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# *In Search of the Issue-Attention Cycle*

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This article seeks to establish whether an issue-attention cycle of the type described by Downs for policy relating to the environment is typical of all policy areas in the United States. Downs introduced the concept of the issue-attention cycle based on his perception of the ecology issue rather than on a quantitative analysis of issue salience. This article uses changes in U.S. federal government organizations as an indicator of policy activity. Organizational activity within policy areas is indeed found to take a cyclical form, with the timing differing for different policy areas. It is, however, necessary to go beyond Downs's differentiation between policy attention and subsequent waning of political interest. Organizational initiation may be followed by a lack of any organizational activity, but it is more typically followed by periods of organizational succession (that is, replacement of the original initiations). The periods of highest organizational activity in a particular policy area are normally, but not universally, their periods of highest relative policy salience compared to total government organizational activity. Changes in organizational activity are related to changes in the salience of issues in public opinion. Peak periods of organizational activity occur either during the period of peak public concern with an issue or in the period immediately after that peak in public concern.

## UP AND DOWN WITH THE ISSUE-ATTENTION CYCLE

**I**n his article "Up and Down with Ecology" Anthony Downs (1972) drew attention to the cyclical nature of public attention to domestic issues in the United States. He divided the cycle into five stages:

1. The pre-problem state;

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2. Alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm;
3. Realizing the costs of significant progress;
4. Gradual decline of public interest;
5. The post-problem state.

Although using ecology as an illustration he was clearly making a general statement about public attitudes and behavior concerning important domestic issues. Downs based his model of the issue-attention cycle on his perception rather than on a quantitative analysis of issue salience. We consider the concept of the issue-attention cycle to be sufficiently important to our understanding of the policy process to be worth subjecting to further development and empirical exploration.

Downs focuses largely on the level and nature of public attention rather than on the responses of government. What is not fully clear from Downs's explication of the stages of the cycle is how far he envisages that some form of policy and organizational response is launched by government to deal with the issue before interest fades away. For example, it is unclear whether stage three, "realizing the cost of significant progress," is envisaged as occurring before or after there has been some policy and organizational response. Often the costs which Downs sets out only become apparent after the passage of legislation and attempts to implement it. Yet whether the realization of costs arises before or after policy selection makes a lot of difference, since in the latter case the initial surge of interest will have become institutionalized into programs and agencies that will not automatically self-destruct when costs become apparent or interest declines.

In this article we are concerned with identifying both initial surges of interest to which government responds by setting up an organization or organizations to deal with the problem and with what happens after this initial peak in the issue-attention cycle. We would expect there to be far fewer initiations of completely new organizations, but there is a range of possible responses to a reopening of political interest later in the cycle. This will in part depend on the nature of the initial government response and its consequence.

Following Hogwood and Peters (1982, 1983) we identify three main organizational outcomes following the initial government response to a problem:

*Maintenance*, by which the organization set up to deal with the initial surge of public interest is continued with the same task definition. Such policy maintenance may simply arise from inertia because the initial policy is not challenged or from an explicit decision to continue the policy, even in the context of attempts to change it because the dominant political decision makers do not consider alternative solutions to be better.

*Termination*, by which an organization is abolished without any replacement's being established. This outcome would be most likely to occur in cases where following a government response to the issue there was concern about the costs of implementing it.

*Succession*, by which an organization is replaced by one or more "new" ones directed at similar problems and/or clientele. Succession can occur as a result of positive attempts to build on the early achievements or concern about its costs, its limited effectiveness, or how the organization and its activities interact with other programs.

The concept of succession enables us to go beyond Downs's (1972, p. 41) passing reference to the post-problem stage as different from the pre-problem stage to analyze both what form changes may take and the differences in the political process involved in bringing about succession rather than the original innovation. In agenda setting for policy succession the issue by definition has legitimacy as one appropriate for government concern since the government is already delivering a program directed at it, whereas at the original pre-problem state the issue has to overcome the initial hurdle of legitimacy. Once the debate about the issue begins, it will be structured differently the "first time around" than for subsequent proposed successions. In the case of succession there will be, as Downs notes, an organization with the issue as its core interest and with the resources to resist or promote policy. There may now be a defined and structured clientele, often with mandatory consultation rights. For both public employees and clients *actual* rather than hypothetical benefits may be at risk or subject to modification. Public employees may be professionalized and highly mobilized and, in addition to any threat to their jobs, they may be anxious to maintain their right to define service-delivery criteria.

#### PROPOSITIONS ABOUT THE POLICY CYCLE

1. In any given policy area there will be variable degrees of political attention over time as measured by changes to government organizations, with a sharp decline following the peak of activity. Downs (1972) is rather ambiguous about whether he considers that an issue-attention cycle applies to "most key domestic problems" (p. 38) or whether "not all major social problems go through this issue-attention cycle" (p. 41). We will be testing the proposition about the existence of a cycle for all policy areas, both domestic and nondomestic. These flurries of activity may be related to events such as wars or economic depressions, or they may be related to policy "fashions" or what Schon (1972) refers to as "ideas in good currency." The levels of activity need not be initiations only, and

governments may give their attention to policy areas in order to undo or develop further what previous governments have done.

2. The peaks of political attention as indicated by organizational change will not coincide for all policy areas. In other words, the phasing of the cycle will be policy-area specific.

3. Following Downs (1972, p. 41), who argues that "problems that have gone through the cycle almost always receive a higher average level of attention, public effort, and general concern than those still in the pre-discovery state," we would expect to find that the total level of organizational activity following the peak of organizational activity in a policy area would be higher than the total level of organizational activity prior to that peak.

4. Following the peak of initiations of new organizations in a policy area, a much greater proportion of overall organizational activity will take the form of successions and, to a lesser extent, terminations.

5. The periods of greatest organizational activity across time within a particular policy area will also be the periods of highest relative salience of that policy area compared to all government organizational activity. This proposition is important in the context of Downs's view of issues competing for political attention, with interest in one issue declining as other issues begin to receive attention. Only when the issue was most important in terms of public attention might one expect it to undergo a surge in organizational activity designed to deal with the issue. The proposition may appear self-evident, but in fact must be established empirically since, because of fluctuations in total organizational activity and the interaction of differing cycles for different policy areas (proposition 2), it will not necessarily be true that the peak time for organizational activity within each policy area will also be its peak in terms of relative political salience compared to total activity for all policy areas.

6. Changes in organizational activity are related to changes in public opinion. Downs's original model was based upon changes in the public's attention to different problems. The majority of our discussion will be on the reaction of government to problems, as evidenced by changes in the organizational population of the public sector, but we would hypothesize that these organizational events are to some degree related to public opinion.

#### USING ORGANIZATIONS AS INDICATORS OF THE POLICY CYCLE

Organizations have a number of advantages for the study of policy change and political interest in an issue, although organizational change is certainly not isomorphic with policy change. Very often when government initiates a program an organization is also initiated; when govern-

ments want to change a policy they may also change the organization delivering the policy. Organizations have the advantage of being "real"; that is, they have laws which establish them, they employ real people, they have budgets, etc. This is especially true in the United States where the decentralized nature of the federal bureaucracy requires the identification of any array of bureaus, offices, divisions, etc., each with its own budget and its own personnel allocations.

Not only are the organizations in the U.S. federal government themselves identifiable, but changes in organizations also tend to be identifiable. As organizational changes frequently involve the passage of a law, or the equivalent, the identification of policy-significant changes is easier. We are aware, of course, that the passage of the law may merely sanctify what has already been occurring, but there is still an identifiable event (Short, 1923).

Organizational change, because of its threshold nature and because it requires explicit administrative actions, is more useful as an indicator of political *attention* than other indicators such as budgets and personnel. (Budget change on its own would be a poor indicator of political attention because budget changes arise in a number of ways which do not always reflect explicit political interest, such as the inertial effects of incremental changes in the numbers of entitled beneficiaries.)

However, organizational change can occur without policy change. Organizations can be split, consolidated, and moved from one executive department to another, and the policies they administer may remain constant. This is in fact one standard critique of reform and reorganization in government. It involves moving boxes around, but what the boxes do is unchanged. On the other hand, policies can change while organizations remain constant. Especially for the direct replacement of one program by another, the organization is frequently capable of absorbing the change within its existing structures. For example, the Army Corps of Engineers has undergone a major change in its orientation to environmental issues without any significant changes in its organizational structure (Mazmanian and Nienaber, 1979).

These caveats having been raised, however, it does appear that the majority of organizational changes will involve policy changes, and vice versa. This is true for several reasons. First, even if reorganization does only apparently involve shifting boxes from one point in an organization to another, the move places the transferred component of the organization in a new environment so that the downward flow of ideas and directions will be different. This environmental influence is difficult to detect but does appear to be real (Weimer, 1983).

Likewise, organizations will have to adapt to policy changes, even if slowly and almost imperceptibly. Form may follow function, even if the

evolutionary process is slow. In short, while organizational change and policy change are not the same thing, organizational change is an indicator of the extent to which government responds to political interest in an issue and enables us to separate genuine initiations from subsequent activity involving succession or termination.

#### DATA BASE AND METHODOLOGY

The data used to address the research questions outlined above come from the *U.S. Government Manual*. The data consist of information on every change in the structures of government from 4 March 1933 to 1 July 1982. These data are found in appendix A of the 1982–83 *Manual*. In addition, we have been through the body of the manual itself in order to attempt to capture every initiation of an organization which occurred during this period. The data which are coded are *events*, e.g., an initiation of an organization or a termination or a succession. The data base consists of a total of 2,071 events.

All coding has been done by the authors, but some of the decisions taken in coding were matters of judgment as to whether a particular type of change rather than another had occurred. However, the majority of the ambiguities were between different types of successions—especially consolidations and nonlinear changes—rather than between successions and other types of change.

In interpreting the tables it should be remembered that the 1930s includes only the period 1933–39 for which we have data, while the 1970s includes 1980–mid-1982, since the decade of the 1980s contains too few entries to be suitable for separate analysis.

#### FINDINGS

This section presents findings to test the propositions set out earlier.

##### *Are There Fluctuations in Activity within Policy Areas?*

There does appear to be an issue-attention cycle in terms of organizational change in the American federal bureaucracy. As can be seen from table 1, almost all policy areas have at least one clear peak decade of organizational activity. Policy areas vary in the extent to which organizational activity is concentrated in the peak decade, from 67 percent for the relatively new policy area of environment to as low as 29 percent for natural resources, which is particularly interesting in terms of a cyclical effect since it had an earlier peak of 26 percent in the 1930s before falling as low as 8 percent in the 1950s.

If overall levels of government activity are the result of an issue-

TABLE 1  
 RATES OF TOTAL ACTIVITY BY POLICY AREA BY DECADE  
 (% OF TOTAL ACTIVITY IN POLICY AREA)

POLICY AREA	1930s	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	TOTAL
Public Works	53 (16)	27 (8)	17 (5)	3 (1)	—	100 (30)
Agriculture	32 (55)	22 (38)	13 (23)	12 (21)	21 (35)	100 (172)
Commerce	33 (102)	23 (71)	9 (26)	14 (42)	21 (63)	100 (304)
Defense	3 (13)	61 (250)	20 (81)	7 (29)	9 (38)	100 (411)
International Affairs	8 (7)	32 (27)	19 (16)	24 (20)	17 (14)	100 (84)
Housing/Urban Affairs	17 (16)	34 (32)	11 (13)	21 (20)	17 (16)	100 (97)
Welfare	13 (11)	11 (10)	8 (7)	40 (35)	28 (25)	100 (88)
Education	10 (11)	15 (16)	15 (16)	23 (24)	37 (39)	100 (106)
Transportation	17 (20)	16 (19)	17 (20)	31 (37)	19 (22)	100 (118)
Natural Resources	26 (28)	15 (16)	8 (9)	22 (24)	29 (32)	100 (109)
Economic Policy	8 (7)	23 (21)	15 (14)	20 (19)	34 (32)	100 (93)
Health	5 (3)	25 (15)	8 (5)	18 (11)	44 (27)	100 (61)
Energy	15 (11)	16 (12)	11 (8)	4 (3)	54 (40)	100 (74)
Justice	14 (13)	12 (11)	14 (13)	16 (15)	44 (39)	100 (91)
Environment	—	—	—	33 (11)	67 (22)	100 (33)
Other	23 (46)	10 (20)	18 (37)	16 (32)	33 (65)	100 (200)

Source: Calculated from information in Office of the Federal Register, *The United States Government Manual 1982/83* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1982).

Note: N is in brackets.

attention cycle of the Downs type then almost all of the activities during the peak period should be initiations. In fact, we can see from table 2 that while the peak period for initiations coincides in 75 percent of the cases with the peak period for total organizational activity, this is not inevitable.



TABLE 2  
 RATE OF INITIATION BY POLICY AREA BY DECADE  
 (% OF TOTAL INITIATIONS IN POLICY AREA)

POLICY AREA	1930s	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	TOTAL
Public Works	67 (8)	17 (2)	8 (1)	8 (1)	—	100 (12)
Agriculture	37 (18)	14 (7)	12 (6)	23 (11)	14 (7)	100 (49)
Commerce	50 (50)	8 (8)	11 (11)	16 (16)	15 (15)	100 (100)
Defense	4 (6)	60 (100)	24 (39)	5 (8)	7 (13)	100 (166)
International Affairs	12 (4)	32 (11)	14 (5)	30 (10)	12 (4)	100 (34)
Housing/Urban Affairs	26 (8)	19 (6)	23 (7)	19 (6)	13 (4)	100 (31)
Welfare	15 (5)	6 (2)	9 (3)	50 (17)	21 (7)	100 (34)
Education	9 (4)	14 (6)	16 (7)	33 (14)	28 (11)	100 (42)
Transportation	19 (9)	12 (6)	17 (8)	26 (12)	26 (12)	100 (47)
Natural Resources	31 (13)	7 (3)	14 (6)	29 (12)	19 (8)	100 (42)
Economic Policy	8 (3)	17 (7)	26 (10)	26 (10)	23 (9)	100 (39)
Health	5 (1)	15 (3)	5 (1)	20 (5)	60 (15)	100 (25)
Energy	14 (5)	24 (7)	20 (6)	6 (2)	36 (11)	100 (31)
Justice	17 (7)	4 (2)	21 (9)	19 (8)	38 (16)	100 (42)
Environment	—	—	—	60 (9)	40 (6)	100 (15)
Other	21 (16)	9 (7)	24 (19)	18 (14)	27 (21)	100 (77)

Source: Same as table 1.

Note: Italicized entry indicates decade of peak *total* organizational activity. *N* is in brackets.

### *Does the Timing of Peaks of Political Attention Vary between Policy Areas?*

As shown in table 1, there are marked differences in the times at which different types of policy had their major activity. Public works,

agriculture, and commerce (including organizations in the Department of Labor) all were most active in the 1930s. This rather obviously is a function of the attempts of the federal government to produce an economic recovery through the New Deal.

Defense, international affairs, and housing were most active during the 1940s. This should be expected for defense and international affairs, but housing may require some explanation. The major activities in housing during the 1940s were a large number of successions which, to a great extent, were a reaction to the housing policies initiated during the New Deal. No policy area had a peak of organizational activity in the 1950s; this confirms impressionistic views about the nature of the Eisenhower administration (though it is worth noting the relatively high level of initiations in the economic policy area).

Social welfare and transportation were most active during the 1960s. These findings appear to be a function of the activity surrounding the War on Poverty and the Great Society as well as the creation of a Department of Transportation (1966). Those changes were followed by high levels of activity in health, energy, natural resources, economic policy, and justice in the 1970s. The most dramatic in this regard were the patterns for energy and the environment, which were almost nonexistent prior to the 1960s but became extremely active in response both to policy initiatives from the environmental movement and to the energy crisis of the 1970s.

### *Is the Level of Activity Higher after a Peak Than It Was Before?*

For organizations with peaks of activity in the 1930s and 1970s it is not possible to answer this question from our data. However, from table 1 we can see that for policy areas with peaks of total activity in the 1940s and 1960s, defense, international affairs, welfare, education, and transportation all show markedly higher levels of activity after the peak decade than before. On average, organizational activity in these policy areas was 66 percent greater after the peak decade than before. The evidence suggests that once government has become active in a policy area the activity may cyclically decline from the peak but does not revert to previous relatively low levels, i.e., the cycle is asymmetric. This is not purely due to subsequent successions and terminations, since the level of new *initiations* also tends to be higher after the peak than before (see table 2).

### *Do Successions and Terminations Form a Greater Proportion of Activity after Peaks?*

The pattern of succession following initiation is well demonstrated in table 3. For example, as we noted, there were numerous initiations in the area of commerce during the 1930s. These were followed by a very large number of successions in the 1940s; 76 percent of all the events in commerce in the 1940s were successions, compared to only 38 percent in

TABLE 3  
RATE OF SUCCESSION BY POLICY AREA BY DECADE  
(% OF TOTAL SUCCESSIONS IN POLICY AREA)

POLICY AREA	1930s	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	TOTAL
Public Works	43 (6)	36 (5)	21 (3)	—	—	100 (14)
Agriculture	29 (33)	27 (31)	12 (14)	7 (8)	25 (28)	100 (114)
Commerce	24 (39)	34 (54)	8 (12)	12 (20)	22 (35)	100 (160)
Defense	3 (6)	63 (112)	15 (27)	9 (17)	9 (17)	100 (179)
International Affairs	5 (2)	35 (13)	27 (10)	16 (6)	16 (6)	100 (37)
Housing/Urban Affairs	15 (8)	48 (26)	6 (3)	17 (9)	15 (8)	100 (54)
Welfare	10 (5)	14 (7)	8 (4)	37 (18)	31 (15)	100 (49)
Education	13 (7)	16 (9)	13 (7)	13 (7)	45 (25)	100 (55)
Transportation	15 (8)	19 (10)	17 (9)	34 (18)	15 (8)	100 (53)
Natural Resources	27 (12)	16 (7)	5 (2)	18 (8)	34 (15)	100 (44)
Economic Policy	9 (3)	29 (10)	3 (1)	21 (7)	38 (13)	100 (34)
Health	3 (1)	30 (9)	13 (4)	16 (5)	37 (11)	100 (30)
Energy	12 (4)	6 (2)	—	3 (1)	79 (26)	100 (33)
Justice	14 (4)	24 (7)	7 (2)	7 (2)	48 (14)	100 (29)
Environment	—	—	—	29 (2)	71 (5)	100 (7)
Other	33 (27)	14 (11)	9 (7)	7 (6)	37 (30)	100 (81)

Source: Same as table 1.

Note: Italicized entry indicates decade of peak *initiation* activity. N is in brackets.

the 1930s. A similar pattern is found in agriculture. In the 1930s, 33 percent of all events were initiations while in the 1940s 82 percent were successions. In later years, the policy area of education followed a similar pattern. In the 1960s, 58 percent of all the events were successions.

The timing of terminations appears to be somewhat less predictable, although in some policy areas, such as natural resources, the environment, defense, and urban affairs/housing, there is a pattern of increased termination activity following the peak of initiations.

*Is Organizational Activity Highest at the Time of Its Greatest Relative Salience?*

So far the discussion has been in terms of cycles of issue attention within each policy area considered separately. Table 4 shows that for most policy areas the policy-specific peak period is also clearly the peak period in terms of relative political salience compared to total organizational activity for all policy areas combined. There are, however, some interesting exceptions, raising the general point that what may appear as an

TABLE 4  
RELATIVE SALIENCE IN DECADE OF POLICY AREA  
(% OF TOTAL ORGANIZATIONAL ACTIVITY BY DECADE)

POLICY AREA	1930s	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s
Public Works	4	1	2	*	0
Agriculture	15	7	8	6	7
Commerce	28	13	9	12	12
Defense	4	44	28	8	7
International Affairs	2	5	5	6	3
Housing/Urban Affairs	4	6	4	6	3
Welfare	3	2	2	10	5
Education	3	3	5	7	8
Transportation	6	3	7	11	4
Natural Resources	8	3	3	7	6
Economic Policy	2	4	5	6	6
Health	1	3	2	3	5
Energy	3	2	3	1	8
Justice	4	2	4	4	8
Environment	0	0	0	3	4
Other	13	4	13	9	13
Total %	100	100	100	100	100
N	359	566	293	344	509

*Note:* Italicized entry indicates period of highest total activity over time within the policy area.

\* Less than 0.5%.

upturn or downturn in political attention from the perspective of those involved in the specific policy area may not appear in the same way when viewed from the broader perspective of relative priority within the total activity of government. International affairs shows a clear peak in terms of its individual policy cycle in the 1940s, but its relative salience increased in the 1960s. Similarly, housing and urban affairs showed a clear peak in the 1940s but its relative significance reached its 1940s' level again in the 1960s after dipping in the 1950s. Education shows a steep rise in terms of its cycle from decade to decade between the 1950s and 1970s but a much more modest rise in terms of its relative significance. Perhaps the most interesting case is that of natural resources, which had its cyclical peaks in the 1930s and 1970s but had higher relative salience in the 1960s before dipping slightly in the 1970s.

### *Are Changes in Government Organizations Related to Public Opinion?*

Changes in the organizational structure of government may be conceptualized as responses to changes in public opinion about the relative importance of issues. That is, if models of representative democracy are valid, then governmental institutions should respond to changes in public opinion. More specifically, we should see high levels of organizational activities for policy areas during time periods in which the public regards that policy to be of particular importance.

Measuring the salience of issues in the mass public across time is a difficult undertaking. The timing of surveys, the nature of the questions asked, and any number of extraneous events can influence the findings. Further, several major issue areas—international affairs/defense and the economy—tend to have such an overwhelming importance that many less important issues may not be mentioned in surveys even though the public is interested in them. With all these caveats in mind, we have undertaken to make a rough measurement of changes in the importance attached to issues by the public and the relationship of those expressions of public opinion to organizational change.

The salience of issues to the mass public is measured by their responses to the question: "What do you think is the most important problem facing the country today?" This question was asked on seventy-nine Gallup polls during the period from 1935 to 1981 (Gallup, 1972, 1978, annual). Twelve of the policy areas we have been discussing received mention in these surveys. For each we calculated the mean percentage mentioning the policy area in each decade. Thereby we could determine the relative salience of the issue in each decade. The major exception to this was that during the period 1942–45, the question was frequently phrased: "Other

than winning the war, what do you think is the most important problem facing this country?" From this (and some common sense) we inferred that defense was of most importance during the 1940s. This judgment was further reinforced by the large number of defense-related answers given as the Cold War continued after the end of World War II.

As shown in table 5, the peak salience of issues with the public and the peak of organizational activity occurred in the same decade for seven of the twelve policy areas mentioned. In another four of the twelve peak organizational activity occurred in the decade immediately after peak salience in public opinion. Only in social welfare policy did peak organizational activity occur before the peak of opinion salience. The record in reference to initiations is not quite so supportive of a model of public opinion directly influencing organizational activity. In five of the policy areas the peak of organizational initiations occurred during the same decade as peak salience, and in four others peak organizational activity occurred after the peak of public salience. For economic policy, housing, and social welfare the peak of organizational initiations occurred prior to the peak of popular salience.

TABLE 5  
RELATIONSHIP OF PEAK SALIENCE IN PUBLIC OPINION POLLS  
TO PEAKS OF ORGANIZATIONAL ACTIVITY AND ORGANIZATIONAL  
INITIATIONS, BY DECADE

POLICY	ORGANIZATIONAL ACTIVITY	ORGANIZATIONAL INITIATIONS
Economic	Same	Decade before
Defense	Same	Same
Agriculture	Same	Same
Commerce	Decade after	Decade after
Foreign Affairs	Same	Same
Justice	Decade after	Decade after
Housing	Same	Decade before
Social Welfare	Decade before	Decade before
Health	Same	Same
Education	Decade after	Decade after
Environment	Decade after	Decade after
Energy	Same	Same

*Note:* "Decade before" refers to peak organizational activity occurring in decade prior to peak public opinion salience. "Decade after" refers to peak organizational activity occurring in decade after peak public opinion salience.

There does, therefore, appear to be some relationship between the perceptions of the relative importance of public issues in the mind of the mass public and the level of organizational response in government. Fur-

ther, given that changes in attitudes tend to lead changes in organizational activity if the two do not occur simultaneously, it appears that a model of responsive government could receive limited support in these data. Of course, the use of decade rather than year-by-year data make these findings all the more tentative, as do the methodological problems in the surveys mentioned previously.

### CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we have explored a number of hypotheses about the relative attention which the U.S. federal government has paid to different policy areas, using organizational initiation, succession, and termination as indicators. We have established that almost all policy areas have had at least one clear peak decade of organizational activity. However, this activity consists not only of the establishment of new organizations but also of the replacement of those already existing—including replacements of organizations only recently established during the surge of initiations. The timing of the peak decade varies markedly between policy areas. Public works, agriculture, and commerce were most active in the 1930s. Defense, international affairs, and housing peaked in the 1940s, while social welfare and transportation were most active in the 1960s, followed by high levels of activity in health, energy, natural resources, economic policy, and justice in the 1970s.

Our evidence supports Downs's contention that problems which have been through the issue-attention cycle will receive a higher level of attention after rather than before the peak. This higher level of organizational activity is not due purely to subsequent successions and terminations since the level of new initiations also tends to be higher after the peak than before. However, organizational successions do form a substantially greater proportion of all organizational activity in decades after peaks of activity; this represents a continuing adaptation of programs set up during the initial surge of activity.

It was established that for most policy areas the policy-specific peak period was also clearly the peak period in terms of its relative political salience compared to total organizational activity for all policy areas combined, though there were interesting exceptions. When only initiations are considered, there is a much closer relationship between peak periods within a policy area and their peak periods in terms of relative salience.

There is also evidence that there is a linkage between public opinion and organizational change. Peaks of organizational activity tend to occur either during the same time period or after peak salience of an issue for the public. These findings should offer some consolation for the supporters of responsive democratic government.

It does appear that there are different patterns of change arising from cycles of issue attention sparked in two different ways. The first type of cycle is that initiated in response to events such as wars and energy crises. Where external events—particularly those of a crisis nature—are being mediated by public attention, we cannot expect the “issue” to go through the attention cycle in the same way as the type of issues Downs was concerned with, even though attention to those issues may be *triggered* by specific catalysts. Thus, World War II could not be expected to fade away as it went through the attention cycle.

The second type of cycle involves a more explicitly political type of initiative reflecting political priorities (e.g., contrast Carter and Reagan on natural resources and the environment). Political priorities may entail a new round of initiations starting a completely new cycle or an emphasis on terminations or cutbacks.

Certainly, the evidence indicates that periods of succession and termination follow periods of initiation. This arises in four main ways: (1) problem exhaustion, whereby the need for the policy delivered by the organization no longer exists (e.g., some defense organizations after World War II and the Korean War); (2) governments inevitably make mistakes when they engage in a great deal of activity in a policy area in a short time and it subsequently becomes necessary to go back and attempt to fashion a better organizational arrangement; (3) even when a policy is not considered a mistake and the concern is to develop it, it may be possible to do this only through a replacement of existing organizations rather than by setting up a separate organization to deal with the innovative element; (4) finally, changes in political priorities may lead to successions or terminations of the organizations.

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