

Decision-Making under Ambiguity and Time Constraints: Assessing the Multiple Streams Framework

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The conditions under which policies are made in current societies have changed substantially in recent years. First, issues have grown ever more complex. Streams of permanently changing “ill-structured” (Simon) or “wicked problems” (Rittel/Webber 1973; Verweij 2011) plague policy-makers. In addition, policies may not bring about the expected results but produce unexpected effects that require continuous readjustments and corrections. Secondly, in modern societies mostly all fundamental and commonly shared norms and values are eroding. In principle, everything is contestable and everything is open for politicization. Politics is confronted with an increase of problems and options that turn politics into a highly complicated and contested business. Thirdly, in most cases, from nuclear energy to the European debt crisis, even experts from the scientific communities vehemently disagree about feasible policy options. As a consequence, decisions-makers have to decide on problems they do not really understand and they do not know if the chosen policies will solve or adequately deal with the problems at hand. Finally, globalization challenges national governments with problems they have no real and direct access to. Global and national policy-making is a time-consuming process in which political deliberation, the hammering out of compromises and bargaining may not be able to keep up with the speed of the emerging problems. Thus, political adjustments lag behind political necessities.

Although these points are not exhaustive, one can conclude that governments act under conditions of ambiguity and complexity which we define as problematic preferences and lack of information about public means and ends. What is more, policy makers have little time to think through their decisions as the pace of economic and social change has accelerated, media reporting has become continuous and more intrusive and voting behaviour is becoming increasingly volatile. Thus, all decisions must be made under incomplete and severely contested information and under rigid time-constraints. Both ambiguity and time-constraints render rational problem-solving models of decisions-making highly unconvincing.

Conversely, Kingdon’s Multiple Streams Approach (MSA) (Kingdon 2010), developed further by Zahariadis (2003; 2007), takes ambiguity and time-constraints as a starting point of the policy process. Thus, it seems that MSA is a theoretical framework whose time has come. Moreover, recent scholarship has applied MSA to

- different policy areas: from social policy (Compston/Madsen 2001) to foreign policies (Zahariadis 2005), from forestry policy (Boscarino 2009) to emissions trading (Brunner 2008) and to British devolution (Münter 2005); and from health insurance (Blankenau 2001) to crisis management (Birkland 1997).
- different political systems: not only to presidential regimes for which the approach was developed but also to parliamentary regimes (Zahariadis 1995; 2005; Compston/Madsen 2001; Bundgaard/Vrangbaek 2007) and even to the political regime of the EU (Corbett 2005; Borrás/Radelli 2011; Ackrill/Kay 2011);
- the entire policy process and not only to agenda-setting (Zahariadis 1995; Münter 2005).

While it turns out that the MSA travels surprisingly well in these different contexts, scholarship varies substantially in theoretical and empirical quality. We will address

these issues by systematically exploring the framework's potential in different contexts, assessing its explanatory and predictive power, and charting a robust future research agenda.

Although scholarly interest and empirical applications of the framework have increased tremendously in recent years, there has not yet been a systematic attempt to bring together scholarship to tease out more fully the implications and applications of the approach. The main aim of the workshop, therefore, is to bring together a group of researchers interested in and working with the MSA. We welcome all kinds of papers applying the framework; both empirical studies (case studies, comparative research or quantitative studies) and more conceptual or theoretical work across different levels of government, issues, and organizational context. Papers should deal with at least one of the following three main topics that will be at the centre of the proposed workshop:

(a) Theoretical relevance: Are all key concepts theoretically well developed? Is the MSA a heuristic or can hypotheses be derived (and if so, which are they)? Put differently, what is the causal logic of the MSA? Is it consistent and clear? How successful is the MSA in explaining agenda-setting and policy making? Which theoretical revisions (if any) are necessary in order to apply the framework in different contexts? For example, are any theoretical adaptations needed in order to explain the policy process in policy areas that are affected by globalization or Europeanization?

(b) Empirical application: Can the framework be falsified? How can the key concepts of the approach be operationalized? For example, how can the 'national mood' be measured, how can a policy entrepreneur be identified etc.? Furthermore, can the MSA be tested quantitatively?

(c) Comparison with other theoretical frameworks: How does the MSA fare in comparison with other theoretical frameworks, like the Advocacy Coalition Framework, the Punctuated Equilibrium lens, Institutional Rational Choice, Historical Institutionalism, Partisan or Veto Player Theory, and Strategic Constructivism?

We invite scholars from all sub-disciplines of political science as well as from other social sciences, e.g., organizational theory, cognitive sciences, public administration, education, history, and political sociology. Furthermore, the most well-known scholar applying and developing Multiple Streams further, Prof. Nikolaos Zahariadis of the University of Alabama at Birmingham, has confirmed that he will participate in the workshop. Apart from Prof. Zahariadis, we wish to bring together a group of researchers applying this particular approach that is as diverse as possible with regard to origin, policy field, issue area, and methodological approach.

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