Understanding Local Policy Making: Policy Elites’ Perceptions of Local Agenda Setting and Alternative Policy Selection

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Abstract

Despite the increasing interest in policy agenda research in recent years, very few studies have focused their attention on the relevant processes at the local level. Drawing on agenda setting research, particularly Kingdon's multiple-streams framework, this study examines the key forces and factors, as well as their relative importance, in local agenda setting, problem identification and alternative policy selection. Data are collected from 271 in-depth interviews with local policy stakeholders in three U.S. Gulf Coast areas. Interview materials are coded using a protocol focused on capturing stakeholders' perceptions of the key elements and forces in local policy dynamics. Our interview data indicate that (1) governmental actors and various interest groups have relatively more influence in shaping local agendas than the general public, experts and election-related actors, while the mass media are found to have little agenda setting power in local policy processes; (2) budgetary consideration and various forms of feedback to local government are more important than objective problem indicators and focusing events in setting local policy priorities; (3) policy alternatives that are deemed compatible with existing policies and regulations are more likely to be selected than those relying on other criteria such as technical feasibility, value acceptability and future constraints; and (4) consensus- and coalition-building is perceived as the most important political factor in local policy processes. Limitations of our study and recommendations for future research are discussed in the concluding section.

Keywords: Agenda setting, Alternative selection, Local policy process, Multiple-streams theory

Introduction

Policy scholars have constructed various theories and models to study local policymaking. Many of these focus on local power structures, democratic accountabilities, business-government relations, and policy impacts and distribution effects. A policy agenda setting approach, however, emphasizes the importance of studying the key elements and forces of pre-decision policy making processes in which some public issues and policy alternatives gain relatively more governmental attention than others (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Cobb and Elder 1983; Jones 1994; Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Kingdon 1995; Schattschneider 1960). This approach has greatly contributed to our understanding of the complexity of policymaking at the national level. Given the observation by some political scientists that the fundamental characteristics and dynamics of local policy processes are very similar to that of the national level (e.g., Jones 1983), very few studies have utilized the agenda setting approach to examine local policymaking. Drawing on the agenda setting work by Kingdon (1995) and informed by other perspectives of local politics, this study attempts to take the first steps to fill up the gap.

The local policy making process involves many stages, including agenda setting, alternative consideration, policy formation, decision making, and policy implementation. This study concentrates on certain aspects of the first two stages – local agenda setting and alternative policy selection. We are particularly interested in two broad questions. First, viewing from an agenda setting perspective, what are the major forces and factors, as well as their relative importance, in local agenda setting and alternative selection? Second, how does the agenda setting framework “fit” at the local level of policy making? The first question will provide insight into local decision making and policy processes, while the second will contribute to and expand upon agenda studies in general from both theoretical and empirical perspectives.

In the following sections, we begin with a brief review of the agenda setting perspective as well as other theoretical approaches to local policymaking, followed by specification of our research questions derived from Kingdon's framework. We then describe our research method, interview procedure, data collection and interview coding protocol. Next, we present our findings from both quantitative and qualitative interview data to examine the key forces and factors as well as their relative importance in local policy agenda setting and alternative selection. In the final section, we summarize our main findings from the interview data, assess the fitness and applicability of agenda setting perspective to local policy study, and discuss the limitations of this study and some recommendations for future research.
Agendas, Alternatives, and Politics in Local Policymaking

There are various approaches to the study of local policymaking in the United States. The classic pluralist approach argues that policymaking in a democratic system operates in a fragmented power structure that is open to considerable influences from various interest groups (Dahl 1961, 1986; Polsby 1960, 1980). The elite theory of local politics stresses that community power is disproportionately distributed and local policy formation is controlled by a relatively small number of very powerful individuals or groups whose dominant interest is business (Domhoff 2006; Hunter 1953). The growth-machine thesis further refines local elite theory and contends that the combination of land developers, commercial interests, local government and entrepreneurial coalitions play a decisive role in shaping local governance and policy priorities (Logan and Molotch 1987, 1996; Molotch 1976). The urban regime theory questions the elitist-pluralist debate as a false dualism and highlights the influence of particular collaborative coalitions/regimes (consisted of various governmental and non-governmental actors) in shaping local policy making (Elkin 1987; Stone and Sanders 1987; Stone 1989, 1993; see also Mossberger and Stoker, 2001, for a review of regime analysis).

The earlier theories usually focus on a public problem and concentrate on the structural politics surrounding that problem. In contrast, the agenda setting approach is more interested in how government, as a set of organizations with limited rationality and capability, copes with literally unlimited public problems (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Cobb and Elder 1972; Jones 1994, 2001; Kingdon 1995; Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Rochefort and Cobb 1994). According to Kingdon (1995, 5), the agenda is defined as "the list of subjects or problems to which governmental officials, and people outside of government closely associated with those officials, are paying some serious attention at any given time." Agenda setting is a process in which certain public problems are identified, recognized, and defined, and specific solutions or alternatives are generated, considered, and attached to these problems. Due to the limited attention span and limited information-processing capacity of government, the lists of problems and solutions are usually very short (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Jones 1994; Kingdon 1995; Jones and Baumgartner 2005).

The agenda setting and alternative selection framework articulated by Kingdon considers the pre-decision aspects of the policy process: what problems attract attention and how policy agendas are set (and by whom) and what alternative solutions are being seriously considered. By adapting and expanding the "garbage can" model of organizational decision making (Cohen, March, and Olsen 1972), Kingdon argues that there are three separate and partially independent streams—each with its own dynamics and rules—in the policy process: problems, policies/alternatives, and politics. An issue is most likely to receive serious attention and rise on decision agenda when the three streams are coupled through the efforts of policy entrepreneurs.

According to Kingdon, agenda setting is enabled through the interaction of: the problem stream, where problems rise and fall on the attention of decision makers either through systematic indicators, focusing events, or feedback; the policy options stream, where the specification of alternative solutions is advanced by hidden specialists such as academics and career bureaucrats who have the detailed knowledge of and proximity to solutions, ideas, and re-combinations of previous ideas; and, the political stream, where elections, public mood swings, interest group demands, and personnel or jurisdiction changes in an administration can all contribute to an issue rising in prominence on the agenda. The successful coupling of these stream elements is facilitated by the presence of policy entrepreneurs, those elected and appointed officials and private sector leaders, who champion the issue or a particular solution.

Kingdon's multiple-streams framework has been modified, expanded, and applied to a wide variety of scenarios, including environmental policy (Clark 2004; Simon and Alm 1995; Solecki and Shelley 1996), climate change policy (Fisher-Vanden 1997), transportation policy (Lindquist 2006), health policy (Sardell and Johnson 1998), and applied in an international and comparative perspective (Zahariadis 1992; 1995; Zahariadis and Allen 1995). At the local level, however, there have been fewer attempts to apply this framework (see, for example, Lieberman 2002). As one of the major theoretical breakthroughs in the study of public policy in recent years (Sabatier 2007), Kingdon's multiple-streams framework provides a useful lens with which to examine the complexity and dynamics of local policy making. A comprehensive application of the framework is beyond the scope of this article, therefore we focus on the following four fundamental aspects of the agenda setting and alternative selection process:
1. Important Policy Participants

Actors inside of government possess legal authority granted by statute and naturally exert great influence in shaping policy agendas (Kingdon 1995). While local government actors have the formal power to make local decisions, all local authorities operate in the context of federalism. Empirical studies show that federal and state governments can frequently shape local policy agendas through their regional offices, programs, regulations, and funding opportunities (Hula and Haring 2004; Warren, Rosentraub and Weschler 1992).

Various participants outside of government, who do not possess formal authority to make policies, can also influence agenda setting. Perhaps the most important are interests groups (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Elkin 1987; Ferman 1996; Kingdon 1995; Logan and Molotch 1987, 1996; Molotch 1976; see also Schneider and Teske 1993; Silvel, Weitman, and Brecher 2002; Stoker 1995). Various experts (academics, researchers, and consultants) are also found to be influential participants in policy processes (Kingdon 1995; Sabatier 1988; Silvel, Weitman, and Brecher 2002). Other potential participants outside of government include the general public (Jones 1983; Silvel, Weitman, and Brecher 2002), the mass media (McLeod et al. 1999; Scheufele, Shanahan, and Kim 2002), and local political parties and campaigners (Katz and Eldersveld 1961; Scholz, Twombly, and Headrick 1991).

2. Attention Attractors

Attention is a key concept in agenda setting literature. Due to policy makers’ limited information-processing capacity (including limited attention span), public issues must compete to attract policy maker’s attention (Kingdon 1995; Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Jones 1994; Jones and Baumgartner 2005).

Agenda setting work by Kingdon (1995) as well as Jones and Baumgartner (2005) identify several major system-level factors that can attract the attention of decision makers. These include (a) the intrusion of new (or previously overlooked) information into the policy agenda setting process, as new information is usually associated with changing social conditions and problem indicators (Kingdon 1995; Jones and Baumgartner 2005. See also Soroka 2002); (b) focusing events that emphasize the occurrence of natural or man-made crises or disasters (Kingdon 1995; Baumgartner and Jones 1993; see also Birkland 1997; 1998; Liu, Lindquist, and Vedlitz 2008); (c) feedback – messages and signals looped back to policy makers from existing governmental programs and new public problems (Kingdon 1995); and (d) budgetary considerations, including budgetary cycles that can enhance or inhibit a problem’s status in the agenda (Kingdon 1995).

3. Alternative Attributes

New policy ideas and alternatives are constantly presented to policy makers, but not all receive serious consideration (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Jones 1994; 2001; Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Kingdon 1995). The majority of new ideas and proposals fail to attract sufficient support and eventually drop off of the governmental agenda, but some do survive and receive further consideration for policy formulation.

According to Kingdon, three key characteristics of those alternatives that are more likely to succeed are: technical feasibility; value acceptability; and, anticipation of future constraints (Kingdon 1995). Technical feasibility is concerned about the technical aspects of a proposal—its technical specifications, logical consistencies, and practical feasibilities. Value acceptability refers to a proposal’s fitness to the mainstream value of a policy community (Kingdon 1995: 132-7). For a proposal to survive or to be accepted in alternative selection, it must be compatible with the policy community’s value system. Anticipation of future constraints is another important characteristic for an alternative’s survival. For Kingdon (137-9), a policy proposal without considering possible future constraints (such as budget constraint, public acquiescence, support or opposition of elected officials) would be less likely to be considered and selected.

In local policy processes, we think that ‘policy compatibility’ may constitute another advantageous attribute that would enhance the probability of alternative survival and selection. In the United States, local governments exercise autonomous authority and self governance within statutory and constitutional provisions. However, all local politics and policy making are operated under federalism, in which policy alternatives proposed at lower levels of government are usually required to be in accordance with a higher level's policies, regulations, and programs. New proposals and alternatives that are compatible or
consistent with state or federal policies would have a greater chance to survive in the local policy selection process.

4. Political Factors

In Kingdon’s framework, politics is another stream that is largely distinct from and independent of problem and alternative streams. Major components and events in the political stream include swings of political mood, interactions among organized political forces, personnel changes in government, battles over issue jurisdictions, stresses and crises, and consensus and coalition building (Kingdon 1995; see also Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Carr, Selin, and Schuett 2004; Innes 1996; Innes and Gruber 2005; Klosterman 1999). As noted earlier, the agenda setting framework has primarily been applied at the federal level of government and decision making, with its highly visible political components. Comparative political components and events at the local level may have different impacts on the policy process.

Research Question, Interview Method and Data Collection

Drawing primarily on Kingdon’s framework and informed by other agenda literature discussed above, this study focuses on four sets of research questions: (1) Who are the major participants on the inside and outside of the governments in local policy agenda and alternative selection processes? What is their relative importance among the major policy participants? (2) What are the most important attention-attracting factors that enhance prominent issue status in regional policy agendas? What is the relative importance of these attention attractors? (3) What are the key attributes that enhance the survival and selection of new policy ideas and alternatives? (4) What are the most critical political factors that shape agenda priorities and affect alternative selections in local policy processes?

To answer these questions, we conducted in-depth interviews with local elites from various organizations in three areas on the U.S. Gulf Coast: the Apalachicola Bay area in Florida, the Barataria-Terrebonne Watershed in Louisiana, and Galveston Bay in Texas. Respondents were primarily identified as those with potential, but not exclusive, policy influence and authority in areas of local environmental decision making. Our interest in the study was not only in environmental decision making but in how environmental issues were in balance or competition with other issues. As such our data is not limited to environmental decision and policy making, but represents a much broader range of issues. A two step snowballing technique was used to ensure that the sampling frame of local organizations was as comprehensive and representative as possible.

For each sampled organization, the senior administrator who was responsible for routinely directing and managing the organization was identified and interviewed. All interviews were conducted during the second half of 2004 and the first half of 2005 by our research team members, who had formal training in interviewing techniques and standards (see Jordan, Marcus, and Reeder 1980; Peabody et al. 1990; United States Bureau of the Census & Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research 1986). During the interviews, open-ended questions were asked to gather information from respondents. A structure of general topic interview prompts allowed interviewers to direct conversations to focus on the pressing problems facing the local communities; ideas, proposals, or solutions for solving the problems; important policy participants; and policy making dynamics.

A total of 271 interviews were completed, including 79 from Florida, 99 from Louisiana, and 97 from Texas. Interview respondents were mainly from governments, private sector firms, professional associations, academics, non-profit organizations, and other local entities. Table 1 shows the distribution of these interviewees across different organizations, representing a broad range and variety of interests in these three selected research locations.

Upon completion of all interviews, audio-recorded interview materials were transcribed by professional transcribers and entered into our final interview database. Interview transcripts were managed and coded using NVivo – a computer assisted content-analysis management software. Guided by the agenda setting perspective and our research questions on local agenda setting and alternative selection, an interview codebook was developed to guide the interview coding. With the assistance of the NVivo software, four sets of specific variables, corresponding to the four research questions, were coded:

The first set of variables are the important policy participants, including any individual and collective actors mentioned by respondents as significant sources of local agenda items and major proponents or opponents of policy proposals, ideas, alternatives or solutions. Participants inside of government were further coded into five sub-categories: federal government actor, state government actor, sub-state/local government actor (i.e., county, municipal, etc.), inter-government actor in the region, and other
government actors that cannot be identified as one of the sub-categories mentioned above. Participants outside of government were coded based on whether the respondent mentioned them as associated with: interest groups (including specialized public interest groups and lobbyists), academics/researchers/consultants, the media, election-related participants (i.e., campaigners and political parties), the general public, and other non-government participants that cannot be categorized into the aforementioned actors outside of government.7

Table 1: Distribution of Interviews by Organization Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization Type</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Number of Interviews</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ASSN</td>
<td>Associations organized around specific occupations and occupational interests</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDUH</td>
<td>Higher education institutions; university affiliated research centers and programs</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDUS</td>
<td>K-12 schools and school districts</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOVC</td>
<td>Municipal level administration, departments, and programs</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOVF</td>
<td>Federal government departments, agencies, programs, labs, and research centers</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOVP</td>
<td>Parish/county level government departments, agencies, programs, administration, and elected or appointed officials. State government departments, agencies, programs, labs, research centers, and elected legislative officials</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>13.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOVS</td>
<td></td>
<td>39</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HARV</td>
<td>Economic organizations directly dependent on extraction of natural resources</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEVE</td>
<td>Levee board members and levee district administration</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGOE</td>
<td>Non-government organizations with broadly defined environmental interests and goals</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGOS</td>
<td>Non-government organizations with narrow interest focus and specific mandate</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PORT</td>
<td>Port commission members and port administration; river authority members and administration</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRFT</td>
<td>Profit-seeking organizations with economic function other than extraction of a natural resource</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRIB</td>
<td>Affiliations and associations organized around Native American ethnic membership and culture</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OTHE</td>
<td>Other organizations</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Total             | 271                                         | 100%                |

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The second set of variables are attention attractors, including problem indicators, focusing events, feedback, and budgetary considerations. These variables were coded when respondents discussed them as factors that enhanced the likelihood of a particular public issue to draw policy elites' attention and thus promoted issue prominence in agenda setting process. Examples of problem indicators in respondents' discussion of local problems included unemployment rates, economic growth rates, crime rates, statistics on air or water quality, sea level rise, school drop-out rates, number of highway deaths, etc. Examples of focusing events mentioned by respondents included tropical storms, hurricanes, droughts, flooding, and industrial accidents. We also coded other types of focusing events such as local political scandals, major litigation or trials, protests and demonstrations, or creation of new institutions or programs. Both internal feedback from governmental officials' routine activities and external feedback from societal venues (such as public opinion polls and citizens' complaints) were coded. Budgetary consideration was coded when a respondent discussed the importance of budget, cost, or funding factors in local agenda setting, regardless of whether budgets were mentioned as a constraint or as a promoter.

The third set of variables are the key alternative attributes, including technical feasibility, value acceptability, anticipation of future constraints, and policy compatibility—four important characteristics of proposed solutions, alternatives, or new ideas that would make them more likely to survive and/or be selected in local policy process. In some cases, respondents discussed how these attributes contributed to the survival and success of a policy proposal, but more often, they gave examples of how sometimes policy ideas died in the process simply because they, when scrutinized, did not meet one or more of the four criteria. We coded these variables in both successful and failed cases when respondents discussed the importance of these attributes in the alternative selection process.

The fourth set of variables are the critical political components and forces in shaping local policy dynamics, including political mood, organized political forces, personnel changes in government, jurisdiction change, consensus and coalition building. Examples of the terms that the respondents used to describe the political mood in their interviews included "the climate in the country/region/area," "changes in public opinion," "social movement," "deregulation trend," "swing to the right," "anti-government mood," "pro-environment/pro-growth mood," and "other pressing tasks/problems." Organized political forces were recorded when respondents discussed how various political forces were mobilized and organized to block or promote certain issues on the agenda or certain proposals to be considered in the alternative selection. Examples of key personnel changes in the governments included new governor, mayor, or city council, change of agency's administrator, and change of seats in legislative committees, subcommittees, or the entire legislative body. Our coding on jurisdiction change recorded respondent's discussion on the competition and struggle for issue turfs, policy objectives, mandates or priorities and management strategies among different governmental departments, agencies and offices. In addition, we also coded whether the respondents discussed the consensus- and coalition-building in the process of local agenda setting and alternative selection. For example, consensus- and coalition-building was recorded if a respondent attributed that lack of consensus was a major barrier to problem recognition, or if a respondent mentioned that coalition-building was the key to the successful selection of a policy option.

**Interview Data Analysis**

The results from NVivo-assisted content analysis and coding yielded two types of information from the interviews: a qualitative database formed by original interview quotes and a quantitative database that distilled interviewees' responses and counted the frequency of the variables discussed above. Both types of information are utilized in the analysis to inform us of how the following four aspects of local agenda setting and alternative selection are perceived by our respondents.

1. **Important Policy Participants Inside and Outside of Local Government**

In local agenda setting and alternative selection, there are many different policy participants. Some actors and their roles were more frequently discussed among the respondents; others were only mentioned in a few interviews. Counting the frequency of how many respondents mentioned these actors, Figure 1 shows a picture of various policy participants and their relative importance in local policy processes. Note that, in Figure 1, the light columns represent the participants inside of government and the dark columns represent those outside of government.
Respondents considered four groups to be actors of first-tier importance in local policy agenda setting and alternative selection: local government, state government, federal government and interest groups (including specialized public and lobbyists). The second tier of importance included the general public, experts (including academics, researchers and consultants), and election-related participants (political parties and election campaigners). Ranking lower in importance than these first two groups were inter-governmental actors (e.g., regional councils of government) and the media.

The role of federal, state, and local governments in shaping local agendas were mentioned frequently by respondents. While it is no surprise to see that the state and local governments were perceived among the first-tier most important participants in local agenda setting and alternative selection, our data show that the role of the federal government was perceived as almost equally important as the state and local governments. In one interview, the respondent mentioned more than 20 federal agencies were involved in developing a local program. Unlike the national process, in which governments at state and local levels usually have little influence in shaping the national agenda, the local policy process is greatly influenced by all three levels of governments. Inter-governmental actors, such as regional councils of government, were mentioned by some respondents but their role was far less prominent than federal, state, and local government entities.

In Kingdon's study, interest groups were among the first-tier most influential actors in the national policy process, following federal governmental actors (i.e., the president and his appointees, and the
members of the Congress). Kingdon’s analysis also indicated that interest groups were among the most important participants outside the government. Our data show a very similar picture of the influence of various interest groups in the policy process at the local level. Their importance in the local agenda and alternative selection was discussed in 146 of the interviews (54%), and they were the most prominently mentioned participant among all non-governmental actors. Interest groups often focus on one policy area, and their influences are particularly strong in their specialized fields. For instance, business and commercial groups are often dominant in setting local development plans and policies. One interviewee had this to say about the influence of a major land developer in the one of the study areas:

The County Commissioners, they take their orders from [Company X]. They do exactly what [Company X] wants them to do, and they will not go up against the Company…. I think they must have a smorgasbord of threats and rewards to be able to get that many people in that first line of work to do their bidding.

Experts (academics, researchers, and consultants), the general public, and election-related actors were identified by Kingdon as the next most important set of players in the national policy process. Our data show a similar picture of their influence at the local level: they are prominent, but not as frequently mentioned as the first-tier group (see Figure 1). However, while Kingdon’s study found that, at the national level, experts (academics, researchers and consultants) follow specialized interest groups as the next most important non-governmental player; our data show that, at the local level, the general public was perceived as being more influential than experts. This is to be expected considering that local citizens have more direct and frequent access to local decision makers.

The mass media were found to have far less power in agenda setting – a finding very similar to Kingdon’s (1995, 57-58). As shown in Figure 1, among 271 interviews, only 10 respondents mentioned the media as an important participant in the local policy process.

2. Attention Attractors in Local Agenda Setting

Attention is a crucial yet scarce commodity in politics and policy making, and gaining attention is a prerequisite for public issues to reach policy agendas. The frequency of mentions of problem indicators, focusing events, feedback, and budgetary considerations were obtained from the interview data in order to track their attention-attracting powers in local agenda setting. Figure 2 illustrates the relative strength of each attention factor in our study.

As shown in Figure 2, budgetary concerns are the most critical factor in shaping the local policy agenda and shifting policy priorities. Among 271 respondents, 124 (46%) mentioned the importance of budgetary considerations. One respondent stated that "the budget realities…dictate the (local) priorities." While many interviewees discussed how local and state budget allocations affect agenda setting and policy formation, interviewees also commented frequently on the increasing importance of federal funding for large-scale local projects. As one respondent put it:

As far as solutions to [coastal erosion] …we have to depend a lot on the federal government for money, and I think that the more money [that] is allocated through either current legislation or future legislation can help, you know, stop the process of coast erosion. … but it's local and you have budget and the priority and sometimes you know these projects don't get funded because they have other priorities in federal budget that need more attention and that's unfortunate, but sometime that's the case.

Various forms of feedback (internal feedback from the existing governmental programs and external feedback from societal sectors) are the next most powerful factor in attracting policy attention to issues. In Figure 2, among all the 271 cases, 113 interviewees (42%) discussed the influence of feedback in the local agenda setting process. One respondent particularly stressed the importance of the feedback from the general public: "Whenever we have a new project come up, we always have public meetings to get the public involved from the get go, and we listen and we have to take it serious." This makes sense because at the local level, both individual and collective policy makers closely interact with ongoing public programs, their constituencies, and various sectors in the local communities, and feedback generated from implementing agencies, local citizens, and organizations is constantly looped back to local government. Compared to national level policy makers, the cost for a local policy maker to ignore feedback is much greater due to their frequent interaction with their constituencies.
Problem indicators and indicator changes are also important in attracting local attention. As shown in Figure 2, approximately one-fifth of the interviewees mentioned that quantitative measures of the severity of local public problems drew policy makers’ attention to these problems. For instance, empirical measures of the changes in air quality and water quality were cited as important, as were ozone levels. Focusing events were mentioned less often in the interviews as attention-attractors: only 23 respondents (8.5%) stated that events attracted attention to a problem or caused shifts in local governmental priorities.

Figure 2. Attention Attractors and Budgetary Considerations in Agenda Setting

- Indicators: 140
- Focusing Events: 124
- Feedback: 113
- Budgetary Considerations: 23

3. Key Attributes for Alternative’s Survival and Selection

As discussed earlier, technical feasibility, value acceptability, anticipation of future constraints, and policy compatibility are important attributes that contribute to a policy proposal’s survival and success in the local policy process. The frequencies of the four characteristics associated with new ideas and proposals are presented in Figure 3.

While it is expected that “policy compatibility” would play a role in affecting a policy alternative’s survival and selection, it is surprising to see that “policy compatibility” is the most frequently discussed attribute in local alternative consideration. 104 respondents (38%) discussed the necessity of a proposed solution being compatible with policies from higher levels of government. For these interviewees, a new proposal that is, or seems to be, compatible with higher level policies, programs, or initiatives is more likely to gain support and receive serious consideration. One respondent illustrated the importance of policy compatibility in discussing a sewerage and water management proposal: on one hand, the proposal had to address life and property issues associated with storm drainage, while also complying with federal and state water quality requirements. Although “it is a very difficult balancing act for the city to be consistent on both ends of this,” the respondent said, in the end, the proposal must “meet federal and state requirements on water quality.” Most respondents also believed that policy compatibility considerations positively affected local policy directions.

The second most frequently mentioned attribute in our interviews, which is necessary for a policy alternative’s survival and selection, is “value acceptability.” As shown in Figure 3, approximately one-third of the respondents discussed how various values – such as political ideology, equity and fairness, social justice, efficiency and effectiveness – affect the policy process. New ideas that are consistent with the values of policy makers tend to have a better chance to survive the process, while proposals that do not
conform to the dominant political ideology in a policy community – or do not seem “efficient” or “fair” for some constituencies – are less likely to be considered for adoption. For example, a proposal that helps a greater number of the people would be given more consideration than one which benefits a smaller group. As one respondent said:

Sometimes you just have to make the decision on which solution would help the majority of the people. One solution might help this group, one solution might help this group, but which solution is gonna benefit the majority of the people and that is who we work for, the majority of the people. It may not benefit both groups, but what would benefit the vast majority.

Fairness, equitable sharing of costs and benefits, effectiveness, and efficiency were also important attributes for a policy alternative’s survival and selection. Some respondents stressed the need to “be fair to everybody,” to share the cost burden equitably, and to focus on efficiency and effectiveness in decision making.

For some respondents, “technical feasibility” and “anticipation of future constraints” were also cited as important attributes for a proposal’s survival and success. Policy proposals to land loss in coastal Louisiana often spurred rigorous debate about the technical feasibility of certain policies that encompassed both physical and engineering sciences. As one interviewee noted:

When you do something like [reroute the Mississippi River], there’s so many other consequences. You have -- if you start putting significant amounts of water down that area, then the river will not have the flow it has. You'll have dredging problems; maybe have the Port of New Orleans or a little more saltwater in the water.

4. Critical Factors in the Politics Stream

Various important political factors were discussed in the interviews, but the overall importance of this set of political items was lower than those sets of variables on participants, attention attractors, and proposal attributes. Figure 4 presents the results on the five components in the politics stream as perceived by the respondents.
In Kingdon's original work, the combination of political mood and personnel turnover in government has the greatest effect on the national policy agenda. While Kingdon's observations may be true at the national level, our data from these local interviews indicate that local politics exhibits unique and differing dynamics from national politics.

While public mood, organized political forces, key personnel changes in government, and struggles and competitions for issue jurisdiction are all important political factors discussed by some respondents, the most frequently mentioned political factor, and perhaps the most powerful one in local policy process, was "consensus and coalition building." As shown in Figure 4, far more respondents cited "consensus and coalition building" as impacting local agendas than other political factors.

Consensus building is a process to mobilize similar interests and settle conflicts that involve multiple parties. In many cases, local decision making involves the full range of stakeholders. One respondent reported:

We brought in probably forty people when we first started this process. All the interest groups, all the agencies, the local government, and anybody else who was involved in coastal issues. Brought them all in the room. Years back, when we first got started, and [we] said, 'this is what we want to do; let's make this a living document.' We don't want to just say, 'this is what we want to do' and put it out there. We want this to be an effort that everybody has input in. We know we need to get here, we all agree that there's a problem, we have to solve it. Let's work together to solve it.

Another respondent also emphasized the importance of consensus building, "When you go to do a project, you bring everybody in and try to make a decision, not as a dictator, but as a committee, to come up with what's the best solution for everybody."

While building consensus and coalition among stakeholders was frequently emphasized in the interviews, several respondents noted that the consensus building in the political sphere was typically not based on participants' goodwill or unilateral concession; instead, it was often "governed by bargaining" (Kingdon 1995, 159). As one interviewee put it:

To bring up most legislation you have to have about 60 percent vote. In other words, you have to have 60 percent of the people say they're going to vote for it…. There's still some disagreements, but really controversial things like
something that's going to benefit one area, probably is not going to be brought up except as part of some sort of deal. I'll give you some additional seawall in Galveston if you vote for a medical school in El Paso.

The national and regional moods also play a role in agenda setting, as issues compete for agenda status. National or regional events can determine how issues are prioritized at the local level. As one respondent said, "Well now we have an Iraq problem so all the environmental concerns on the Apalachicola Forest are kind of put aside because we are in a war mood." With regard to some issues, one respondent stated that a particular local disposition or mood could characterize the policy community in an entire region: "Houston is a unique city…. And you might know this from planning, that Houston is a laissez faire city, and the decision making here is distinct from decision making in say, Seattle, or Dallas, or Atlanta, or Boston, or whatever."

The balance of organized political forces, key personnel turnovers in government, and competition of issue jurisdiction are also very important in local agenda setting and alternative specification. Observers noted that well organized political forces, with power and influence from money or from existing systems, can significantly impact local policy issues, and that the average citizen would have a difficult time competing against these influential, well financed interests, for example, home builders or land development corporations.

In one interview, the respondent suggested that the current jurisdictional structure had prevented the coastal restoration issue from being adequately addressed in the coastal region of Louisiana, in part because the state's Natural Resources Department has primary jurisdiction over the issue. "Coastal restoration is probably the number one issue in this part of the state lately." The respondent suggested that the way to change how coastal restoration and other water-related issues are treated, would be to "take coastal restoration out of natural resources" and put the issue jurisdiction "into a new department for water resources."

In our interviews, respondents pointed to the agenda consequences of government personnel turnover on two levels—large-scale administration changes that altered the broader policy landscape and small-scale changes that affected the implementation of policy solutions. For example:

Every four years you have a new governor, you have a new president. I mean things change. New people in office and whatever. One person may have started which may have been good in legislation another party gets in four years down the road or whatever, six years, it's dropped.

Although some political factors were mentioned and discussed more frequently than others, the politics stream as a whole was perceived by the respondents as a critical component in the local policy process. One respondent stated that "from my experience, most [local policy decisions] are based on politics and politics is related to who stands to gain from decisions." While favorable political circumstances can enhance issue status and facilitate the solution aligning with problems, an unfavorable political climate can inhibit action on issues and block policy discussions at the local level.

Conclusion and Discussion

Many theories and empirical studies have contributed to our understanding of local politics and policy making. In this study, we drew insights from agenda setting research and applied Kingdon's multiple-streams framework to local elites' perceptions of various elements and their relative importance in each of the problem, alternatives, and politics streams. Several new components that were not identified in Kingdon's framework but are unique to local policymaking – such as policy compatibility – were also documented and analyzed. In our conclusions we summarize the significant findings and address the two broad questions that underscore this study.

By applying specific components from within the agenda setting framework at the local level we mined results from 271 interviews with local stakeholders in three locations along the U.S. Gulf Coast. Our findings are as follows:

1. We found that governmental actors and interest groups were the first-tier, most important agenda setters in local policy processes.

2. The general public, experts (academics, researchers, analysts, consultants) and election-related actors were perceived as players of next-tier importance, while the mass media were to have little power to the agenda in the local process.
3. Budgetary considerations were the most frequently mentioned factor in shaping local priorities. Of the three other attention attractors – problem indicators, focusing events, and feedback – mentioned in the interviews, feedback, both internal and external to policy making bodies, was the second most effective mechanism to attract attention to an issue.

4. In contrast to the three attributes (i.e., technical feasibility, value acceptability, and anticipation of future constraints) cited as important by Kingdon, we found that policy compatibility, one not mentioned by Kingdon, was the most discussed attribute that contributes to an alternative's survival and selection in the local policy processes.

5. Our findings show that local media exert far less power than expected.

6. The local policy process appears to be most influenced by consensus- and coalition building, unlike the national policy process, which is largely influenced by shifting public moods and opinion as well as changes in electoral leadership (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Kingdon 1995).

The findings presented here only scratch the surface of this issue, however. Several questions remain largely unanswered at the local policy making level and require further examination. In particular, how is consensus typically obtained and how are coalitions built at the local level? Are consensus and coalition usually achieved through bargaining and trading (as Kingdon suggested) or through other mechanisms? How does consensus- and coalition-building specifically promote or inhibit issue status and solution selection in local governments?

In regard to our second broad question on the fit of the agenda setting framework at the local level, our findings on attention-attractors and key alternative attributes demonstrate the potential of the agenda setting perspective as a unique resource for local policy research. Unlike other approaches to the study of local policy, agenda setting research highlights the fact that local governments, like any other organization, are constrained by their limited attention span and limited information-processing ability. While many public issues must compete to attract policy makers' attention and many new ideas and policy alternatives must contest each other for support, only a limited number of policy items are seriously examined and considered. As shown in our study, the agenda setting perspective, with some modifications, provides a useful and unique lens for understanding which factors facilitate attention attraction and which attributes enhance a policy alternative's survival and selection.

Although we attempted to extend Kingdon's framework to the local level and reported findings from interviews with local stakeholders, we understand that the agenda dynamics and processes at the local level are far more complex than presented here. It should be noted there are some limitations and caveats in this study. First, our sampling method was not systematically random; rather, we primarily relied on a snowballing technique, which could lead to a skewed sampling frame that gave more weight to the 'seed' respondents. Thus the analysis presented here may be more reflective of the perceptions of certain type of stakeholders than that of the local policy elites of all types. Second, although the respondents brought up a wide range of local problems and issues, and our coding was based on their discussions of these issues, a significant number of the local problems and policy alternatives discussed in the interviews were environmental and resource management issues. Therefore, our findings here may represent more of the policy dynamics in these issue domains than in other issue fields. Third, in this study, the three streams – problems, alternatives, and politics – were treated conceptually as if they were distinct and independent. We did not capture the interactive impact of the three streams, nor did we address the moments of "policy windows" when the three streams are coupled in local policy processes, an important concept in Kingdon's model. Although the interactive dynamics between these three streams and local policy windows are beyond the scope of this study, it should be noted that in our interviews respondents frequently discussed the connections between problems, alternatives, and politics, and described many other aspects of the local policy process (e.g., policy implementation). This underscores not only the complexity of local policymaking but also the methodological complexities of applying all aspects of the agenda setting framework in one study. Detailed studies on dynamic interactions among the three streams, local policy windows and policy changes, and other aspects of local policy processes are obviously called for in future research. This study does, however, confirm the general and continued utility of this framework as an organizing and explanatory device with which to assess the public policy process.
Notes

1. These interviews were part of a larger Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) research project, entitled "Use of Science in Gulf of Mexico Decision Making Involving Climate Change." Our interviews covered a variety of topics and involved multiple stages. The data used in this paper were drawn from the interviews with local elites regarding their perceptions of agenda setting and policy making in their local area. These three locations were chosen for several reasons: (a) they fairly represent eastern, central, and western portions of the Gulf of Mexico, respectively; (b) our team members are familiar with these areas and their environmental, ecological, social, economic and political characteristics; and (c) these areas are conveniently located within a one-day-driving distance that makes face-to-face interview possible.

2. First, an initial list of potential representative organizations was compiled in each research area using various sources, including government documents, internet websites, media sources, and referrals by other organizations. Local organizations with a potential stake in climate change were entered into the list. To ensure a broad and diverse representation within the local decision-making networks and stakeholder communities, researchers initially searched and selected potential respondent organizations from the following categories: government agencies, elected government officials, businesses, non-profit organizations, and academics. Second, upon completion of each initial interview, respondent was asked to refer additional important local stakeholders and their affiliated organizations that we should interview. The referrals from these initial interviews were added to the sampling list and repeats of initial entries were eliminated. The remaining interviews were randomly drawn from the expanded sampling list. Although there was no assurance that the sampling frame lists were exhaustive, this kind of snowballing selection of respondents was determined to be appropriate for our research purpose.

3. The team members came from four universities: Texas A&M University, the University of New Orleans, the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, and Florida A&M University. Most of the interviews were conducted face-to-face while a few were carried out via telephone. There were a few cases in which the respondent could not be reached or refused to be interviewed. In these cases replacements were randomly selected from the sampling list. Interviews were audio-recorded with respondents' consent. Most interviews lasted between 45-60 minutes; several were shorter (under half an hour) or longer (more than two hours).

4. We asked interviewees what the major public issues are in their area, how and why these issues become recognized as problems, what solutions/alternatives/proposals are there to alleviate or solve the problems, who is suggesting and promoting these solutions, why the solutions are put forward, how decision makers communicate, what disagreements or conflicts are there in local policy process. The interview questions are presented in Appendix 1.

5. Out of the 271 interviews, respondents brought up 726 public problems, covering a wide range of issue topics including environmental protection, land and water management, housing and community development, transportation, local economy, agriculture and aquaculture, health, education, crime and law enforcement, and government operation and administration.

6. An iterative process was used to train a research associate as the primary coder of the interviews, with the supervision of a senior researcher. The open-ended and free-flowing nature of the interviews made coding challenging. The codebook and coding procedures were discussed at length, and interpretations of the various coding concepts were established. Coding of the first 10 interviews was thoroughly checked for accuracy by the coding supervisor, and additional instruction was undertaken as needed. There was daily interaction between the primary coder and the coding supervisor, and problems of ambiguity were resolved as a team. This process was repeated until the primary coder’s performance was consistent with that of the coding supervisor, and the primary coder completed the coding of the remaining interviews.

7. In some interviews, respondents mentioned the importance of friends, relatives, or neighbors in advising them on particular public issues and/or solutions. This may be an important, albeit informal, type of participants, particularly in those small communities. In our coding system, coders checked if respondent mentioned further background information about their "friends," "relatives," or "neighbors." For instance, if "a friend" was mentioned as a representative of a home owners association, this friend would be coded under interest group/specialized public/lobbyist; if no specific information could
be found in the interview passages about the friend(s), then this type of participant(s) was coded under “other participant.”

8. For confidentiality reasons, all names of interviewees and organizations were replaced with interview numbers and generic names.
References


APPENDIX: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Problems
- What are the major problems in the local area?
- Prioritize them if there are multiple problems
- Describe each of them, starting with the most serious:
  - Probe for seriousness, risks, timing, causes, who is affected, who recognizes the problem
- How and Why did this become recognized as a problem
- Do other organizations have these problems as well – shared?
- How were they defined as problems:
  - Probe for role of information in defining or understanding the problem: probe for source and type of information
- Who does Respondent talk to about the problem:
  - Probe for network for information on the problem
- Who knows most about the problem?

Solutions & Decision Process
- What is/are the ideal solution(s)
- What is/are the possible solution(s)
- Who is suggesting it/them: Probe for relative influence of groups or individuals
- Who is actually making decisions about what to do:
  - Probe for why the solution was put forward
- How are decision-makers communicating
- Is there disagreement or conflict over solution(s)
- What information is being used to make these decisions:
  - Probe for type, source and trust if different from 6th bullet above and how the different types of information affect decisions
- How can information be improved to aid decision making:
  - Probe for sources, types, formats
- What are the resources available to address the problem
- What are other barriers to implementation of solutions:
  - Probe for the level at which barriers exist (local, regional, state, national), windows of opportunity, communication barriers, information barriers