can attach their solution, or a development in the political stream, such as a change of administration, that provides a receptive climate for their proposal. Some windows open largely on a schedule; others are quite unpredictable. But a window closes quickly. Opportunities come, but they also pass. If a chance is missed, another must be awaited.

While the governmental agenda is set by events in either the problems or political streams, setting of decision agendas emphasizes, in addition, an available alternative. A worked-out, viable proposal, available in the policy stream, enhances the odds that a problem will rise on a decision agenda. In other words, the probability of an item rising on a decision agenda is dramatically increased if all three elements—problem, proposal, and political receptivity—are coupled in a single package.

Finally, success in one area increases the probability of success in adjacent areas. Events spill over into adjacent areas because politicians find there is a reward for riding the same horse that brought benefit before, because the winning coalition can be transferred to new issues, and because one can argue from precedent.