Agenda Setting and Acid Precipitation in the United States

LESLIE R. ALM*
Department of Political Science
Boise State University
Boise, Idaho 83725, USA

CHARLES DAVIS*
Department of Political Science
Colorado State University
Ft. Collins, Colorado 80523, USA

ABSTRACT / The objective of this research was to analyze the retention of acid precipitation as a viable policy issue on the Congressional agenda during the 1980s. Issue maintenance (a term borrowed from Barbara Nelson's discussion of the four stages associated with agenda decision making) was examined in relation to a set of issue characteristics originally developed by Roger Cobb and Charles Elder, i.e., concreteness, social significance, temporal relevance, complexity, and categorical precedence. Each issue attribute was found to be somewhat useful in explaining the longevity of acid rain as an agenda item although the direction of influence for two factors, complexity and temporal relevance, was contrary to expectations. It was suggested that a conceptual merger of this sort could contribute to the comparative analysis of agenda policy decisions by providing a clearer and more restricted set of decision points to be explained.

On 15 November 1990 federal legislation placing regulatory controls on the production of acid precipitation was finally achieved when President Bush signed the Clean Air Act Amendments. While this represented but one section of a large and exceedingly complex bill, the architects of the new law succeeded in getting statutory coverage for a policy problem that had languished on the Congressional agenda for over a decade. Our interest in this topic was prompted by a fascination with the long-lasting struggle carried out by an unusual coalition of policy actors to elevate, nurture, and maintain an environmental issue on the formal or institutional agenda despite some rather formidable political constraints, namely, the opposition of powerful interest groups and public officials, including a popular incumbent President.

Our objective in this article is to analyze the acid precipitation issue from an agenda-setting perspective. One particularly useful framework for the analysis of factors responsible for expanding the constituency base of group(s) favoring a public policy response to a given problem is offered by Cobb and Elder (1972) in their now classic study Participation in American Politics. Attention is directed to five issue characteristics, i.e., concreteness, social significance, temporal relevance, complexity, and categorical precedence and the contribution each makes to moving an issue from a position of general public concern (i.e., the systemic agenda) to the institutional agenda. A notable application of this approach to an environmental issue is a study of hazardous waste facility siting controversies in several communities scattered throughout the United States (O'Brien and others 1984).

While acid precipitation shares certain commonalities with other environmental problems in terms of the general cast of interested parties and the characteristics of the issue, it differs in at least one important dimension. Few policy concerns have demonstrated the degree of staying power associated with this issue. This is a conceptual problem that is not addressed within the Cobb and Elder framework.

To address this concern, we decided to construct a synthesis of existing approaches to agenda setting. Our primary focus is upon decisions made within the US Congress between 1979 and 1989. The issue characteristics identified by Cobb and Elder are retained in our analysis of acid precipitation as independent variables that capture multiple dimensions of the policy proposal under review. Each of these is depicted by indicators derived from several data sources including government documents and surveys.

Issue longevity is considered within the context of an alternative model proposed by Nelson (1984) in her study of child abuse as a policy problem. She identified a process of agenda decision-making that can be divided into four distinct stages, i.e., issue recognition, issue adoption, issue prioritization, and is-

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*Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.
sue maintenance. The latter stage refers to the retention of a policy proposal after a bill is introduced for consideration by the Congress and a committee/subcommittee hearing is scheduled but prior to its eventual enactment or disappearance as a viable policy issue. We chose to incorporate this component of the formal institutional agenda as the dependent variable.

Data and Methods

A case study containing multiple sources of information was adopted here as the most comprehensive means of shedding light on the relationships between issue characteristics and issue maintenance. Scholarly work involving the acid rain debate was reviewed along with government documents, reports, and secondary sources. In addition, information was obtained from both mail surveys and on-site interviews conducted during the spring and summer of 1989 with relevant political actors involved in efforts to influence the direction of acid precipitation policy proposals in the US Congress during the spring and summer of 1989.

A total of 223 questionnaires were sent to policy actors in the United States and Canada and 139 of these were completed and returned for a response rate of 62%. In addition, 51 interviews were conducted in Washington, DC. Included among the American survey/interview respondents were congressional staff members from both the House and Senate (N = 45) and representatives from utilities (N = 15), the coal industry (N = 17), environmental groups (N = 23), researchers/scientists (N = 21) and federal agencies (N = 24).

Our selection of legislative staffers to be interviewed was based upon affiliation with the committees that have shown greatest interest in acid rain policy proposals over the years, i.e., the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works and the House Committee on Energy and Commerce (especially the Subcommittee on Health and the Environment). Canadian respondents included government officials (N = 21), environmental groups (N = 3), industry (N = 6) and researchers/scientists (N = 6). The overall response rate for surveys mailed to Americans was 60% while the corresponding figure for the Canadians was 71%.

Acid Precipitation as a Policy Problem

While acid precipitation was identified as a threat to both plant and aquatic life by scientists in the late 1960s (Cowling 1982), it did not receive official recognition as a serious policy problem within the United States until President Carter's second annual environmental message in 1979 (CQ Almanac 1979). Subsequent calls for research resulted in the establishment of a task force to study the issue (PL 96-294, 30 June 1980), but little effort was expended to promote the development of a regulatory program to promote emissions reductions from stationary sources (such as power plants or steel factories). In this respect, its progression as a policy issue closely resembled the path taken by governmental officials in response to other pollution problems. Problem recognition was followed by a determination that additional funding was needed for research on the causes and consequences of acid precipitation as well as possible abatement alternatives (Streets 1985).

In short, the political climate was less than optimum for proponents of acid precipitation legislation. President Reagan gave ample notice through campaign speeches in 1980 and through his subsequent political appointments that ecological goals would be subordinated to economic goals (Vig and Kraft 1984). Getting government off the backs of business by cutting back or even eliminating regulatory activities fell disproportionately on the shoulders of administrators in charge of environmental or consumer protection programs.

President Reagan's policy priorities were sufficiently disconcerting to members of Congress more closely tied to environmental policy goals that a new form of "deferral politics" was created, effectively postponing the introduction of new regulatory programs until a more favorable political climate for their consideration was in place (Davidson and Cook 1985). This did not augur well for supporters of acid rain legislation.

Against this backdrop, the political importance of arguments opposing a legislative solution to acid precipitation problems carried greater weight. Perhaps the most frequently cited reason for hesitation within the policy arena was the lack of scientific consensus. Without an ability to precisely identify the geographic source of acid precipitation, the question of apportioning liability costs for damages loomed large. Related to this was President Reagan's continuing insistence that additional research precede policy development (Regens and Rycroft 1988). Other complicating factors receiving attention included sensitivity toward the implications of political warfare between regions, notably the waste-generating states in the Midwest and states at the receiving end located in the Northeast and, to a lesser degree, a modicum of resentment toward Canadian lobbying for regulatory legislation to deal with transboundary pollution concerns (Carroll 1986).