

CHAPTER 4

Processes: Origins, Rationality, Incrementalism, and Garbage Cans

We turn now from participants, the subjects of Chapters 2 and 3, to processes. First, we consider three common approaches: tracing the origins of initiatives; comprehensive, rational decision making; and incrementalism. Each of these is familiar, and each does describe *parts* of policy formation. We discuss the contributions of each approach to our understanding, but also note the limitations of each. A later part of this chapter then sketches a set of concepts that gives us a more comprehensive understanding, and subsequent chapters fill out that sketch.

ORIGINS

A concentration on the origins of initiatives does not make for very complete theory about agenda setting or alternative specification. I reach that conclusion for three reasons: (1) ideas can come from anywhere; (2) tracing origins involves one in an infinite regress; and (3) nobody leads anybody else.¹

Ideas Can Come from Anywhere

Even a brief examination of public policy case studies would lead a researcher to despair of ever finding a given source of initiative that seems to be important across several cases. One case shows that one source is important; the next case shows something different. Public policy is not one single actor's

1. For a general discussion of related problems, see George D. Greenberg, Jeffrey A. Miller, Lawrence B. Mohr, and Bruce C. Vladck, "Developing Public Policy Theory," *American Political Science Review* 71 (December 1977): 1532-1543.

brainchild. Across case studies, the proximate origin of the policy change varies from one case to the next. Even within a case study, it is often difficult to pinpoint who was responsible for movement. Ideas come from anywhere, actually, and the critical factor that explains the prominence of an item on the agenda is not its source, but instead the climate in government or the receptivity to ideas of a given type, regardless of source.

A brief look at several health initiatives illustrates the generalization that the proximate origins—the sources of initiative close in time to enactment—vary a great deal from one case to the next. First, the initiative for Health Maintenance Organizations was the brainchild of Paul Ellwood, the head of a group in Minneapolis called InterStudy, as we noticed in Chapter 1. Second, the Professional Standards Review Organization (PSRO) program was enacted in 1972 at the initiative of Senator Wallace Bennett (R-Utah), the ranking Republican on the Finance Committee. PSROs were to be physician organizations in each locality designed to monitor the hospital care that Medicare and Medicaid patients were receiving, to dampen unnecessary utilization, and to assure quality. Third, health planning started in two separate tracks, on the Hill and downtown. Several programs that dealt in one way or another with facilities planning—including Hill-Burton, Regional Medical Programs, and Comprehensive Health Planning—were all coming up for renewal at roughly the same time. Staffers on the Hill and people in the executive branch independently had the idea of combining the programs and adding provisions for planning organizations in each locality (which came to be called Health Systems Agencies). Our fourth case, a federal blood policy, was confined to the career civil service. To cut down on hepatitis in the blood used for transfusions, an HEW task force, using threats of government regulation and legislative proposals, pressured the blood banks and other interested organizations into voluntarily cutting down on the use of paid blood donors. Finally, the federal reimbursement for kidney dialysis depended in the first instance on the development of a technological advance, the shunt that would allow patients with end-stage renal disease to be hooked up to a dialysis machine.

Clearly, these cases are distinguished by the extraordinary variety of origins. Sometimes it's the administration or the Hill; at other times, it's civil servants, an outside analyst, the scientific community, or a lobby. Many times, there are several origins at once. At other times, a single proximate source of the idea can be quite readily identified. But nobody has a monopoly on ideas. They come from a plethora of different sources. Thus the key to understanding policy change is not where the idea came from but what made it take hold and grow. It is critical that an idea starts somewhere, and that it becomes diffused in the community of people who deal with a given policy domain, a process we discuss in Chapter 6. But as to the origins, as one Hill staffer put it, "Ideas come from anywhere."

Infinite Regress

We have discovered that as we move from one case to another, we have difficulty discerning a pattern to the origins. It is also true that within a given case, when we try to track down the origins of an idea or proposal, we become involved in an infinite regress. An idea doesn't start with the proximate source. It has a history. When one starts to trace the history of a proposal or concern back through time, there is no logical place to stop the process. As one respondent sagely pointed out, "This is not like a river. There is no point of origin."

Another look at case studies illustrates the problem. Serious proposals for national health insurance, for instance, go back in the United States at least to Teddy Roosevelt, and those really serious about tracing origins could go back to Bismarck and possibly beyond. One author traces recognition of the need for health planning far beyond recent efforts, to the 1927 Committee on the Costs of Medical Care.² HMOs did not start fresh in the mind of Paul Ellwood, but rather had a considerable history preceding the events of the Nixon administration HMO initiative. Similarly, there was quite a bit of experience with peer review by physicians prior to Senator Wallace Bennett's PSRO proposal. As one respondent summarized the problem, "You'll always find that things have their start somewhere else. People don't sit down and think up whole new approaches in a flash of insight. They borrow from somewhere else."

Because of the problem of infinite regress, the ultimate origin of an idea, concern, or proposal cannot be specified. Even if it could be, it would be difficult to determine whether an event at an earlier point in time was more important than an event at a later point. Indeed, "importance" would turn out to be tricky to define. So tracing origins turns out to be futile.

Nobody Leads Anybody Else

I originally designed this research to track the movement of items from one category of respondents to another in the policy community. If career civil servants were leaders over the others in the community, for instance, they might talk about a given subject in 1977, and it would take until 1978 or 1979 before others discussed it prominently in the interviews. Strictly in the sense of the early appearance of items in their interviews, then, some people might be called leaders.

It turns out that there are no leaders, at least not consistently across many possible subjects. Taking each public policy item in my data that changed

2. See Carol McCarthy, "Planning for Health Care," in Steven Jonas, ed., *Health Care Delivery in the United States* (New York: Springer Publishing Co., 1977), p. 352.

during the four years, I noted the respondents who had discussed the subject at the low point in the four years, before it had become prominent in the interviews. I then added these frequencies across all variables. If one category of respondents was consistently talking about subjects before others, it should have higher scores. But as Table 4-1 shows, no category of respondents exhibits that sort of prescience. If one examines the percentages of respondents in each category who treat subjects as very or somewhat important at the low points in the curves, before the subjects caught on with respondents as a whole, the figures are quite uniform across categories. The exceptions to the uniformities are those with very small numbers of interviews, making conclusions about their ability to anticipate issues quite shaky. Nearly all of the time, the percentage in each category of respondents is within five percentage points of the aggregate for them all.

I did the same sort of analysis for the *high* points in the curves, with roughly parallel results, as indicated in Table 4-2. In this instance, there is slightly more variation, although (again) many of the unusual categories have perilously low numbers on which to base calculations. In the main, however, attention to problems is fairly even across categories of participants at the points of most attention to a subject, as it was at the points of least attention.

Thus topics do not seem to move around in these policy communities from one type of participant to another with any regular pattern. No category of participant consistently discusses subjects ahead of others, and no category participates disproportionately when the subject is hot. When subjects hit the agenda, they seem to hit all participants roughly equally. Whole communities are affected simultaneously across the board.

Combinations and the Fertile Soil

The more that case studies and the place of various actors in processes of policy formation are examined, the more one concludes that attempting to pinpoint a single origin is futile. Instead, a complex *combination* of factors is generally responsible for the movement of a given item into agenda prominence. Even when we were considering the president himself, probably the most important single actor in the system, we were impressed by multiple causation. We set forth examples in which it appeared at first that the president was very powerful in setting the agenda, only to discover on some reflection that the agenda was set through a confluence of factors, including but not limited to presidential initiative.

If the president himself is only one among many, surely other actors are even less able to influence public policy single-handedly. It would be tempting to say that HMOs came to the fore because of Paul Ellwood, but the concentration on Ellwood as its proximate source would miss the importance of other factors—the administration's interest, the previous experience with prepaid group practice, the general national concern about medical care

Table 4-1
Discussion When Subjects Are Not Prominent*

	Congres- sional staff	Congres- sional agency	White House appointees	White House civil servants	Depart- mental appointees	Depart- mental civil servants	Interest groups	Journalists	Research- ers, Aca- demics, Consultants	Total
<i>Health</i>										
Very or somewhat prominent	19%	13%	15%	31%	17%	15%	11%	15%	18%	16%
Little prominence or no mention	<u>81</u>	<u>87</u>	<u>85</u>	<u>69</u>	<u>83</u>	<u>85</u>	<u>89</u>	<u>85</u>	<u>82</u>	<u>84</u>
Total %	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
n	77	31	13	13	24	123	64	52	96	493
<i>Transportation</i>										
Very or somewhat prominent	17%	17%	23%	21%	4%	18%	13%	12%	20%	16%
Little prominence or no mention	<u>83</u>	<u>83</u>	<u>77</u>	<u>79</u>	<u>96</u>	<u>82</u>	<u>87</u>	<u>88</u>	<u>80</u>	<u>84</u>
Total %	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
n	132	59	13	24	24	176	137	52	94	711
<i>Combined</i>										
Very or somewhat prominent	18%	16%	19%	24%	10%	17%	12%	13%	20%	16%
Little prominence or no mention	<u>82</u>	<u>84</u>	<u>81</u>	<u>76</u>	<u>90</u>	<u>83</u>	<u>88</u>	<u>87</u>	<u>80</u>	<u>84</u>
Total %	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
n	209	90	26	37	48	299	201	104	190	1204

*To explain the method by which the figures are derived, I first defined a "change," as in the Appendix. For all changes, I determined a low point and a high point in the curve. For instance, catastrophic insurance was mentioned by 14 percent of my respondents in 1977 as being very or somewhat prominent, and by 92 percent in 1979. I then noted which respondents were among the 14 percent—were they Hill staffers, lobbyists, civil servants, or whom? I did the same things for all changes, excluding some that duplicated others. I then added across all the changes. Thus we have a measure of the degree to which a given category of respondents such as congressional staff or lobbyists discusses a subject seriously, before other categories of respondents do so. Among health congressional staffers, for instance, 19 percent of their interviews include a very or somewhat prominent discussion of these subjects at the low points in their curves, while 81 percent of congressional staff interviews neglected those subjects, again at the low points.

Table 4-2
Discussion When Subjects Are Prominent*

	Congres- sional staff	Congres- sional agency	White House appointees	White House civil servants	Depart- mental appointees	Depart- mental civil servants	Interest groups	Journalists	Research- ers, Aca- demics, Consultants	Total
<i>Health</i>										
Very or somewhat prominent	65%	57%	69%	75%	82%	48%	60%	58%	69%	61%
Little prominence or no mention	<u>35</u>	<u>43</u>	<u>31</u>	<u>25</u>	<u>18</u>	<u>52</u>	<u>40</u>	<u>42</u>	<u>31</u>	<u>39</u>
Total %	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
n	40	14	13	4	17	95	53	43	80	359
<i>Transportation</i>										
Very or somewhat prominent	51%	50%	0	83%	33%	56%	58%	74%	75%	61%
Little prominence or no mention	<u>49</u>	<u>50</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>17</u>	<u>67</u>	<u>44</u>	<u>42</u>	<u>26</u>	<u>25</u>	<u>39</u>
Total %	100%	100%	0	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
n	84	18	0	24	42	108	132	54	138	600
<i>Combined</i>										
Very or somewhat prominent	56%	53%	69%	82%	47%	52%	59%	67%	73%	61%
Little prominence or no mention	<u>44</u>	<u>47</u>	<u>31</u>	<u>18</u>	<u>53</u>	<u>48</u>	<u>41</u>	<u>33</u>	<u>27</u>	<u>39</u>
Total %	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
n	124	32	13	28	59	203	185	97	218	959

*The procedure is the same as described in the footnote to Table 4-1, except that these figures are for the *high* point in the curves. **Here**, we see if certain categories are disproportionately represented among respondents who rated a subject as prominent, during the year that it was hot.

costs—that all came together at once. The same could be said for nearly every other case.

For a number of reasons, a combination of sources is virtually always responsible. One reason is the general fragmentation of the system. The founders deliberately designed a constitutional system to be fragmented, incapable of being dominated by any one actor. They succeeded. Thus a combination of people is required to bring an idea to policy fruition. In our discussion of the difference between the agenda and the alternatives, we also noticed that a variety of resources is needed. Some actors bring to the policy process their political popularity; others, their expertise. Some bring their pragmatic sense of the possible; others, their ability to attract attention.

Finally, nobody really controls the information system. It is tempting to say that the congressional staff controls the flow of information to their bosses, or that higher-level executive branch appointees depend on their civil service subordinates for expertise, ideas, and information. When we reach these conclusions, we seem to operate with an implicit hierarchical notion that information must flow up and down through channels, to and from superiors and subordinates. That approach misses the extraordinary looseness of the information system. Ideas, rumors, bits of information, studies, lobbyists' pleadings—all of these float around the system without any hard-and-fast communication channels. Subordinates cannot control that flow of information because their bosses have many others from whom they hear—lobbies, academics, media, each other, and their own experience and ideas. The same argument about the inability to control information flow can be applied to everybody, not just subordinates. No source monopolizes the flow of information and ideas.

The prominent feature of the processes under study here is the *joint* effect of several factors coming together at once. As one respondent put his experience with an important piece of legislation, "I'm sure that each of three or four people would gladly tell you that they originated it. The truth probably is that it sort of developed in that group of people." Said another, about a different issue, "I guess that each of us could claim credit, but actually, it came out of the agreement among us." In such cases, it's much less interesting *where* an idea got started than *that* it did.

Thus, the critical thing to understand is not where the seed comes from, but what makes the soil fertile. As one of my respondents eloquently stated the point:

I can trace the paths of ideas. But my personal theory is that people plant seeds every day. There are a lot of ideas around, and there is no lacking for ideas. The real question is, which of these ideas will catch hold? When you plant a seed, you need rain, soil, and luck.

A major reason that health policy makers became very interested in the subject of the implications of sophisticated technology, for instance, is that

they were preoccupied with cost and saw such technological advances as renal dialysis, CAT scanners, and heart bypass surgery as major contributors to cost inflation. Their concern with costs was the fertile soil that made it possible for the seed of concern over technology transfer to flourish. Or the academic thinking about deregulation in transportation took root in the fertile soil of a national mood that politicians perceived as being fed up with big government. Seeds come from many places. Why they germinate, grow, and flourish is much more interesting than their origins.

COMPREHENSIVE, RATIONAL DECISION MAKING

We need only have a brief word about how rational or comprehensive these processes appear because critiques of such models are already amply developed in earlier literature.³ If policy makers were operating according to a rational, comprehensive model, they would first define their goals rather clearly and set the levels of achievement of those goals that would satisfy them. Then they would canvass many (ideally, all) alternatives that might achieve these goals. They would compare the alternatives systematically, assessing their costs and benefits, and then they would choose the alternatives that would achieve their goals at the least cost.

For various reasons already developed by other writers, such a model does not very accurately describe reality. The ability of human beings to process information is more limited than such a comprehensive approach would prescribe.⁴ We are unable to canvass many alternatives, keep them simultaneously in our heads, and compare them systematically. We also do not usually clarify our goals; indeed, this is often counterproductive because constructing a political coalition involves persuading people to agree on a specific proposal when they might not agree on a set of goals to be achieved.⁵ It could be that some individual actors in the process are fairly rational a fair amount of the time, but when many actors are involved and they drift in and out of the process, the kind of rationality that might characterize a unitary decision-making structure becomes elusive.

The case studies in this research also don't have the flavor of a rational, comprehensive approach to problem solving. Often, the participants are not solving problems at all. They have not specified their goals very precisely and have not identified their problems with great care. They often seem to push for given proposals, developing information about the problems they are

3. For example, see James G. March and Herbert A. Simon, *Organizations* (New York: Wiley, 1958), Chapter 6; Charles E. Lindblom, "The Science of Muddling Through," *Public Administration Review* 14 (Spring 1959): 79-88; and Aaron Wildavsky, *The Politics of the Budgetary Process*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), Chapters 2 and 5.

4. March and Simon, *ibid.*

5. Lindblom, "The Science of Muddling Through," *op. cit.*

supposedly solving along the way as a means of justifying their position. The case studies have something of a loose, messy quality to them, not the tight, orderly process that a rational approach specifies. Often, a somewhat accidental confluence of factors seems to loom rather large in the descriptions.

Another conception of orderly process is that policy proceeds in stages. Events, for example, proceed from agenda setting, through decision, to implementation. We also might believe that people recognize problems first and then seek solutions to them.⁶ As we will argue presently, neat stages do not describe these processes well.⁷ While there are indeed different processes, they do not necessarily follow one another through time in any regular pattern. Instead, several streams develop independently; they are logically coequal, and none necessarily precedes the others chronologically. Then, the separate streams become coupled at critical junctures, rather than following from one another.

It may be that some parts of the process approximate a rational decision-making model more closely than others. Paul Light argues, for instance, that there are occasions in priority setting in the White House when people do sit down with a fairly full set of alternatives and compare them systematically, assessing their substantive and political costs and benefits.⁸ It is also not fair to say that the processes are irrational: They may be just about as orderly as human beings can make them, under the circumstances. Still and all, a rational-comprehensive model does not describe very well the processes under investigation in this book, taken as a whole.

INCREMENTALISM

Partly in response to writings which imply that a rational-comprehensive model either is or should be used in governmental policy making, Charles Lindblom and others developed their description and defense of an incremental approach.⁹ Instead of beginning consideration of each program or issue afresh, decision makers take what they are currently doing as given, and make small, incremental, marginal adjustments in that current behavior. By

6. For two other conceptions of stages, see Roger Cobb, Jennie-Keith Ross, and Marc Howard Ross, "Agenda Building as a Comparative Political Process," *American Political Science Review* 70 (March 1976): 127; and Barbara J. Nelson, "The Politics of Child Abuse and Neglect" (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming), Chapter 2.

7. Cobb and Elder agree. See Roger W. Cobb and Charles D. Elder, "Communications and Public Policy," in Dan Nimmo and Keith Sanders, eds., *Handbook of Political Communications* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1981), p. 394.

8. For example, see Paul C. Light, *The President's Agenda* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), Chapter 6.

9. Lindblom, "The Science of Muddling Through," op. cit.; Wildavsky, *Politics of the Budgetary Process*, op. cit. For alternative perspectives, see Amitai Etzioni, "Mixed Scanning," *Public Administration Review* 27 (December 1967): 385-392; and Paul R. Schulman, "Nonincremental Policy Making," *American Political Science Review* 69 (December 1975): 1354-1370.

taking that tack, they need not canvass formidable numbers of far-reaching changes, they need not spend inordinate time defining their goals, and the comparisons they make between the current state of affairs and the small adjustments to be made in current behavior are entirely manageable. The result is that policy changes very gradually, in small steps.

Such a model describes many political and governmental processes. Aaron Wildavsky argues that the budgetary process works this way.¹⁰ All participants assume that agencies have a base budget to work from. People rarely examine an entire budget from scratch because they are overwhelmed with information if they try, and they proceed instead to add or subtract small increments to or from the base.

There are also notable instances of incrementalism at work in my interviews. If a program has basically settled down into a stable pattern, for instance, few questions are raised about it, there is little controversy surrounding it, and whatever changes that do occur are modest. There are changes, but they proceed gradually, piece by piece. For instance, federal highway funds were traditionally spent only for new construction. As road surfaces deteriorated, however, the need for maintenance became obvious to everyone. The federal government gradually got into the maintenance business, not by suddenly declaring that they would do so but by gradually defining more and more maintenance activities as construction: replacement, then rehabilitation, then resurfacing, then bridge repair. But "they didn't really come out and call it maintenance," in the words of one lobbyist. By the late 1970s, when I asked whether the federal government actually was financing maintenance, one congressional staffer replied, "I think we crossed that watershed a year or two ago."

Incrementalism is also treated in the interviews, not as a description of the way the world is but as a strategy that one might use to manipulate outcomes. People are sometimes reluctant to take big steps. Apprehensive about being unable to calculate the political fallout, politicians shy away from grand departures. Apprehensive about not fully understanding the unanticipated consequences that might ensue, specialists also avoid significant changes. Both worry about budgetary implications of massive new programs. Given this natural caution, those who advocate major changes find they often must push for one small part at a time in order to move in their preferred direction. Thus respondents often talked about getting to national health insurance in

10. Wildavsky, *ibid.*, Chapter 2; and Otto A. Davis, M. A. H. Dempster, and Aaron Wildavsky, "A Theory of the Budgetary Process," *American Political Science Review* 60 (September 1966): 529-547. See also several articles that modify or criticize an incremental model, including Peter B. Natchez and Irvin C. Bupp, "Policy and Priority in the Budgetary Process," *American Political Science Review* 67 (September 1973): 951-963; John Wanat, "Bases of Budgetary Incrementalism," *American Political Science Review* 68 (September 1974): 1221-1228; and John F. Padgett, "Bounded Rationality in Budgetary Research," *American Political Science Review* 74 (June 1980): 354-372.

bits and pieces, starting with Medicare and Medicaid in the 1960s, and gradually expanding. One could expand by population groupings, for instance, so that the next step after the elderly and the poor might be maternal and child benefits, bringing young people into coverage. One respondent labeled this a "kiddie-in-the-door" approach. Another way to expand would be to enact catastrophic coverage for the entire population and gradually reduce the deductible over the years. Another would be to finance given procedures, gradually adding to the list. When Congress enacted the program for renal dialysis and kidney transplants, for instance, a congressional staffer called it national health insurance one organ at a time.

As good a description as incrementalism is of some parts of the processes under scrutiny in this book, and as good a strategy as it might be under some circumstances, an incremental or gradualism model does not describe agenda change particularly well. If agendas changed incrementally, a gradual heightening of interest in a subject over the course of years would be apparent. In my interview data, for instance, a subject may be mentioned by 5 percent more respondents each year, for a total change of 20 percent spread over the four years. But interest does not gradually build in this fashion. Instead of incremental agenda change, a subject rather suddenly "hits," "catches on," or "takes off." After decades of thinking about the problem, a sudden flurry of interest in waterway user charges produces a program within two years. Serious discussion of catastrophic health insurance jumps from 33 percent of my respondents in one year to 92 percent the next year. One extremely well-informed health respondent said at the time, "If you had asked me three months ago, I would have said that nothing was going to happen. Something really has come along to move national health insurance onto the front burner." Said another, when I reminded him that he had predicted a year earlier that it would be ten years before there would be any movement, "Actually, I would still have said that three or four weeks ago." The same comments were made about the deregulation movement in transportation. Respondents referred to the changes in ICC interpretations that allowed much greater flexibility in pricing, entry, and abandonment as "unbelievable," "revolutionary," and "utterly without precedent clear back into the previous century." Even a casual glance at the quantitative indicators presented throughout this book, including the charts in the Chapter 1 case studies, reveals a lot of sudden spikes upward, rather than gradual, incremental changes.

Nor are selected case studies isolated instances. I analyzed all changes in my data, and found that there were as many nonincremental as incremental changes. Table 4-3 shows that pattern. If incremental changes dominated this picture, one would see the changes clustered disproportionately at the low end, in the twenties and thirties. Remember that a change of 40 percent, for instance, is really quite substantial; it means going from, say, 30 percent to 70 percent of my respondents. Of course, conclusions in this area turn on how

Table 4-3
Size of Changes*

Size of change, in %	Number of health variables exhibiting change	Number of transportation variables exhibiting change	Total
60% +	4	6	10
50-59%	2	6	8
40-49%	5	12	17
30-39%	9	12	21
20-29%	9	10	19
n	29	46	75

*I included all variables for policy subjects for which there had been some change over the four years (see Appendix for operational definitions). There were 29 such health variables, and 46 in transportation. I then noted for each included variable the magnitude of the largest difference across the four years. If a given item rose from 23 percent of my health respondents discussing it as very or somewhat prominent in 1976 to 63 percent in 1978, for instance, there would be a 40 percent difference. The cell entries in the table, then, are the numbers of variables that fall into the categories on the left. Four of the 29 health variables, for instance, show their largest change over the four years to be 60 percent or higher; 10 of the 46 transportation variables show a change of between 20 and 29 percent.

one defines "incremental." I have resisted the temptation to set an arbitrary definition at, for example, 35 percent change. Instead, I present the whole array in Table 4-3, and let the reader make his or her own interpretation. However one sets an exact level, an incremental model does not very completely describe these data since the variables are fairly evenly distributed across the categories. At least it can be said that there are many clearly nonincremental changes.

But do these changes take place over all four waves of my interviews, or do the subjects suddenly shift from one year to an adjacent year? Table 4-4 presents the data in Table 4-3, but broken down by the number of years it took to traverse the largest change. Once again, the variables spread rather evenly across the categories. The changes do not tend disproportionately to take place gradually over all four waves of interviews; indeed, somewhat more of them shift over one year.

If we were to call a change nonincremental if *either* it is 40 percent or higher or it takes place over one year, 53 of the 75 variables (71 percent) would be classified as nonincremental changes. The reader can invent other definitions to suit his or her taste. But again, even by quite a variety of reasonable definitions, many instances of sharp, substantial, sudden changes are evident in these data. It might be fair to describe some changes as incremental, but not all or even a majority of them.

Table 4-4
*Size of Changes, by Years**

Size of change	Health			Total
	Over 1 year	Over 2 years	Over 3 years	
60% +	0	3	1	4
50-59%	1	1	0	2
40-49%	1	1	3	5
30-39%	5	2	2	9
20-29%	3	1	5	9
Totals	10	8	11	29

Size of change	Transportation			Total
	Over 1 year	Over 2 years	Over 3 years	
60% +	3	1	2	6
50-59%	1	2	3	6
40-49%	3	6	3	12
30-39%	5	5	2	12
20-29%	5	5	0	10
Totals	17	19	10	46

*The procedure here is the same as in Table 4-3, except that I have also noticed here the number of years the change took. If there was a 53 percent rise between 1976 and 1977, for instance, that goes in the "one year" column; a 34 percent drop between 1976 and 1979 goes in the "three year" column. There is some under reporting of the sharpness of change. If a variable went from 12 percent in 1976, to 14 percent in 1977, to 46 percent in 1978, for instance, it is dutifully recorded as a 34 percent change over two years, even though there was clearly a sharp rise in one of the two.

To return to our distinction between the agenda and the alternatives, agenda change appears quite discontinuous and nonincremental. But incrementalism might still characterize the generation of alternatives. As policy makers consider the alternatives from which they will choose, they repair to ideas and approaches with which they are already familiar. The Nixon administration picked up on prepaid group practice, an arrangement with an extensive previous track record, for its Health Maintenance Organization initiative. The concept of waterway user charges depended heavily on the financing of other modes by user charges, and on an extensive history of waterway proposals. The proposals are often quite familiar and have been floating around in circles of cognoscenti for some time. But the agenda is capable of changing quite abruptly—with the election of a new administration, a crisis like the collapse of the Penn Central, or a variety of other things that we are detailing in this book.

In fact, incremental processes are discussed quite often in the interviews. They were prominent in 62 percent of the interviews, and in 14 of the 23 case studies. But this discussion often refers to either the development of proposals or alternatives or to the enactment of changes in small increments, rather than to agenda change. One respondent in the aviation area described interest in higher landing fees in peak traffic periods as a way of creating an incentive for some traffic to flow in the less busy times of the day or week:

The idea has been around for some time. But as a policy issue, it goes up and down. Sometimes OMB might be interested in it and then they drop it. Sometimes the environmental quality people get interested in it and then drop it. Lately, there has been no great pressure to do anything about it, but we are continuing to look at it as an alternative to investment in capital projects.

In this description, an old alternative—known to specialists, and discussed and refined at length by analysts—pops up on and disappears from policy agendas. The content of the idea is quite stable; its appearance on the agenda is not. Similarly, actual enactments into law might be quite small, gradual, and incremental. Another transportation respondent described small steps taken over many years toward greater coherence and integration in transportation planning: "These things proceed in small, incremental steps. Something is enacted, everybody concludes that it's not so bad, and that gets people ready for the next bite." So the agenda might be quite volatile, but the alternatives policy makers consider and the actual proposals they are prepared to enact might represent much less dramatic changes.¹¹

Thus incrementalism is important, particularly in understanding the development of alternatives and proposals. We will return to the developmental process that takes place in communities of specialists in Chapter 6. But agendas exhibit a good deal of nonincremental change.

THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT AND GARBAGE CANS

To this point in our journey through the labyrinth of policy formation, we have come across many important and interesting partial answers to our central questions: how the agenda is set, how the alternatives for choice are specified, and why these processes work as they do. By now, we know a lot about the participants who are important and about the conditions under which they are important, and we have explored the potential of some notions that might be used to contribute to our understanding. But the answers have been partial, and our understanding has been in bits and pieces. This section

11. For an account of the cumulative effect of incremental changes, see Hugh Hecl, *Modern Social Politics in Britain and Sweden* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), especially pp. 304–322.

starts the process of assembling pieces into the whole. We provide here an overview of the theory we develop in subsequent chapters, a kind of skeleton that is fleshed out in the chapters to follow.

Our point of departure is a model developed by Michael Cohen, James March, and Johan Olsen which, in a masterpiece of indelicate language, they called a "garbage can model of organizational choice."¹² What I have observed in my research seems similar in many of its major contours to the essential logic of their model. I will add several features of my own to their argument and will alter their model in some major respects to fit the phenomena under study here, which is why their model is our point of departure rather than our finish line. I begin by describing their concepts and then I will show how those ideas can be changed to suit our purposes.

The Garbage Can Model

Cohen, March, and Olsen set about to understand organizations that they called "organized anarchies." Their empirical referent for such organizations, it pains and embarrasses an academic to admit, is universities. Organized anarchies have three general properties: problematic preferences, unclear technology, and fluid participation. As to preferences, people characteristically do not define their preferences very precisely, much as political actors often fail to (or refuse to) define their goals. Yet, as Lindblom argues, people act in the absence of clearly defined goals; indeed, action is often facilitated by fuzzing over what one is trying to accomplish.¹³ When participants do define their preferences with a modicum of precision, they conflict. So the preferences are inconsistent, both between individuals and even within a given individual. Thus, as Cohen et al. put it, the organization is "a loose collection of ideas [rather than] a coherent structure; it discovers preferences through action more than it acts on the basis of preferences."¹⁴ This is not like a small business, for instance, in which everyone agrees that the firm must turn a profit.

Second, as to unclear technology, an organized anarchy's members do not understand the organization's processes very well. They may know their own jobs, and the organization as a whole may get along rather well, but its members have only fragmentary and rudimentary understandings of why they are doing what they are doing and how their jobs fit into a more general picture of the organization. They operate a lot by trial and error, by learning from experience, and by pragmatic invention in crises. Third, participants drift in and out of decision making, so the boundaries of such an organization

12. Michael Cohen, James March, and Johan Olsen, "A Garbage Can Model of Organizational Choice," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 17 (March 1972): 1-25.

13. Lindblom, "The Science of Muddling Through," op. cit.

14. Cohen, March, and Olsen, "A Garbage Can Model," op. cit., p. 1.

are rather fluid. The time and effort members of the organization devote to different subjects vary; even within a given subject their involvement varies from one time to another. Who shows up for or is invited to a given critical meeting, and their degree of activity at the meeting, for instance, turn out to make a tremendous difference. Despite these characteristics, such organizations do function: They make decisions, adapt, and survive, at least after a fashion and sometimes quite well.

On the face of it, this looks a lot like the federal government. People do disagree about what they want government to accomplish, and often are obliged to act before they have the luxury of defining their preferences precisely. They often don't know how to accomplish what they want to accomplish, even if they can define their goals. If they want to eliminate poverty, for instance, the technology to do so is quite elusive; it's not like making widgets. People also don't necessarily understand the organization of which they are a part: The left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing. Participation is definitely fluid. Even within a relatively hierarchical bureaucracy, some people take on an importance that is not commensurate with their formal role, and others are impotent despite considerable powers on paper. Both the legislature and the executive branch are in the act, further clouding organizational boundaries. And various categories of people outside of government also drift in and out of decision making. Participation changes from one decision to another and one time to the next. Turnover of personnel adds to the fluidity. Thus a description of the federal government as an organized anarchy is not far wide of the mark.

Running through such organizations or decision structures are four separate streams: problems, solutions, participants, and choice opportunities. Each of the streams has a life of its own, largely unrelated to the others. Thus people generate and debate solutions because they have some self-interest in doing so (e.g., keeping their job or expanding their unit), not because the solutions are generated in response to a problem or in anticipation of a particular upcoming choice. Or participants drift in and out of decision making, carrying their pet problems and solutions with them, but not necessarily because their participation was dictated by the problem, solution, or choice at hand. As Cohen, March, and Olsen say, this kind of organization "is a collection of choices looking for problems, issues and feelings looking for decision situations in which they might be aired, solutions looking for issues to which they might be the answer, and decision makers looking for work."¹⁵

As a choice opportunity (e.g., the selection of a dean) floats by in the organization (e.g., a university), various participants, each with their own resources, become involved. Various problems (e.g., maintaining scholarly quality, curriculum improvement, affirmative action) are introduced into the choice, and various solutions (e.g., inside candidates for a deanship, outside

15. Ibid., p. 2.

candidates, expanding the unit, abolishing the unit) may be considered. A choice opportunity thus is "a garbage can into which various kinds of problems and solutions are dumped by participants as they are generated. The mix of garbage in a single can depends on the mix of cans available, on the labels attached to the alternative cans, on what garbage is currently being produced, and on the speed with which garbage is collected and removed from the scene."¹⁶

The outcomes, then, are a function of the mix of garbage (problems, solutions, participants, and the participants' resources) in the can and how it is processed. Who is invited to or shows up for a meeting (i.e., who the participants are) affects the outcome dramatically. Which solutions are ready for airing and which problems are on people's minds are critical. The various streams are coupled in these choice contexts. When a given solution is proposed, it may be regarded by the participants as irrelevant to the problem and is thus discarded. Or even more likely, the participants have fixed on a course of action and cast about for a problem to which it is the solution, discarding problems that don't seem to fit. The solutions and problems that come to the fore might change from one meeting to the next, as given participants attend or fail to attend.

Sometimes, problems are actually resolved. At least as often, problems drift away from the choice at hand to another garbage can, not being resolved in the current round at least. Or important problems are ignored altogether, possibly because there is no available solution for them. At any rate, the logical structure of such a model is (1) the flow of fairly separate streams through the system, and (2) outcomes heavily dependent on the coupling of the streams—couplings of solutions to problems; interactions among participants; the fortuitous or purposeful absence of solutions, problems, or participants—in the choices (the garbage cans) that must be made.

Note that this picture is quite unlike various models we discussed earlier. It certainly does not look like comprehensive, rational decision making. People do not set about to solve problems here. More often, solutions search for problems. People work on problems only when a particular combination of problem, solution, and participants in a choice situation makes it possible. Nor do they go through a prescribed logical routine: defining the problem, canvassing the possible solutions, evaluating the alternatives in terms of their ability to solve the problem at the least cost. Rather, solutions and problems have equal status as separate streams in the system, and the popularity of a given solution at a given point in time often affects the problems that come up for consideration. Nor is change produced by such a process necessarily incremental. It can be, but a coupling of streams in a decision context can also produce quite an abrupt change, as a new combination previously untried comes into play.

A Revised Model

We now adapt this general line of thought to understand agenda setting in the federal government. In this adaptation, we will bend the ideas to suit our purposes and add features of our own where it seems appropriate. The streams described here also differ from those in the Cohen-March-Olsen model. But the general logic is similar. The federal government is seen as an organized anarchy. We will find our emphasis being placed more on the "organized" than on the "anarchy," as we discover structures and patterns in the processes. But the properties of problematic preferences, unclear technology, and fluid participation are in evidence. Separate streams run through the organization, each with a life of its own. These streams are coupled at critical junctures, and that coupling produces the greatest agenda change.

As I have observed them, there are three families of processes in federal government agenda setting: problems, policies, and politics. People recognize problems, they generate proposals for public policy changes, and they engage in such political activities as election campaigns and pressure group lobbying. In theory, each of the participants discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 could be involved in each of these processes. Members of Congress could both run for reelection and formulate proposals, for instance, and interest groups could both push for recognition of pet problems and for adoption of their solutions or proposals. In practice, while many participants do cut across the three process streams, there is also some specialization. Academics and researchers, for example, are more involved in generating policy proposals than in the electioneering or pressure activities that we label "political," and political parties are more involved in the political stream than in the detailed work of formulating proposals. Conceptually, however, any actor can be involved in any stream, and some of them actually are involved in several. In other words, we distinguish between participants and processes.

The three major process streams in the federal government are (1) problem recognition, (2) the formation and refining of policy proposals, and (3) politics. First, various problems come to capture the attention of people in and around government. In the health area, for instance, people could be worried about the cost of medical care and, within that problem, about the subproblems of cost to the government, cost to insurers, and cost to consumers. Or they could concentrate on the access to medical care, health habits in the population, biomedical research frontiers, or the latest epidemic. So we need to understand how and why one set of problems rather than another comes to occupy officials' attention; we will focus on that stream in Chapter 5.

Second, there is a policy community of specialists—bureaucrats, people in the planning and evaluation and in the budget offices, Hill staffers, academics, interest groups, researchers—which concentrates on generating proposals. They each have their pet ideas or axes to grind; they float their ideas up and the ideas bubble around in these policy communities. In a selection

process, some ideas or proposals are taken seriously and others are discarded. These phenomena, akin to the garbage can model's stream of solutions, are discussed in Chapter 6.

Third, the political stream is composed of things like swings of national mood, vagaries of public opinion, election results, changes of administration, shifts in partisan or ideological distributions in Congress, and interest group pressure campaigns. Events in this stream occur independently of the streams of problems and proposals. Thus politicians discern a new mood among their constituents; election results bring a new administration to power; or an influx of new and different legislators changes the complexion of Capitol Hill. We concentrate on the political stream in Chapter 7.

Each of the actors and processes can operate either as an impetus or as a constraint. As an impetus, an interest group or a president can push for the inclusion of a given item on a governmental agenda, or the recognition of a problem or the development of a solution can prompt higher agenda status for a given item. But people in and around government also find themselves coming up against a series of constraints. If the costs of paying attention are too high, otherwise worthy items are prevented from becoming prominent. Thus the problems stream can push some items higher on the agenda, but it can also retard the upward movement of others, particularly through the budget constraint. Other items are not considered because there is a lot of public opposition, either from the general public or from activists of various descriptions. If an unacceptable political cost would have to be paid, the item is shunted aside. So the political forces we describe in Chapter 7 can operate either as an impetus or as a constraint.

These three streams of processes develop and operate largely independently of one another. Solutions are developed whether or not they respond to a problem. The political stream may change suddenly whether or not the policy community is ready or the problems facing the country have changed. The economy may go sour, affecting the budget constraint, which imposes a burden on both politicians and policy specialists that was not of their own making. The streams are not absolutely independent, however. The criteria for selecting ideas in the policy stream, for instance, are affected by specialists' anticipation of what the political or budgetary constraints might be. Or election outcomes in the political stream might be affected by the public's perception of the problems facing the country, connecting (to a degree) the political and problems streams. Despite these hints of connection, the streams still are largely separate from one another, largely governed by different forces, different considerations, and different styles.

Once we understand these streams taken separately, the key to understanding agenda and policy change is their coupling. The separate streams come together at critical times. A problem is recognized, a solution is available, the political climate makes the time right for change, and the constraints do not prohibit action. Advocates develop their proposals and then wait for problems

to come along to which they can attach their solutions, or for a development in the political stream like a change of administration that makes their proposals more likely to be adopted. In Chapter 8 I label an opportunity for pushing one's proposals a "policy window"—open for a short time, when the conditions to push a given subject higher on the policy agenda are right. But the window is open for only a while, and then it closes. Enabling legislation comes up for renewal, for instance, and many potential changes in the program can be proposed only in the context of the renewal consideration. Or an unanticipated influx of new members of Congress makes action on certain items possible, but those legislators might not last beyond their first two-year term. Thus an item suddenly gets hot. Something is done about it, or nothing, but in either case, policy makers soon turn their attention to something else. So opportunities pass, and if policy entrepreneurs who were trying to couple a solution to the hot problem or the propitious political situation miss the chance, they must wait for the next opportunity. Chapter 8 discusses these policy windows and the coupling of the streams that takes place when they open.

This chapter has only sketched out the line of argument that we pursue in the remainder of the book. We turn now to a series of chapters that paint the more complete picture. The next three chapters consider each of the process streams in their turn. Chapter 8 then discusses the coupling of the streams that takes place when a policy window opens. Chapter 9 wraps up the argument of the book, and presents some reflections on the structure of the processes and the implications of our findings.