

FROM AGENDA SETTING TO POLICY ADOPTION

WHY SOME IDEAS SUCCEED
WHILE OTHERS FAIL

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INTRODUCTION

Global, national, and local policymakers alike face the same fundamental problem: A plethora of complex problems demand solutions, yet the inevitable limits of attention and resources means that only some make it onto government agendas (Kingdon 1984; Kingdon 2014; Keeler 1993; Baumgartner & Jones 1993; Zahariadis 2003; Zohlnhöfer et al. 2016; OECD 2023; UNDP 2024). But why do some make it while others do not? And why are some policies that are put on the agenda never adopted (Signé 2017a; Signé 2017b; Signé 2025)?

Policymakers face a variety of barriers to getting an issue on the agenda, whether it be limited bandwidth, too few resources, competing demands, urgent requests, political disagreements, or outside shocks. Poor agenda management comes with big consequences: critical issues go unaddressed, low-impact issues consume resources, policy windows close before viable solutions have enough evidence, and international opportunities (e.g. partnerships or finance schemes) go unutilized (Theodoulou and Kofinis, 2004, pp. 163-174). And when the government appears unfocused or unresponsive, stakeholder confidence erodes (Partnership for Public Service 2025; OECD 2024).

This report focuses on the agenda setting and policy adoption phases of the policymaking lifecycle. These phases are extremely important but distinct from the implementation and evaluation phases (Jann and Wegrich 2006): Even when an issue is placed on the agenda and a policy solution successfully adopted, significant obstacles for effective implementation can still arise, often resulting in a gap between the policy adopted and the outcomes achieved. While these gaps have been extensively studied in the policy implementation literature (Howlett 2019; Matland 1995; Sager et al. 2024; Signé 2017a, 2017b, 2025), more attention should be paid to the earlier stages of the policymaking process (Kingdon 1984; Kingdon 2014). This report examines why some issues are taken up on the agenda and why some policy options are adopted to become new public policies. Understanding these dynamics is essential for making sense of the policymaking process and for improving the likelihood that better policies are successfully adopted and ultimately implemented.

By exploring the evolution of the agenda-setting literature, this analysis provides policymakers with a practical framework for strategic agenda management, highlighting drivers of agenda setting and potential strategies to actively increase the likelihood that policies are adopted (UNDP 2024; OECD 2023). It in turn sets out four strategies available to policymakers to increase the likelihood of success in the agenda-setting and policy adoption phases of the policymaking lifecycle, dependent on the problem, policy, and political context at play. Policy adoption is successful when a policy idea, among competing alternatives during agenda setting, is selected and formally adopted as public policy.

AGENDA-SETTING AND POLICY ADOPTION LITERATURE REVIEW

I. From linear models to multiple streams

Early studies of agenda setting began as challenges to the rational, linear models of policy-making. Through seven stages (intelligence gathering, promotion, prescription, sanctions, application, appraisal, and termination), Harold Lasswell (1956, 1971) conceptualized policy processes as cyclical instead of linear, and Brewer (1974) emphasized that policymaking is an ongoing and iterative process. Cohen, March, and Olsen (1972) challenged the assumption that policymaking goes through identifiable stages and instead introduced their “garbage can” model of organizational choice. It proposes that organizations are “collections 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 an answer, and decision makers looking for work” (1972, 2). Their contribution suggested that problems, solutions, participants, and decision opportunities often exist independently and combine in unpredictable ways.

KINGDON'S MULTIPLE STREAMS FRAMEWORK

Building directly from the “garbage can” foundation, Kingdon (1984, 2014) contributed the Multiple Streams Framework (MSF) for policy adoption, which recognized three independent “streams” that flow through the political system simultaneously.

- **The problem stream** is the recognition that a situation or issue is a problem that needs to be addressed by policymakers. An issue might get recognized as a policy problem through public feedback on programs or major events that draw attention to something that the public views as a problem solvable by policymakers.
- **The policy stream** is the development of policy proposals and solutions. The strongest proposals are thoroughly thought out, technically viable, and easily implementable. Analysts and experts often identify and assess the various options to find the best policy solution.
- **The politics stream** is the political environment, including political events, elections, interest group advocacy, and public mood changes that can create opportunities for policy adoption. While a change in elected leadership is an obvious example of the politics

stream, smaller changes like a newly appointed judge or an argument between political parties could also trigger the politics stream (Wilson 2020).

Kingdon's key insight is that a policy can be adopted onto the agenda when these otherwise-independent streams converge during brief "policy windows." These windows are opened either by external means—such as a crisis or accident—or by internal means—such as the presence of "policy entrepreneurs" who operate within and across the policy and politics streams and take advantage of opportunities to get an issue on the agenda (see, e.g., Mintrom & Norman 2009; Roberts & King 1991; Guldbbrandsson & Fossum 2009; Meijerink & Huitema 2010; Oborn, Barrett & Exworthy 2011; Spohr 2016; Sætren 2016). Such policy entrepreneurs can be "visible," as in the case of interest groups, advocates, and lobbyists or "hidden" as in the case of analysts, academics, or researchers (Mhazo and Maponga 2021).

Kingdon consolidated Cohen, et. al (1972)'s participants and choice opportunities into his "politics stream" to focus on policy content rather than organizational dynamics. The MSF explains why agenda setting often appears random while still maintaining underlying patterns and includes aspects from both traditional agenda-setting debates and the strategic behavior of political actors, resolving a longstanding tension in the literature between structural and agency-based explanations.

II. Addressing MSF's limitations

THE STABILITY PROBLEM: POLICY MONOPOLIES AND PUNCTUATED CHANGE

One challenge the MSF has faced is explaining why policy areas on the agenda often remain stable over time despite the many variables that seemingly influence the agenda-setting process. Baumgartner and Jones (1993) developed the Punctuated Equilibrium Theory as another type of explanation for agenda-setting dynamics, introducing their concept of "policy monopolies:" stable conditions that control both the definition of the issue and institutional access to it, which makes policy areas remain stagnant for long periods of time. Change can occur through the breakdown of these monopolies when new actors gain access to decision-making venues. Institutional structures create both barriers and opportunities for agenda access which helps shed light on why similar problems can have vastly different agenda outcomes depending on existing policy monopolies.

When it comes to focusing events, which were formalized by Kingdon (1984, 2014) and represent events or moments where an issue gets pushed to the forefront (such as a crisis or accident), Birkland (1998) finds that they do not necessarily automatically open policy windows. The chance that they do depends on the specific context of the policy domain and pre-existing organizational capacity. The same focus event could impact the agenda differently based on where there is existing public interest in the domain, clarity of the event's causes and harms, or the presence of organized groups ready to mobilize over the issue.

THE IMPLEMENTATION GAP: FROM COMMITMENT TO ADOPTION

A second limitation of the MSF was its restricted focus on agenda setting, which left unexplained why many issues that successfully reach government agendas still fail to be adopted.

Zahariadis (1995, 2003, 2014) challenged this restriction by explaining how the same ambiguity and fluidity that characterizes agenda formation also characterizes policy adoption. This insight extends the theory by arguing that getting a policy on the agenda does not necessarily mean policy adoption will occur; stream convergence must continue through decisionmaking phases as well.

Herweg et al. (2015) built on this idea and proposed their two-phase model that distinguishes agenda coupling from decision coupling. The first coupling—the “agenda window”—which refers to the convergence of the problem and the policy streams, with the help of policy entrepreneurs, results in a policy proposal. This then goes through the second coupling—the “decision window”—where the political stream and policy entrepreneurs work to make sure the policy is adopted. It also helps address critiques that the MSF does not give adequate attention to institutional aspects. In their dual-coupling model, institutional aspects are integrated more easily. For example, in the decision window, institutional aspects like veto power, party dynamics and numbers, etc. can impact whether a policy proposal will move on to be adopted.

Øvald (2024) extends and revises this model, showing that the agenda window results in “policy commitments”—not completed proposals. This means that the second coupling process will have different actors (political entrepreneurs that focus on building coalitions) and different dynamics (bargaining within the politics stream). This refinement helps explain variations in post-agenda outcomes.

Howlett et al. (2015)’s “five-stream confluence model” tackled this challenge from a different angle, extending the MSF model to the entire policy process by adding two additional streams: the “process” and “programme” streams. The process stream captures how actors narrow from agenda setting (broad participation) through formulation and decisionmaking (restricted to formal authorities) to implementation (broadening again), and the programme stream captures existing policy instruments that constrain and enable new policy development. Its extension shows how agenda access is just the first of multiple confluence points where streams must align for policy change to occur. It mentions “sub-confluence points” and “whirlpools” (strategic re-coupling away from public view) which ultimately mean that entrepreneurial activity must continue after agenda access.

THE SOCIETAL FORCES GAP: DIGITAL AGE AND SOCIAL STREAM EXTENSIONS

A third limitation of MSF is that societal influences are not adequately represented in the model for agenda setting. Khan et al. (2025) contribute their Kingdon-Khan Model (KKM) which adds a fourth stream. This is the “social stream,” which includes media, public opinion, and social movements. Kingdon acknowledged some of these factors, but he did not treat them as systematic forces that shape agenda setting in the way that the KKM does. The social stream concept explains how contemporary digital communication has transformed tradition-

al dynamics. According to the authors, it operates through seven interactive elements: “amplification effects that rapidly escalate issue salience, attention cycles that can now bypass traditional gatekeepers, framing contests conducted across multiple platforms simultaneously, diverse actor networks that can quickly mobilize around issues, real-time public sentiment tracking, focusing events amplified through social media, and transnational dynamics that spread agenda items across borders” (Khan et al. 2025). The social stream does not operate independently (unlike the other three). It continuously shapes the other three, meaning that problem definition now occurs through both vertical (elite-driven) and horizontal (public-driven) processes, policy communities can be rapidly expanded through digital organizing, and political calculations must account for viral attention patterns that can emerge unpredictably.

AI and digital age adaptations

New dynamics are impacting the agenda-setting literature when it comes to the ever-evolving deployment of digital and advanced technologies. Social media, for example, has transformed agenda setting by democratizing problem identification and amplification (An and Yu 2024). It accelerates attention cycles but shortens attention spans, creating new venues for coalition building and opposition mobilization and enabling rapid misinformation to spread that distorts problem definitions (Sanchez and Middlemass 2022). Shaw et al. (2016)’s research discusses how audiences actively “meld” traditional and social media agendas into personalized information chambers which deviate greatly between generations. This new reality alters Kingdon’s three streams (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia et al. 2016). The problem stream operates through both vertical media (traditional, broad reaching) and horizontal media (social, targeted), requiring policymakers to coordinate consistent problem definitions in these different environments. The policy stream faces new ways through which technical solutions can gain traction, like through social media communities, before achieving traditional expert consensus. Lastly, the politics stream becomes more complex as political momentum can build through horizontal organizing while potentially bypassing traditional gatekeepers.

Other scholars have introduced a “technology stream” (Elzen et al., 2011; Goyal & Howlett, 2020; Goyal et al., 2021; Haakman et al., 2020; Kulmer et al., 2022) focused on innovation-centric activities like R&D, market creation, and technology transfer which are driven by diverse technology constituencies (technology developers, manufacturers, suppliers, service providers, users, lobby groups, political actors, and academics (Goyal & Howlett, 2018)). In the innovation-centric model, stakeholders are typically united by a collective motivation to promote innovation, and their activities tend to remain contained within the technology stream itself (Goyal & Howlett, 2018).

In contrast, Khanal et al. (2025) discuss how Big Tech companies have evolved into “super policy entrepreneurs” who impact all MSF streams. According to the authors, Big Tech companies can act as problem brokers (by highlighting certain issues (e.g. GenAI regulation) over others (e.g. ethics of AI)), as policy entrepreneurs (by positioning tech platforms as essential solutions to policy challenges), and as political entrepreneurs (by mobilizing resources through lobbying and research funding). Big Tech actors’ control over digital infrastructure increasingly synchronizes all streams instead of waiting for policy windows to couple them, and their focus is more on corporate interests than innovation.

Recent empirical research on AI policy agenda setting reveals the complexity of public influence in digital-age policymaking. Schiff (2024) examines whether public attention to AI on social media shapes congressional agendas, finding that while the public does lead policymaker attention to AI generally (contradicting and elaborating on Barberá et al. (2019) who found that the public did not play a strong role in shaping agendas across domains), this influence is circumscribed by issue framing. Public attention only influences policymaker agendas when discussing AI's economic dimensions, but not when discussing its ethical implications, even despite growing policymaker attention to ethics debates overall. Digital platforms may therefore democratize general problem identification but not necessarily democratize which problem dimensions gain traction amongst policymakers. Policymakers may instead engage in selective attention to public signals that align with pre-existing priorities. The findings challenge assumptions that increased digital public participation automatically translates to meaningful agenda influence, particularly on technical or normative dimensions of emerging technologies.

Digital and advanced technologies create new tensions for agenda-setting frameworks. While they have democratized access to the agenda-setting process, they have also created new, complex barriers. Algorithms, platforms, and/or selective policymaker attention all impact which issues will gain traction and will continue to be an important concern and area of future research.

THE MEASUREMENT PROBLEM: OPERATIONALIZATION AND TESTING

A fourth criticism of the MSF is that while its flexibility accounts for the broad array of factors in the policymaking process, it can also inhibit practical applications and cross-case comparisons. This raises the question of whether the MSF is intended for testable hypotheses or whether it is meant instead as a descriptive tool.

Zahariadis (2016)'s "Four Ps" diagnostic framework (Power (who has authority to act), Perception (how actors understand the problem), Potency (perceived urgency/severity), and Proximity (direct impact on decisionmakers), helped systematically think about tools to predict agenda-setting success, serving to make the MSF more actionable rather than descriptive. It shows how issues' viability for policy adoption can be strengthened across multiple MSF streams by, for example, building coalitional power (Power), improving public perception of affected groups (Perception), demonstrating problem severity (Potency), and creating personal relevance for decisionmakers (Proximity).

Likewise, Cairney and Zahariadis (2016) helped move the MSF from a flexible metaphor to a testable framework. It proposes five concrete propositions for assessing agenda-setting probability with measurable indicators for each stream. For the problem stream, success depends on sudden changes in social indicators, credible policy feedback linking current problems to past policy failures, and focusing events. For the policy stream, success depends on demonstrated technical feasibility, value alignment with prevailing norms, and acceptable budgetary costs. And for the politics stream, probability of success increases when governing parties "own" the issue domain and proposals align with perceived national mood and face limited organized opposition. They measure policy windows by size, duration, and entrepreneurial effectiveness by persistence, access to power centers, and coalition-building skills.

III. Policy entrepreneurship in practice

Recent research has moved beyond general descriptions of entrepreneurial activity toward specific strategies and tactics that policy entrepreneurs employ to advance contested solutions.

STRATEGIC APPROACHES: TRANSCODING AND ORGANIZATIONAL TACTICS

Transcoding between technical and political requirements

Valin and Huitema (2023) introduced the concept of “transcoding” within the MSF as a way in which policy entrepreneurs bridge the policy and politics streams by adapting technical solutions to political feasibility requirements. They describe the EU’s water policy as an example of this. Experts provided technical advice within the policy stream, and they worked to make solutions politically viable in the politics stream via iterative back-and-forth between technical registers (the what) and practical political considerations (the how). Thus, the concept of transcoding helps fill a gap in explaining one way in which the coupling process can be brought about.

Arena shaping

Johannesson and Qvist (2020) draw on the original garbage can model and show how policy entrepreneurs do not necessarily wait for favorable conditions but actively work to create them by manipulating the structure of decisionmaking processes. They identify three “organizational strategies” that policy entrepreneurs use to shape pre-decision processes: 1) regulating participation to neutralize opponents, 2) specializing attention to limit scrutiny of controversial aspects, and 3) sequential attention (advancing proposals in deliberate incremental steps so that decisionmakers commit to each piece before the full scope of the change becomes politically visible) to reduce complexity and build commitment incrementally. These strategies are particularly effective in settings where organizational arrangements are temporary, policymaking processes are exceptional, or entrepreneurs are particularly influential over the process design. They offer a way for policy entrepreneurs to focus on organizing around quelling opposition rather than coalition building.

Venue shopping and coalition strategies

Baumgartner and Jones (1991) discuss “venue shopping,” a strategic tool where entrepreneurs can move issues between institutional forums (like local to federal or legislative to judicial) to find more sympathetic audiences for their problem definitions. Baumgartner and Jones (1991) and Pralle (2003) discuss how strategic movement between decisionmaking forums is shaped by policy learning (new understanding of problems), organizational needs (identity and capacity building), and experimental approaches (testing different venues). This helped refine the role of policy entrepreneurs to be one that actively seeks out new venues

rather than waiting for windows to open. This strategy combines with coalition-building approaches where entrepreneurs may choose broad coalitions for dissemination but deliberately form small, closed networks to exclude opposition when developing specific proposals.

Broader entrepreneurial research identifies various rhetorical strategies including strategic framing, symbolic manipulation, and “salami tactics” (breaking complex reforms into incremental steps). These approaches help entrepreneurs manage the ambiguity that characterizes all three streams, using strategic communication to shape how problems are understood, how solutions are evaluated, and how political feasibility is assessed.

The role of other strategic actors

Knaggård (2015, 450) introduces the idea of “problem brokers” who work in the problem stream using knowledge, values, and emotions to frame problems and use their “persistence, access to policymakers, credibility, and willingness” to reach relevant actors. The problem broker is focused on bringing attention to a matter as a public problem rather than proposing solutions, and can enable or limit how problems are defined, and therefore used, by policy entrepreneurs.

CROSS-NATIONAL APPLICATIONS AND ADAPTATIONS

The MSF’s framework application beyond the U.S. context has helped contribute new or adapted concepts to different institutional or cultural settings.

Institutional context variations

European Union studies (Ackrill and Kay, 2011) introduced “institutional ambiguity” as a key factor where unclear jurisdictional boundaries create both opportunities and constraints for venue shopping. Multi-level governance systems add complexity through both exogenous spillovers (policy entrepreneurs transferring winning coalitions between arenas) and endogenous spillovers (policy changes in one arena forcing decisions in institutionally connected domains).

Applications in parliamentary systems require modifications to the politics stream, where executive and legislative control are typically fused rather than separated. Zahariadis (1995) proposed measuring political receptivity through the ideological complexion of governing parties, while Herweg et al. (2015) emphasized the importance of issue ownership and opposition campaign potential in determining political feasibility.

Cultural and development context adaptations

Because Kingdon was developed under the U.S. context, new studies applying MSF in lower-income contexts have led to new important patterns and themes. Ridde (2009) demonstrated MSF’s utility in Burkina Faso’s policy implementation, while other studies across Africa, Asia, and Latin America have identified recurring adaptations needed for non-Western contexts.

Swarga et al. (2025) conducted a bibliometric systematic review of 98 Global South MSF

applications and found five key themes to consider. First, external donor influence can drive agenda setting, which can override domestic priorities because of funding mechanisms. Second, hierarchical governance structures and limited civic spaces require entrepreneurs to develop alternative strategies—like digital advocacy platforms, elite network cultivation, or other “innovative strategies for stream coupling.” Third, multi-level governance settings mean a need for complicated simultaneous stream alignment across local, national, and international levels, which creates opportunities for cross-level venue shopping. Fourth, sociocultural and religious norms function as powerful filters for defining problems or viable solutions. Fifth, resource constraints and institutional fragmentation mean issues might still not reach the agenda even if streams converge, meaning continuous entrepreneurial activity across roles like frontline implementers, resource mobilizers, and coalition maintainers, will be necessary.

These cross-national applications demonstrate both the flexibility and limitations of MSF and especially the need to adapt its concepts to local context. Their practicality is discussed further in the strategy section.

Successful application of MSF and its additions, especially as political contexts change, requires attention to institutional and cultural contexts, societal forces, and AI/digital-age communication dynamics.

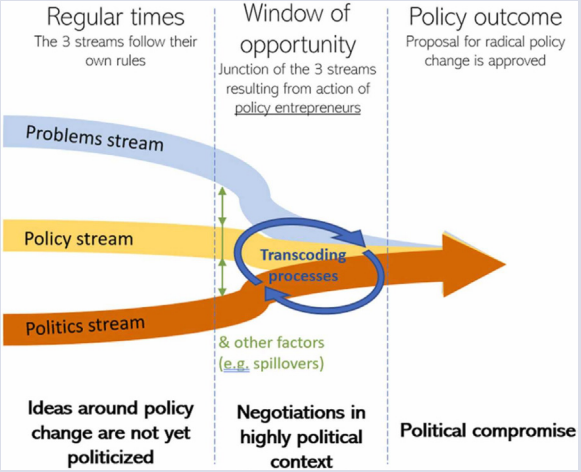
TABLE 1

Evolution of policy agenda-setting literature

Author(s)	Year	Main contribution
Harold Lasswell	1956, 1971	Seven-stage policy process model; established cyclical rather than linear policy development.
Michael D. Cohen, James G. March & Johan P. Olsen	1972	“Garbage can” model of organizational choice; independent streams of problems, solutions, participants, and choice opportunities.
Gary Brewer	1974	Simplified six-stage policy cycle (not finite or linear cycle, but ongoing); introduced “policy cycle” metaphor. Policy process included: 1) invention/initiation, 2) estimation, 3) selection, 4) implementation, 5) evaluation, and 6) termination. Extended Lasswell’s work by including things that were outside of just government.
John Kingdon	1984, 2014	Multiple Streams Framework (MSF); three streams (problem, policy, politics) converge during policy windows via the actions of policy entrepreneurs. Added to questions that previous models left out related to what drove the policy processes.
Frank Baumgartner & Bryan Jones	1991, 1993	Punctuated Equilibrium Theory: policy monopolies, policy images, and venue shopping (seeking venues for decisionmakers that are, or can be persuaded to be, sympathetic to a desired image) explain stability and

Author(s)	Year	Main contribution
		<p>change in agenda setting. Capella (2016) describes it: “The change in agenda occurs when the perception of a policy is changed, mobilising actors who were previously removed from the decision-making process. The authors use the idea of “policy monopoly” to designate a set of understandings about a specific issue that becomes dominant and from which actors gain the ability to control the interpretation of a problem and the way it is perceived and discussed. Monopolies are reinforced by institutional arrangements that keep the decision-making process limited to a small group of actors, restricting access by others. These monopolies are responsible for maintaining stability in the production of public policies and restricting new issues on the governmental agenda.”</p> <p>The interaction between policy actors through policy venues initiates sudden, unpredictable policy events that disrupt stable policy systems, giving rise to new agendas.</p>
Nikolaos Zahariadis	1995, 2003, 2014	Extended MSF to decisionmaking (collapsed agenda setting and decisionmaking into one process); Four Ps framework: Power (coalitional strength), Perception (how groups are viewed), Potency (problem severity), Proximity (personal relevance to decisionmakers).
Roger W. Cobb & Marc Howard Ross	1997	“Agenda denial” theory; systematic exclusion of issues through problem denial, discrediting, co-optation. Conflict over the agenda operates on two levels: 1) whether an issue advances from initial government acknowledgment to active consideration for a decision (not all issues that attract attention are treated as candidates for action); and 2) how competing actors define and frame the issue itself, since controlling its interpretation determines whether and how it becomes the subject of government policy.
Thomas Birkland	1998, 2004	Refined Kingdon’s “focusing events” theory; crises require organizational capacity and mobilized groups to open policy windows.
Vincent Lemieux	2002	Described how policy formulation involves coupling the policy and political streams, but implementation involves coupling the policy and problem streams. In both cases, the politics stream is present but loosely coupled.
Robert Ackrill & Adrian Kay	2011	Defined endogenous vs. exogenous spillover effects. Exogenous spillovers occur if a policy entrepreneur can transfer a winning coalition to another policy arena. Endogenous spillovers occur if a policy change can impact policy decisions in an institutionally connected policy

Author(s)	Year	Main contribution
		<p>arena, even to the point of “forcing a decision when none otherwise would be made” (Ackrill and Kay 2011: 73; Zohlnhöfer et al. 2016).</p> <p>They, along with Sarmiento-Mirwaldst (2013) highlight that ambiguity is related to both how the issue is framed and who is responsible for the policy. Entrepreneurs thus can “assert a primary jurisdiction or for interest groups to venue shop” (Cairney and Jones 2016), linking the analysis of multiple streams to studies of punctuated equilibrium.</p>
Michael Howlett, Allan McConnell & Anthony Perl	2015	Five-stream confluence model; added “process” and “programme” streams with sub-confluence points. The process stream channels the interaction of actors in a subsystem through the policy process. The configuration of this stream parallels the dimensions of an hourglass as depicted by Howlett et al. (2020), in which the range of actors influencing policymaking become increasingly narrower from agenda setting through formulation and finally to decisionmaking, in which only elected officials, or those acting under their delegated authority, approve a course of action. Participation in the process stream then broadens out again through the implementation and evaluation stages. The programme stream carries bundles of potential policy instruments and instruments that are in active use for related policies.
Åsa Knaggård	2015	Distinguished “problem brokers” (who determine problem definition) from policy entrepreneurs (who provide coupling solutions)
Nicole Herweg, Christian Huß & Reimut Zohlnhöfer	2015	Two-phase model: agenda coupling vs. decision coupling; political entrepreneurs vs. policy entrepreneurs. The agenda coupling would result in a policy proposal that would then move to the decision coupling where the streams could change/be modified/etc.
Paul Cairney & Nikolaos Zahariadis	2016	Operationalized MSF with five testable hypotheses: 1) issues become problems through sudden indicator changes, policy feedback, or focusing events, 2) policy proposals need technical feasibility, value acceptability, and budgetary acceptance, 3) political receptivity requires issue ownership, national mood alignment, and limited opposition, 4) entrepreneurs succeed through persistence, access, and coalition-building, and 5) agenda success needs skilled entrepreneurs coupling streams during open windows. Cairney and Zahariadis (2016) describe focusing events as “events that are (a) vivid and have a highly visual impact, and (b) relatively conducive to agenda setting campaigns.”

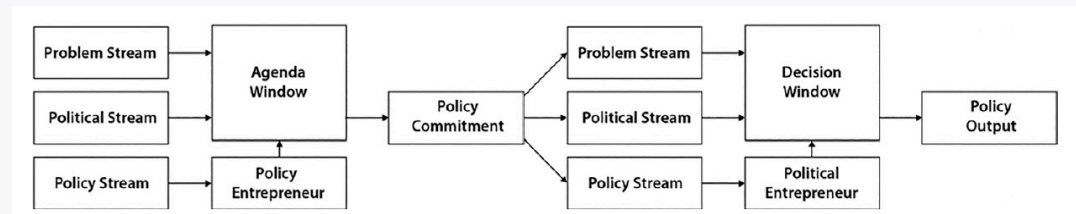
Author(s)	Year	Main contribution
Lia Johannesson and Martin Qvist	2020	Identified three “organizational strategies” that policy entrepreneurs use to shape pre-decision processes: 1) regulating participation to neutralize opponents, 2) specializing attention to limit scrutiny, and 3) using sequential attention to reduce complexity and build commitment. Their study helped understand how solutions are advanced during conflict or political stalemates and discusses the role of pre-decision processes and possibilities for deliberation.
Nina Valin & Dave Huitema	2023	<p>Introduced the concept of “transcoding”: how policy entrepreneurs bridge the policy and politics streams by adapting technical solutions to political feasibility requirements. This concept fills a gap in understanding the specific processes through which solutions find political support, showing coupling as an ongoing process rather than a discrete moment.</p> <p>FIGURE 1</p>  <p>SOURCE: Figure from (Vali & Huitema, 2023).</p>
Camilla Bakken Øvald	2024	Built off Herweg et al. (2015), Øvald described the outcome of the first coupling as a policy commitment, rather than a finished policy proposal, allowing for ambiguity and uncertainty in the framework. The commitment could become subject to changes in the second coupling (decision coupling). “In cases where the policy commitment is already fully developed, the political stream is of prime importance. However, in cases where the output of the first coupling process is a more ambiguous policy commitment, a comprehensive analysis of all three streams in the next phase becomes necessary. The impact of new participants in the decision-making process may potentially change the perception of a problem, influencing the policy stream and proposal design” This

Author(s)	Year	Main contribution
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helps explain why some issues get on the agenda but then face challenges in getting adopted. (Øvald 2024).

FIGURE 2

Revised two-frame framework (Building on Herweg et al., 2015)



SOURCE: Figure from (Øvald, 2024)

Farid Ullah Khan, Joanna Smith & Frauke Meyer	2025	Kingdon-Khan Model (KKM) added fourth “social stream” (media, public opinion, social movements—these are integrated together because of their interrelated nature). The authors define the social stream as the pattern of attention, mobilization, and sentiment around policy issues generated by media coverage, public opinion, and social movement activity that shapes perceptions of problem urgency, solution viability, and political pressure. The elements are: 1) amplification effect, 2) attention and salience, 3) framing and narrative, 4) actors and networks, 5) public sentiment, 6) focusing events and mobilization, and 7) transnational and cross-border dynamics.
Shaleen Khanal, Hougzhou Zhang, and Araz Taeihagh	2025	Khanal et al. (2025) introduce a fourth “technology stream” and distinguish between an “innovation-centric” stream and a “big-tech centrbc” stream. They describe the innovation-centric technology stream as “aimed at technological advancements and innovative solutions” and the big tech-centric technology stream as aimed at creating “[a] political, policy and sociocultural environment that is intrinsically favorable to the existence and expansion of Big Tech” and “to accelerate the diffusion of specific technologies, most recently GenAI, across diverse sectors of society.”

Author(s)	Year	Main contribution
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FIGURE 3

Summary of main features of different streams

Streams	Activities	Actors	Composition	Characteristics	
Problem	Developing conceptions of problems and goals	Epistemic community	Scientists, policy experts, NGO activists, and public agencies	Knowledge-based	
Policy	Developing policy solutions	Instrumental constituencies	Administrators, scientists, design experts, consultants, and technicians	Tool-based	
Politics	Developing identities, interests, and ideologies	Advocacy coalitions	Politicians, parties, legislators, interest groups, media	Interest/legislative/ electorally based	
Technology stream	Innovation-centric	Developing innovative means or approaches	Technology constituencies	Technology developers, lobby groups, political actors, civil society organizations, and users	Innovation-based
	Big Tech-centric	Developing favorable conditions for Big Tech to expand	Technology constituencies	Big Tech and others	Expansion-based

SOURCE: Khanal, et al. (2025)'s table which builds on Simons and Voß, (2017) and Béland & Howlett (2016).

A PRACTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR STRATEGIC AGENDA SETTING

From the complex evolution of agenda-setting theories outlined above, local and global policymakers alike can apply the theoretical insights therein to actively shape which issues get attention and move from reactive to proactive agenda management. Building on Kingdon's three streams framework (1984), successful policymakers should actively work to align problems, policies, and politics to create convergences, translating research findings into actionable guidance for strategic agenda setting. In the following section, I explore how a strategic assessment model can help policymakers develop a context-specific path to policy adoption.

Strategic assessment

Policymakers should first conduct a three-part diagnostic assessment of the issue at hand, drawing on Zahariadis (2016) and Cairney & Zahariadis (2016)'s frameworks for predicting agenda-setting success, covering stream status, contextual factors, and power dynamics.

TABLE 2

Strategic assessment framework for agenda setting viability

Stream status assessment	Context assessment	Power assessment
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Problem stream: Is there compelling evidence of the problem? Have focusing events occurred or could they be leveraged? Are credible problem brokers established who can frame the issue effectively?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Institutional structure: Are you working within a presidential or parliamentary system? Does multi-level governance require cross-level coordination? Do policy monopolies control this domain (Baumgartner & Jones 1993)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Framing effectiveness: Is there research on what type of framing resonates with audiences for your issue area (e.g. Schiff (2024)?• Digital dimensions: How are problem definitions or policy solutions being shaped by algorithms, platforms, or digital communication?

Stream status assessment	Context assessment	Power assessment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy stream: Do technically feasible solutions exist? Do they align with prevailing values and norms? Are costs acceptable to key decision-makers? • Politics stream: Is there leadership support for or potential champions of the issue? Does the proposal align with the national mood/appetite? Is organized opposition limited? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • External dependencies: Is donor influence shaping priorities? Are international framework commitments creating opportunities or constraints within the issue area? • Resource realities: What implementation capacity exists? Can continuous entrepreneurial activity be sustained post-agenda access (Swarga et al. 2025)? 	

Strategy selection: Matching approach to context

By analyzing the results of the above assessment, policymakers can consider how to begin taking action more effectively. Ideally, leveraging strength in one stream will build up the others, creating convergence and ultimately succeeding in getting a policy on the agenda and/or adopted. Below are four potential strategies based on case context.

STRATEGY ONE: PROBLEM-DRIVEN AGENDA SETTING: WHEN PROBLEMS EXIST AND ARE UNDERSTOOD AS PUBLIC PROBLEMS, BUT THEY LACK POLITICAL INTEREST OR SOLUTIONS ARE UNDERDEVELOPED

Sample theoretical case: *A mid-sized city is experiencing a documented surge in pedestrian fatalities concentrated in low-income neighborhoods with poor street lighting and minimal crosswalks. Municipal traffic data, hospital records, and community advocacy groups have built a compelling evidence base, and local journalists have covered the issue. However, the city council has other fiscal priorities, no champion has stepped forward, and no formal infrastructure proposal exists yet.*

Strengthen the problem stream: Maintaining and enhancing the already strong problem stream will be key. Policymakers should build toward focusing events early by pre-positioning organizational capacity and developing clear problem narratives so that the issue actually gains traction when crises occur (Birkland 1998). Consider using “problem brokers” that can establish that government action is needed without necessarily proposing solutions (Knagård 2015). Using both traditional media (vertical, broad reach) and social media (horizontal, targeted) to coordinate consistent problem definitions across different informational environments could be helpful (Khan et al. 2025).

Amplify the policy stream: Use problem evidence to stimulate solution development, as a strong problem narrative creates demand for solutions in the policy stream. Connect problem evidence to existing government planning processes, ongoing donor discussions, and technical working groups, commission studies that explore policy options, and elevate pilot projects that address the problem.

Amplify the politics stream: Connect problems to upcoming electoral themes and existing priorities or use donor terminology where relevant in order to frame problems strategically to raise political interest. In hierarchical governance systems, cultivate elite networks who can elevate the problem alongside grassroots mobilization.

Planning for the next phase: Recognize that strong problem recognition creates agenda commitments—not necessarily policy adoption (Øvald 2024). Plan for a transition to focusing on political entrepreneurs who can build coalitions for decision coupling.

STRATEGY TWO: SOLUTION-DRIVEN AGENDA SETTING: WHEN TECHNICAL SOLUTIONS EXIST, BUT PROBLEM AWARENESS AND POLITICAL SUPPORT ARE LOW

***Sample theoretical case:** A national coalition of public health researchers has developed a low-cost and scalable school-based mental health screening tool that has been validated in three pilot districts. Implementation data shows early identification reduces dropout and improves outcomes. However, mental health stigma keeps the problem from being publicly acknowledged as a government responsibility and there is no political patron championing it.*

Strengthen the policy stream: Demonstrate solution effectiveness and build technical consensus. “Transcoding” between technical solutions (what works) and political considerations (what’s acceptable) could be helpful to connect with the politics stream (Valin and Huitema 2023). Technical solutions can now gain traction through social media expert networks before achieving traditional consensus, creating new entry points to the policy stream.

Amplify problem recognition: Use solution demonstrations to make problems visible. Pilot results reveal issues the solution addresses, making invisible problems tangible. Connect technical capabilities to emerging service delivery discussions. Frame the problem in ways that highlight the solution’s relevance. The availability of solutions can help define what problems are worth addressing.

Amplify political support: Align solutions and with existing political opportunities like modernization agendas and budget cycle opportunities. Frame solutions based on political leaders’ priorities/ideologies/rhetoric/etc. to identify potential champions and sources of feedback. In multi-level governance contexts, identify where policy windows are open (international vs. domestic) and strategically move between levels.

STRATEGY THREE: LEADERSHIP-DRIVEN AGENDA SETTING: WHEN POLITICAL MOMENTUM EXISTS, BUT PROBLEM AWARENESS AND SOLUTION DEVELOPMENT ARE LOW

Sample theoretical case: A newly elected governor, having campaigned on economic modernization, signals strong interest in digital infrastructure investment in rural areas. Broadband access is politically popular and fits the administration's rhetoric, but rigorous data on which communities lack access and what solutions are cost-effective is minimal and the technical policy community is fragmented.

Strengthen political commitment: To strengthen political commitment, move issues between institutional forums (local to federal, legislative to judicial) to find sympathetic audiences (Baumgartner & Jones 1991; Pralle 2003). Actively design favorable conditions by regulating participation to neutralize opponents, specializing attention to limit scrutiny of controversial aspects, and using sequential attention to reduce complexity and build commitment incrementally (Johannesson & Qvist 2020).

Amplify problem visibility: Use political platforms to elevate problem awareness. Commission high-profile studies that build on existing data. Create ceremonial moments that highlight the issue publicly. Amplify voices of affected communities. The political attention creates space for problem definition creation that might otherwise be ignored.

Amplify policy development: Fast-track technical work to match political timelines. Elevate ongoing pilot projects and convene fragmented expert networks. Use political pressure to accelerate solution development in technical communities. The political window creates urgency that can mobilize policy communities.

Consider framing effectiveness: Pay careful attention to which frames resonate with which audiences (using available research).

STRATEGY FOUR: COMPREHENSIVE AGENDA SETTING: FOR COMPLEX CHALLENGES REQUIRING SIMULTANEOUS DEVELOPMENT ACROSS ALL THREE STREAMS, WHETHER VIA ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT OR STAKEHOLDER ALIGNMENT.

Sample theoretical case: A country is attempting to reform a fragmented, multi-payer national health insurance system. The problem is broadly recognized but contested in its framing (is it an equity issue? A fiscal sustainability issue? A competitiveness issue?). Multiple competing technical proposals exist, but none has achieved consensus, and political support is diffuse, with no single champion and strong opposition from insurer and provider lobbies. Success requires building all three streams simultaneously over several years.

For comprehensive, integrated agenda setting, actors should: 1) map current status and gaps across all three streams; 2) invest simultaneously in evidence, solutions, and coalition building; 3) time the convergence of streams around optimal political moments; and 4) monitor stream development and adjust strategies as conditions change. The key will be adaptive management and strategic foresight.

Recent research shows that agenda access does not automatically equal policy adoption (Herweg et al. 2015; Øvald 2024), requiring dual-phase strategic planning. Policymakers should map both agenda coupling requirements (getting commitment) and decision coupling

requirements (securing adoption), recognizing that different entrepreneurs are needed at each phase (such as problem brokers and political coalition builders). Policy entrepreneurs might need to be able to operate effectively in both domains (policy and politics), explaining why successful entrepreneurship often involves teams rather than individual actors.

Stream convergence should be timed strategically around optimal political moments including elections, budget cycles, and crisis patterns. Continuous monitoring and adaptation allow strategies to evolve as conditions change. However, in resource-constrained contexts especially, successful stream convergence does not guarantee implementation (Swarga et al. 2025), requiring plans for continuous entrepreneurial activity incorporating frontline implementers, resource mobilizers, and coalition maintainers who can sustain momentum beyond initial agenda access.

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES AND ADAPTATIONS

Several contemporary challenges require modifications to traditional agenda-setting approaches.

Digital age and advanced technology dynamics: Social media and digital platforms have democratized problem identification but not necessarily problem definition creation. (Khan et al. 2025) and Schiff (2024) demonstrate that new gatekeepers including Big Tech platforms, algorithmic curation, and selective policymaker attention now shape which voices and issue framings gain traction. Strategic adaptations to the framework in this context include developing multi-channel communication consistency, building rapid misinformation response capacity, and using digital tools for sustained attention.

Multi-level governance and fragile contexts: Modern policymakers often navigate complex institutional environments requiring stream alignment across governance levels. Policy windows could open in international forums while remaining closed domestically, which creates opportunities for cross-level venue shopping. Additionally, resource-constrained or donor-dependent contexts could require a modification of approaches such as an alignment in timing with donor funding cycles, the cultivation of elite networks in hierarchical systems, the use of digital advocacy platforms where civic space is limited, and the planning for continuous entrepreneurial activity. Agenda setting in fragile settings that typically have limited state capacity, security constraints, external dependence, and legitimacy deficits requires modified approaches (Signé 2019). Policies that build state legitimacy should be prioritized, international partnerships should be invested heavily in, tangible citizen improvements should be focused on, and coalitions, including with non-state actors, should be built.

STRATEGIES IN PRACTICE: ILLUSTRATIVE APPLICATIONS

The strategic logic of the MSF (leveraging strength in one stream to build the others) is demonstrated by two real-world cases that reflect the framework in action.

First, Mexico's decade-long effort to reform its national tobacco control law offers an example of when a shift in the political stream created a window of opportunity that advocates had previously spent years preparing for and were able to then seize.

As Crosbie et al. (2024) describes, between 2008 to 2020, over 100 initiatives and amendments to strengthen the General Law for Tobacco Control (LGCT) failed to be adopted. The stream status assessment can help identify the gap in this case: Despite having policy options (policy) and a clearly identified problem (problem), a lack of political will and close ties between the government and tobacco industry (politics) meant that convergence was not possible. This complex issue lends itself to strategy four, and the context assessment helps identify why and how convergence was stymied. The institutional structure made up of legislative committees acting as gatekeepers, fixed recess periods, and a powerful executive agenda made the political stream the decisive and convergence-limiting variable.

The power assessment also played a role in the eventual success. Advocates deliberately tested which frames resonated with which audiences over time and shifted from health-focused arguments to legal, economic, and youth-protection framings instead as they learned what was meaningful to different policymakers, explicitly tailoring their problem stream messaging to the incoming president's political rhetoric. When the political stream seemed unfeasible to converge, advocates continued to strengthen their policy and problem streams by documenting Mexico's growing lag behind their Latin American peers through nationally representative surveys (problem) and testing the feasibility of solutions such as 100% smoke-free environments and advertising bans (policy), to build evidence. When the political stream shifted with an election of a new president with a legislative majority in 2018, advocates could couple all three streams and the LGCT amendment was successfully adopted in 2022.

Second, the evolution of universal antiretroviral therapy (ART) policy as a response to HIV/AIDS in Malawi illustrates how a locally derived technical solution drove global policy change even when political conditions were initially unfavorable, as analyzed by Kumwenda et al. (2020). This case's evolution represents a strong example of strategy two for getting a policy

on the agenda and adopted in a donor-dependent context.

The stream status assessment reveals that the policy stream was leading. Malawi's Ministry of Health developed Option B+ in 2011 as a pragmatic, simplified ART protocol designed around the specific constraints of its own health system—from limited laboratory capacity to staff shortages and high client volumes—rather than waiting for WHO guidance (Chersich et al. 2018). This was thus a locally owned solution that was moving ahead of international political consensus, which at the time had not endorsed the approach. The problem stream, however, was present but contested. Conditions like weak health system infrastructure and sub-optimal care retention were clearly documented. Yet donors and civil society organizations disputed the problem's framing by raising concerns about things like human rights, coercion, and the sustainability of lifelong treatment for clinically healthy women. Meanwhile, the politics stream was the binding constraint. Malawi faced resistance from the Global Fund and other donors due to cost and sustainability (Kalua et al. 2017), and the country's growing donor dependency meant that even though the country was technically ready for universal ART as early as 2014, its decisionmaking autonomy was constrained. Political alignment was not achieved until the 2015–2016 WHO universal ART recommendation provided the necessary external legitimacy.

The context and power assessments help explain both the constraint and the eventual breakthrough. The institutional structure was one of high donor dependency; the combined PEPFAR and Global Fund contributions to Malawi's HIV program exceeded the country's entire HIV budget, which created a skewed power dynamic in which donors could bypass normal policy processes and go directly to ministers (Kumwenda et al. 2020). Strategy two's core recommendation of using solution demonstrations to make the problem visible and building technical consensus while waiting for political conditions to align was precisely what Malawian advocates did. The Option B+ pilots generated evidence that made the problem tangible and simplified implementation enough to shift tasks to auxiliary staff, while creating the policy infrastructure that made universal ART a natural progression. Critically, when the political stream shifted in line with the WHO recommendation, the coupling of the streams was rapid because the policy and problem streams had already been developed.

This case also shows the power assessment dimension of the practical framework. Advocates deliberately worked within technical working groups to broaden stakeholder representation, building a coalition that included civil society, academia, and government which softened initial civil society opposition and created internal legitimacy for the solution before political approval was secured externally. As Kumwenda et al. (2020) note, the greater degree of local autonomy in the early period was precisely what drove the innovation that ultimately changed global HIV policy. The power assessment matters, as the same donor relationships that eventually enabled adoption also threatened the quality of implementation.

These cases illustrate how stream convergence can be facilitated through different pathways and contexts. In both cases, the conditions for convergence were constructed instead of passively awaiting change. Policymakers who consider the three assessments (stream status, context, and power) will be better positioned to match their approach to what is actually achievable in their specific institutional and political environment, moving the MSF theory toward practice.

CONCLUSION

This review has traced the background and evolution of policy agenda-setting theory from early linear models through Kingdon's Multiple Streams Framework to contemporary extensions that address the gaps in the MSF related to stability, implementation, measurement, and societal forces. It also discussed recent research about the various roles, strategies, and tactics that policy entrepreneurs take on to actively converge streams and take advantage of windows of opportunity.

Several key themes emerge from this literature. First, agenda-setting is fundamentally characterized by ambiguity and entrepreneurship. The problems, policies, and politics streams operate independently while policy entrepreneurs actively work to couple the streams and open a brief window of opportunity to get a policy on the agenda. Second, getting a policy on the agenda does not guarantee policy adoption. Moving from the agenda to adoption can require different strategies and actors between the agenda-setting phase as compared to the decisionmaking phase. Third, contextual factors matter profoundly for predicting agenda and adoption success. The types of governance or resource structures as well as culture and norms interact across all streams with different mechanisms through which streams might couple or converge, requiring modifications to strategies. Fourth, digital and advanced technologies have transformed agenda-setting dynamics, from social media's impact on problem and policy identification to AI's algorithms and platform curation systems' impact on all three streams, shaping how and when streams converge.

To bridge the gap between the theoretical and the practical applications, this review has proposed a strategic assessment framework that translates decades of agenda-setting research into actionable guidance for policymakers. It provides diagnostic tools to assess stream status, contextual factors, and power dynamics, and proposes tailored strategies for leveraging strength in one stream to build up others. It integrates insights from problem brokers, transcoding, organizational strategies, venue shopping, and two-phase coupling models, to provide policymakers with concrete tools to actively shape which issues reach government agendas.

Despite the advances discussed, significant gaps remain in the literature, opening opportunities for promising future research. Empirical or applied research on the role of sociocultural norms and values (Swarga, et al. 2025) and societal factors like media, public opinion, and social movements' (Khan et al. 2025) effect on stream alignment will be critical to better understand what tools or strategies would be more effective for policymakers across different contexts. More research should explore how and to what extent advanced technologies impact each of the three streams and their unique alignment dynamics and mechanisms as well as the overall fitness of the traditional framework in a digital context (Khanal et al. 2025).

Additionally, even when an issue is placed on the policy agenda and a policy solution is successfully adopted, it does not necessarily mean that the policy will be effectively implemented or adequately evaluated. While a substantial body of scholarship examines the policy

implementation phase (Howlett 2019; Sager et al. 2024; Signé 2017a, 2017b, 2025), further research is needed to better connect the agenda-setting and policy adoption literature with those on implementation and evaluation, especially given the speed at which AI and emerging technologies are altering all phases simultaneously.

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