

## Politics of Policymaking: Agenda setting

Politics of Policymaking is a Year 2 course unit in Politics at The University of Manchester. For this course unit, ESSTED collaborated with Professor Francesca Gains, the unit convenor, to develop a linked lecture and tutorial on the theme of agenda setting.

### Theories of agenda setting

The lecture and tutorial focus on theories that seek to explain how issues get government attention and reach institutional agendas for action, with discussion of

- the link between public opinion and government action
- the opening of 'windows of opportunity' for policy proposals to get attention (John Kingdon, 1995)
- expectation that Government policy agendas change when there is a punctuated equilibrium (Baumgartner and Jones, 2009)



### UK Policy Agendas Project

Adding to the discussion of theory, both the lecture and tutorial consider how theories of agenda setting might be tested with reference to the UK Policy Agendas Project (<http://www.policyagendas.org.uk/>).

First, the lecture highlights an example in work by Claire Annesley and Francesca Gains on gender equality issues in the UK (Annesley and Gains, 2010; 2013).

Then, the tutorial gets students discussing theory in relation to evidence. Students are provided with a graph, showing public concern for the environment and environmental policy mentions in the 'UK Speech from the Throne' between 1960 and 2010. Students prepare for the tutorial by spending time reflecting on both the graph and key reading, Downs (1972), noting their ideas within a learning log. In the tutorial, students work together to interpret the data and evaluate how it relates to theories of democratic responsiveness.

#### Course Aims and Objectives

This course will aim to provide students with conceptual and empirical insights into the development and implementation of public policies. On completion students should possess an understanding of models of policy making and implementation and be able to apply this understanding to contemporary policy examples. Case studies will be examined and will include examples from current policy agendas.

#### Learning outcomes

On completion of the course unit, students should be able to

- Demonstrate a critical awareness of the role of concepts and theories applicable to the study of public policy making;
- Apply relevant concepts and theories to substantive case material drawn from the field of public policy.
- Use electronic resources to identify relevant empirical material, summarise key ideas and concepts both in writing and verbally, and work in small groups

### Using evidence to evaluate theory

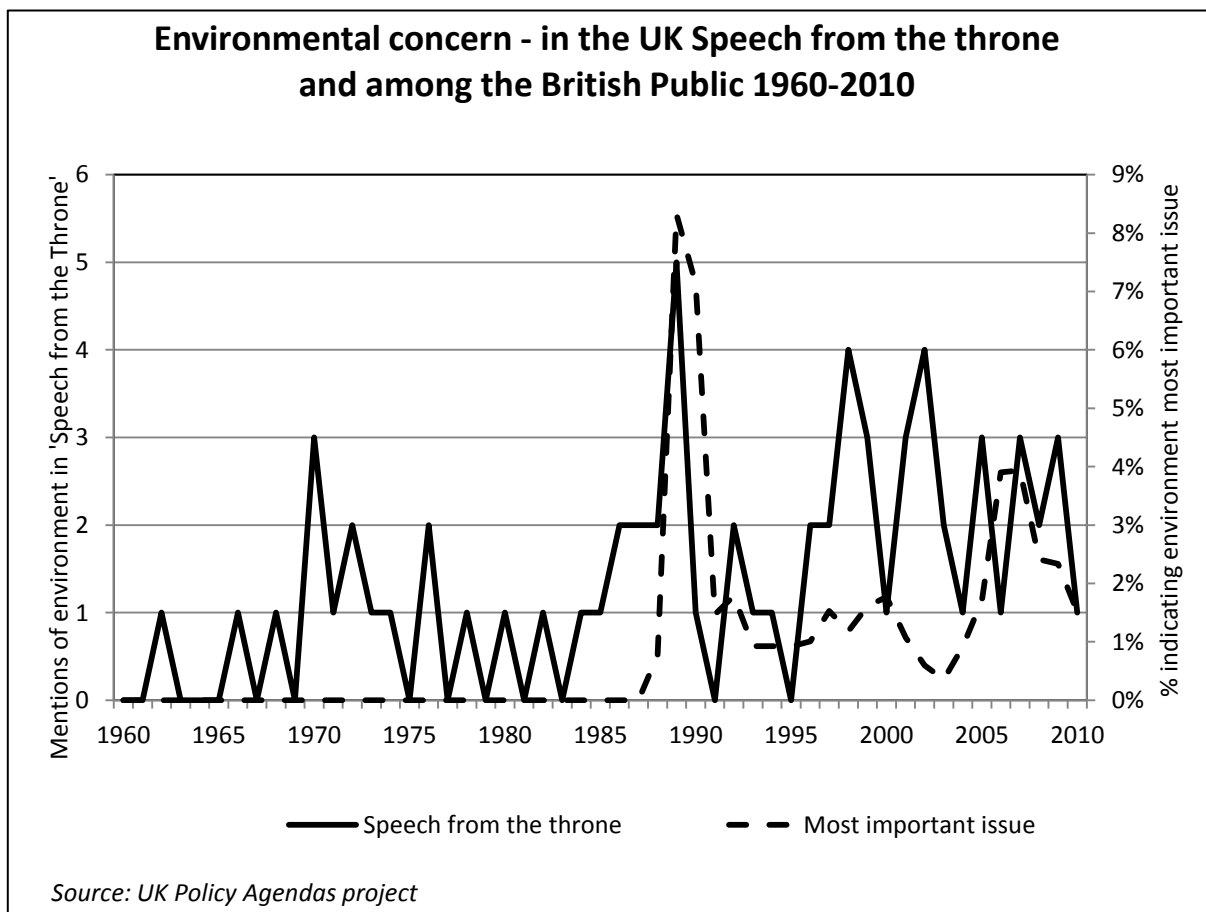
The lecture and tutorial give students insight into how empirical evidence can be used to evaluate theories. The lecture provides the theoretical foundations and an example whilst the tutorial gives students the opportunity for practical experience within a supportive environment. In turn, the practical exercise can support student discussion of complex theories.

### Insight into quantitative research

The lecture and tutorial can introduce students to new forms of empirical evidence that they can draw upon in their coursework and dissertations. Students may be unaware that “The Speech from the Throne”, “Acts of UK Parliament” and “Prime Minister’s Questions 1997-2008” can be sources of quantitative data. To give further insight into this interesting source of data, the tutorial could also include practical activities based around applying the policy content coding scheme used.

### Developing quantitative skills

The clear focus in the lecture on the tutorial is on theme of agenda setting and how it might be researched, rather than on developing specific quantitative skills. However, the lecture and tutorial give students an opportunity to practise the interpretation of quantitative data and see examples of how to present statistical outputs. Specifically, the materials used offer an example of graphs showing change over time for two variables.



### Further Resources

- Lecture slides (PDF)
- Tutorial (Word Document)

### UK Policy Agendas project ([www.policyagendas.org.uk/](http://www.policyagendas.org.uk/))

The UK Policy Agendas Project seeks to develop systematic measures of the policy agenda of British government and politics over time. It applies the policy content coding system of the original Policy Agendas Project (<http://policyagendas.org/>) in the United States.

The UK Policy Agendas Project has generated a number of datasets for use by researchers, students, practitioners and the public, which are freely available through their website.

### References

Annesley, C. and Gains, F. (2013), Investigating the Economic Determinants of the UK Gender Equality Policy Agenda. *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, 15, pp.125–146. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-856X.2011.00492.x

Annesley, C and Gains, F. (2010). The Core Executive Gender, Power and Policy Change. *Political Studies*, 58 (5), pp.909 - 929 <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2010.00824.x/abstract>

Baumgartner, F. and Jones, B. (2009). *Agendas and Instability in British Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Downs , A. (1972) 'Up and Down with Ecology: the Issue Attention cycle', *Public Interest*, 28, pp 35 - 50.

Kingdon, J. (1995). *Agendas, Alternative and Public Policy (2nd ed)*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

#### About this resource

'Politics of Policymaking: Agenda setting' was developed by the ESSTED team in collaboration with Professor Francesca Gains the convenor of the Politics of Policymaking at the University of Manchester.

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