**Policy Formulation: Agenda Setting**

The existence of health related societal problems does not automatically trigger policy changes that solve such problems. Each problem needs to be understood including all its complexity, solutions and potential solutions need to be identified, and the current political circumstances need to be understood in order to assess the will of the pubic as well as law makers. As it happens, the problems that are identified as important or urgent get immediate attention from policymakers. Aggressive congressional intervention usually depends on its public salience and the degree of group conflict surrounding it. Some problems gain traction simply due to a confluence of events and political ripeness. Potential solutions to problems may not be readily present and will need formulation.

Alternatively, policy making can be slowed if there are several potential solutions, each favored by a different interest group. Analysis plays a key role in identifying optimal solutions for inclusion in a policy. Apart from an analysis of advantage-to-disadvantage of alternative solutions, there should always be an awareness of unintended consequences and room for evolution. In this regard, data driven analysis with quantifiable results always has a better chance of finding a place on the policy agenda. All other things being equal, the existence or lack of political will may render an agenda stagnant. The political circumstance surrounding each problem-potential solution is a crucial third variable in creating a window of opportunity.

Additionally, the influence and tenor of interest groups play a pivotal role in moving agendas forward. Sometimes, individual policymakers seem to make frustratingly counterintuitive decisions, and it may be because of how much power a certain interest group may wield over them. Interest groups may use strategies such as lobbying, campaigning through advertisements, organized protests, electioneering, litigation, as well as monetary “carrot and stick” tactics. Lastly, chief executives such as presidents, governors, mayors, etc. also influence policy agenda.

Stages of Agenda Setting

Identify the problem

* Problems must be important and urgent
* Problems must stimulate disagreement between interest groups
* Problems must present an incentive for legislators

Identifying possible solutions

* A feasible solution must be presented to advance a problem into the policy-making process
* Numerous solutions should not be presented as it introduces competition
* Competing proposals make agenda setting difficult

Political Circumstances

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